

A life of vowed service extends to the margins

By Kim Roberts
Clarion Herald

When Dominican Sister of Peace Lillianne Flavin came to New Orleans from Dublin, Ireland, in 1979 to teach at St. Leo the Great School, she was plunged into a culture and environment she knew nothing about.

The blistering heat she endured her first summer wasn't the only thing foreign to her, she said. The people in her new city were also unfamiliar.

At the end of Sister Lillianne's first year of teaching, she wanted to engage more in her new community to learn more about the people she was teaching and living with.

In search of this, she stepped into Hope House in the St. Thomas housing development in New Orleans in 1980 – and never left.

Sister Lillianne became a permanent resident at Hope House in 1983, ministering to poor families in the housing project and inmates in the state prison.

Sister Lillianne said she loves Hope House like her own home and feels accepted as a friend, mother and sometimes a sister by everyone who enters the door.

"I was blown away by their hospitality and by the struggle



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Archbishop Gregory Aymond thanks Dominican Sister of Peace Lillianne Flavin for her decades of work in prison ministry.

of the people," Sister Lillianne said. "I saw a community that was suffering daily at the hands of an oppressive system that was governing their lives, mommas never having enough, police were always a worry. There was a brokenness, there was violence. I saw firsthand the effect of poverty, the depression it brought and the trauma. And, yet, despite it all, there was a great trust in God that he wouldn't fail the people here."

Hope House

Sister Lillianne teaches a class every morning at Hope House, with more than 100 students going through the adult learning program each year.

"I couldn't be happier teaching the people who come here to learn," she said. "They appreciate everything you do for them. Every little bit of help you give them is appreciated. We meet them where they are educationally, providing individualized learning based on their skill level."

The Hope House Adult Learning Center has been helping adults improve their basic academic skills and prepare for Louisiana's high school equivalency exam for more than 40 years.

The program is based on individualized, one-on-one instruction, tailored to the specific hopes and needs of each student. What a student

studies and when he or she comes to class depends on the student's goal and daily schedule. The center is funded through the Louisiana Community and Technical College System (LCTCS). There is no tuition and no fees.

"Most of the students in the program want to get their high school diploma but are struggling in life," Sister Lillianne said. "They are working to put food on the table and pay bills, and they have children and want the best for them. I could never walk away from them. If someone doesn't show up for class, I call to check on them and help them to catch up. I am surrounded by this. It is a challenge, but one I gladly undertake."

Power in proximity

It wasn't long after she was working in St. Thomas that Sister Lillianne realized that the people in her community had loved ones who spent a lot of time in prison.

"I knew they needed my help," she said. "This led me to prison ministry."

For the past 40 years, Sister Lillianne has been visiting women in the Orleans Parish prison on Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons to offer spiritual guidance and support. She also has worked with death row inmates over the years at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, working with Sister of St. Joseph Helen Prejean in the 1980s.

Sister Lillianne said meeting and working with these women has had a profound effect on her.

"My time with them has awakened my spirit and theirs," she said. "Their vulnerability, beauty and trust, are so obvious to me, things you rarely experience outside of prison, much less inside. I meet women who live extraordinary lives of faith, and it lifts them above the insanity of the prison environment."

Sister Lillianne insists that members of society suffer together and are part of each other's lives, and therefore should work together to support those within the prison system. A woman she met in prison named Betty ran up to her one day and asked her to make a phone call for her.

"Betty's body was worn," Sister Lillianne said. "She bore the unresolved scars from her life and had been sexually abused at an early age. As she told me her story, her wounds became exposed and cleansed, and I could feel the spirit of God was upon us. She asked for a hug, then another hug, and then everyone asked for hugs. The whole, dehumanizing place was full of hugs. The spirit of God was there comforting, uniting and liberating. We were all one being in the light of God."

We are one people

A native of County Waterford in the south of Ireland, Sister Lillianne entered the Dominican Sisters of Cabra (now, the Dominican Sisters of Peace) in 1958 when she was 19, knowing she wanted to be a teacher and make a difference in the lives of others.

She said she feels very blessed to have walked through the doors at Hope House and to have been able to meet the wonderful people who have changed her life.

She said it is because of Hope House that she pursued her prison ministry and has been able to fully see God's plan.

"I think my freedom depends on their freedom, and their freedom depends on my freedom," she said. "We are one people in God's eyes. I feel the spirit of God when I go into that jail. Surprisingly, I leave there very light-hearted."

Then Sister Lillianne looked at her watch.

"OK, sweetie, I have to end this interview," she said. "I have to go to jail now."

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