

Time cites nun among 100 most influential

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Sr. Mary Scullion

Sr. Mary Scullion, RSM, director of Project H.O.M.E., has been nominated as one of Time magazine's 100 most influential people in the world for 2009. Project H.O.M.E. is a nonprofit organization that provides housing and services to chronically homeless women and men in Philadelphia. As noted in her listing in Time, Sr. Mary has helped reduce homeless rates in Philadelphia and more than 95 percent of those who cycle through her Project H.O.M.E. program have never again been forced to live on the streets, a success rate which has made the program a model for dozens of other U.S. cities.

Tom Roberts, NCR editor at large, visited Sr. Scullion and her Project HOME operation nearly a decade ago. The following story was published in December, 1999.

Project H.O.M.E. By TOM ROBERTS, NCR Staff

Philadelphia

North Philadelphia is one of those places that defines urban misery in modern America. Like East Los Angeles, South Chicago or the South Bronx, it has been burned out, looted, abandoned, given over to decay. In the gallery of urban landscapes, it is evil and foreboding.

It is also where Mercy Sr. Mary Scullion lives -- in a fourth floor cell at St. Elizabeth's, a former Franciscan convent that is now home for 25 male addicts in various stages of recovery.

Mary Scullion does things like that.

In the case of St. Elizabeth's, the living arrangement was part of a quid pro quo with neighborhood leaders. Scullion wanted to rehab the former convent for a center where homeless addicts could begin to recover. Even in this North Philadelphia neighborhood, where almost any kind of development is an improvement, residents were afraid they'd be left with a house full of undesirables and an absentee landlord. They wanted some assurance and said they would drop their objections if she moved in. Agreed.

For the irrepressible 46-year-old Scullion, founder and head of Project H.O.M.E., life in the converted convent

is just one more step along the way to becoming one of Philadelphia's best-known do-gooders since Mother Katharine Drexel, founder of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. But she hates that saintly kind of talk and those comparisons. "You do what you have to do," she says dismissively of her early exploits that helped the homeless and disrupted this city's bureaucracy.

"I just take one day at a time," she said. It's a trite mantra. But she won't let go of it. Won't venture far from that and from other really simple, direct lines about her work.

The steps started long ago, shortly after she became a Mercy nun in 1974 (this is her jubilee year, and to celebrate, the veteran runner did the New York Marathon with some friends). Inspired in 1976 by the words of Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day, Jesuit Fr. Pedro Arrupe and Brazilian Bishop Dom Helder Camara, all of whom showed up for the Eucharistic Congress held in Philadelphia that year, she began to see the hungry and homeless in her midst.

"Before this," she once told a reporter, "I would go to Mass and think I was fulfilling my obligation. But now, I began to see that there really was hunger in our city and around the world, and I came to realize how much more needs to be done."

She had studied math and was teaching seventh grade while studying for a degree in social work when she began volunteering at Mercy Hospice, where she worked with the homeless.

Later she would found a shelter for women, called Women of Hope, where she lived. Two branches of that shelter remain in operation today, run by the Mercy order in cooperation with the Philadelphia archdiocese.

Little by little, however, Scullion was called to the streets, to the homeless, to the alcoholics, the addicts, the down-and-outers, those who couldn't even get into the city shelters because they were too far gone.

In an interview, she referred to Jesuit Fr. Jon Sobrino, a liberation theologian from El Salvador. "Sobrino said our work as Christians is to take Jesus off the cross. Where do we find Jesus on the cross today? We find him in the suffering of people who are homeless, abused or subject to violence, in those who have addictions."

Along the way she met Joan Dawson-McConnon, at the time a graduate student with a degree in accounting and soon to have a master's in taxation. She was moving along on the same Catholic impulses, learned from a family where caring for others was the primary expression of faith. "Faith was something you acted on," she said.

After she met Scullion, the two eventually began to open emergency shelters during the winter under the umbrella of an organization called the Night Winter Coalition.

It became clear to both of them that something more had to follow the instinct to give hospitality, or the cycle of homelessness, substance abuse and poverty would never be broken.

