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Parish created assisted living in an old convent

Tom Gallagher | Mar. 31, 2009

A fifth-grade student talks with a resident of Mary's House Rockville, Md. (CNS/Catholic Standard/Michael Hoyt)

Mission Management

In the early 1980s, when Jean Brady and Mary Ellen Dougherty met late in the evening around kitchen tables in suburban Rockville, Md., to plot the creation of the state's first assisted-living facility, they faced numerous obstacles. Chief among them: At the time, there was no such thing as "assisted living."

Almost 30 years later, that's hard to imagine. There are now more than 30,000 such facilities nationwide providing assistance to those elderly who don't require nursing home care but can't live independently. But back then, Brady knew intuitively what such corporate giants as Marriott, Sunrise Senior Living and Hyatt would discover a decade or more later: "Many elderly do not need the extensive and costly services of a nursing home. Rather, they can maintain their independence with the benefit of some services such as housekeeping, meal service and assistance with bathing, grooming, dressing and feeding."

Brady's intuitions were backed by experience, both personal -- her mother needed more care than could be provided at home -- and as a member of Montgomery County's commission on senior citizens. Early on, Brady realized that "when the baby boomers get old, this is going to get worse. It's really scary when you consider the future."

As 1983 approached, leaders at St. Mary Parish -- Brady, her husband Jack and their seven children were stalwart parishioners -- realized that the second floor of its convent would be vacant. Rather than let it sit unused, they began soliciting ways to use the unique space, which sat above the parish's bustling elementary school.

Which is when Brady; Dougherty; Washington archdiocese social-concerns director Msgr. Ralph Kuehner; St. Mary's pastor, the late Msgr. Adam Kostick; and a core group that included two Holy Cross sisters really got to work.

Several years prior, Kuehner had created Victory Housing, a not-for-profit organization comprised of Blessed Sacrament, Christ the King and Our Lady of Victory parishes of the Washington archdiocese, to focus on the needs of the elderly. The St. Mary's convent conversion would be the organization's first real-estate development project.

Brady wanted to create a co-generational setting with the young and the elderly near one another, looking after each other, benefiting from each other's company. She laughs now, but when she started down this path, much was unknown to her. When it came time for the technical work of putting a budget together, engaging architects, accommodating local, state and federal laws and securing funds, she said, "I had no idea what I was doing." What she had, instead, was conviction, courage and the confidence that comes with a good and innovative idea.

Brady secured a $26,000 planning grant from the city of Rockville, a $250,000 Community Development Block Grant from the Montgomery County Housing and Community Development Department and the U.S. Housing and Urban Development Department, $24,000 from the State of Maryland and $12,000 from the Montgomery County Department of Family Resources for rent subsidies. Local churches donated $20,000, in-kind gifts and volunteers.

On top of all this, Brady had to have a state law changed because the convent rooms were too small according to existing law. She got it changed.

She also needed to identify 15 frail elderly people who could afford the cost of assisted living. She found them, too.

Mary's House, a nonsectarian housing facility, officially opened on July 1, 1985. In the early days, each resident paid about $1,200 a month -- about half the cost of nursing-home care. Some qualified for subsidized rent, meaning that the new community served both the relatively well-to-do and those without significant financial resources.

Kostick wrote this to his parishioners in May 1985: "All the credit for this accomplishment goes to Jean Brady, our parishioner. With a lot of style, she dealt with city officials, state officials, archdiocesan officials and members of the parish. ? She managed to keep everyone happy and managed to keep her balance."

Since Mary's House opened its doors, Victory Housing, now a $100 million real-estate management and development nonprofit of the Washington archdiocese, has produced more than 25 other homes for assisted living, independent senior housing for low- and moderate-income residents, and affordable housing for families. To learn more about Victory Housing, see www.victoryhousing.org.

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