Today the two -- Scullion, the out-front partner, and Dawson-McConnon, the behind-the-scenes finance person -- oversee a program of shelter, education and rehabilitation of both people and neighborhoods that has become a model far and wide and has earned them praise, awards and willing donors. It has a \$6 million annual operating budget.

But just like taking it "one day at a time," the two never wander far from what Dawson-McConnon referred to as the core, absolutely basic conviction from which they both work: "People should not have to lay their bodies down on the street. That is just not acceptable. That's the working premise. People suffering in the streets should not be suffering."

That's what Dawson-McConnon remembers from those days of innocently bold activism, the times they now laugh over, way back when the two of them were jury-rigging shelters from January to April so people wouldn't freeze on the streets.

One cold winter's night in 1988, Scullion and some homeless people who were unable to get into the city's packed shelters, took over the basement of the Municipal Services Building, the hub of city offices and services. It was audacious, a bit anarchistic and something she would do again in a moment. After that first night, people from the city let them in. "We just did it," she says now.

The following year, the city made more orderly arrangements, allowing the nun and her homeless companions to take up residence in the locker room of a South Philadelphia swim club. "It was great," she remembers. "It was warm, and there were showers."

They also operated out of a Salvation Army roller skating rink and a more upscale property called the Bell Atlantic Building, that has since been demolished for a parking lot.

Scullion may be a minor celebrity now, but back then she was arrested twice for trying to pass out food at the 30th Street train station, and she spent some nights in jail. She was never convicted. And she finally beat city hall and a grudging local neighborhood association to set up the headquarters that's now a point of pride for the city.

Mary Scullion does things like that.

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"Hiya, how are you?" "Hi." "Hiya, how are you?"

It really comes out, "Hiyahow?rya.?"

All over North Philadelphia one sunny September afternoon she was greeting anyone she ran into.

"Hiyahow?rya?"

And everyone stopped as if she really meant it, as if she really wanted to hear him or her tell her all about how they were. And she did, and they did.

Scullion (this day she's wearing a red sweatshirt, jeans and penny loafers) is as Philadelphia as Passayunk (you say that in two syllables) Avenue and as down to earth as a Pat's Cheese Steak.

She was born here, educated here in Catholic schools, and it was in Philadelphia's streets that she discovered the heart of her vocation in the homeless and, in turn, her passion for doing something about it.

That passion has translated into a multi-level operation, Project H.O.M.E. (Housing, Opportunities, Medical Care, Education), run out of a four-story headquarters at 1515 Fairmount Ave. The headquarters itself is a beehive of services, central offices, residential space and commerce.

On one level, there is a used clothing store, Our Daily Threads, on another a bookstore, Cornerstone Book and Art Center, and the Back Home Café.

The café serves walk-in traffic but also operates a catering business that is booming. In late September, the café had the food catering business at the Starbucks coffee shops at the University of Pennsylvania and Temple University.

Plans have been drawn up to break out some walls and expand the food service.

The operations employ about 120 people, many of them formerly homeless. Another 100 people serve as volunteers throughout the project.

The headquarters also oversees one of the more ambitious real estate rehabilitation programs in this section of the city.

In a roughly 12-block area she has begun, with neighborhood groups and a combination of government and private funding, to transform abandoned and broken lives and real estate, including a former convent and an abandoned rectory.

The transformation is accomplished through layers of permanent housing and services that start with that premise: No one should have to use the streets for a bed.

Touring her turf is a head-spinning undertaking -- Project H.O.M.E.'s got something going at every turn. And like a common thread tying together the big projects -- the residences for single mothers and their children, the addiction recovery facilities and levels of group transitional housing -- a visitor notices the little organization logo, done in metal, attached to the fronts of homes that have been rehabbed. The Franciscan sisters who once maintained a presence in the neighborhood have donated \$1 million to pay for the reconstruction of 10 homes a year for the next 10 years for sale to working poor people.

From street level it is difficult to put it all together, to see the pattern in all the reconstruction, demolishing and new construction. It is easy, though, to sense the difference. The gardens, the neat home fronts, the large, designed and landscaped green spaces, the lack of graffiti in the blocks where Project H.O.M.E. has a stake.

On the tour Scullion is pointing out the new community center built into a converted, abandoned rectory; the 39 units of new housing for women with children; the homes that were rehabbed and sold to working poor people, but only after they have had months of education with a full-time Project H.O.M.E. staffer who teaches about home ownership, financing and managing money; she points out the block-long building at the corner of Broad and Jefferson, fully staffed around the clock, permanent housing for men and women off the street with chronic mental illness.

In another context Scullion might be a formidable entrepreneur, but then you arrive at St. Elizabeth's and peek into the fourth floor cell so small the door won't open all the way. The rest of the living space is shared with the recovering addicts.

She is asked if she is ever scared. "That's a fair question," she replies. "There is a lot of violence in the world of substance abuse, but there is also tremendous peace and courage in the world of recovery.

"The self-effacement and the courage of the men inspire me every day." No, she says, she is never scared in this house of recovery.

St. Elizabeth's is a model for how the whole Project HOME enterprise works. Men are taken in here and allowed to stay indefinitely -- usually the stay lasts for several years. But in order to stay, they have to adhere to a regimen of education and counseling. They stay on the first floor level for 90 days. If they are doing what they are supposed to be doing, they move to the second floor, and so on, up to the fourth floor, and eventually to other residences or a place of their own.

Along the way, they are tested, educated, perhaps so they can obtain a general equivalency diploma (GED), others are connected with job training programs and helped along the way to sobriety or freedom from drugs. At

St. Elizabeth's there is 24-hour assistance, individual rooms, and meals are prepared for the men.

From St. Elizabeth's, men might move to one of the residences, perhaps to the Diamond Street facility, where there is a less supportive and intense environment and more freedom to come and go.

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Throughout the sprawling and growing structure of Project H.O.M.E., the central effort is to get people off the street -- to meet them at whatever point in life they find themselves -- and to build from that point. Some require around-the-clock care; others simply need a new start, a new place to live. All along the way, Scullion emphasizes education -- from the community centers and after-school care to classes for adults. Across the street from where new apartments are being built for single mothers and their children, a row of homes has been torn down. She wants a technology education center for that spot, convenient for the mothers and children who soon will be living here. "Education has to be part of it," she says. "It is the key to getting out of homelessness."

Scullion eyes the vacant lot. The technology center, she says, "is a dream right now. We're working on it."

Don't think it will remain a dream for long. Scullion simply knows how to make things work, to get things done, and that track record has elicited some long-term support.

Actress and comedian Lily Tomlin took an interest in Scullion's work back when she was running the Women of Hope shelter and has remained a faithful supporter since. Members of the Connelly family, which owned the former Connelly Container Corp., which is now Crown, Cork and Seal Co., provided Scullion with her first unrestricted grant of \$100,000 and have been significant financial supporters through the two-and-a-half decades of her work with the homeless and in reclaiming neighborhoods in North Philadelphia. The project also has benefitted from significant contributions from the Jewish community, and a point of pride for Scullion is the broad interfaith nature of the project's staff.

When does it all get too big, too "corporate"?

Scullion shrugs. "I don't know," she said. "It's something we keep talking about. You have to be able to manage growth. We just take it one day at a time."

Dawson-McConnon said the topic is often a part of discussion among staff. "We gather people and we just talk about how do we keep each other healthy. We have people I would consider the spiritual barometers," she said. "People who have been here who know the culture and the tone, and they'll speak up if they think we are going off course."

And then there's Scullion. One of her two greatest gifts, said Dawson-McConnon, is her ability to get things done. "When I look back along the way, anytime it seemed a wall was put up, Mary figured out a way to get us around or through it by tapping into every resource she knew, or maybe even didn't know she had. She has a tremendous skill for solving problems and does it beautifully and skillfully.

"Another thing she does better than anybody I know is she sees broad and far. She sees possibilities where I don't think people see them at the time she sees them."

She also "never loses sight of who she is and why she's here." To that end Scullion still goes out on the street doing outreach with her teams from headquarters a couple weeks each month. The CEO of this empire for the homeless stays close to the streets.

"Whether she's talking to extremely powerful and wealthy people or someone sitting on a vent, everyone gets talked about and thought about in the same way. All have the same human dignity," Dawson-McConnon said.

?It is something she really believes.?

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