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DOMINICAN ROOTS

**Genesis and evolution of the
Racine Dominican sponsored ministries.**



Racine Dominicans
Committed to Truth + Compelled to Justice

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BKukla 201

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From the Editor

Chris Broslavick, OP

If ever you had doubts about evolution, sit up, take notice!

Some readers may remember the Church of the '40s, '50, and '60s. Perhaps you were unaware that prior to the 1960s sisters were very instrumental in primarily building and working in schools and hospitals. It is a fascinating history, one of immigrant women meeting the needs of their time and place.

However, in the 1960s "fresh air" surged through the windows of the Church; it was the time of the Second Vatican Council.

One outcome of the Council was that it breathed new life into many religious communities of women. The road to religious life became singularly unique, and opportunities for new ministries were in the air! And, sisters caught hold of new opportunities taking other folks along, too. Ministry became everybody's opportunity!

Thus, a stage is set for this issue of *Dominican Roots*. Our President, S. Maryann McMahon, reflects upon the genesis of her personal vocation and ministry. Then we look at the beginnings of new, formal ministries which our sisters founded. What were they thinking? How did ministries begin? And where are the ministries today?

A gust of wind brings change; change is the essence of evolution, albeit often slow and sometimes imperceptible. So, please, take notice! Notice the evolutionary energy of your life as well.



From the President

Maryann McMahon, OP

Dear Friends,

How do you decide on a life plan / choice? I know for myself, there are many different places I look for wisdom before making a decision. There are also many people I want to consult before deciding which direction to go. Life and faith experiences, both past and present, also influence how I make important decisions.

I remember in high school driving through the area of Plain, WI. It had a beautiful rolling countryside, many farms and stables and the beauty of nature enveloped at every twist and turn in the road. It was beautiful and most alluring. Who wouldn't want to live and work in this lush, green, spaciousness surrounded by the beauty of the Earth?

Then somewhere in our conversation, the driver mentioned how long it took for the folks in this region to get to basic medical care. I was told most people had to drive 50 miles or more to see their doctor or travel to Madison for care. I was appalled by that fact and soon discovered that many rural communities do not have ready access to primary health care. In that moment, I decided I wanted to become a doctor and to serve the people that lived in places like Plain, WI.

That decision set me on a course, and medical school became my goal. But God had other plans for me. I would do rural health care, but as a Nurse Practitioner in Marks and Sledge, MS, for about eight years. I worked with Sinsinawa and Adrian Dominican Sisters in a clinic on the border of cotton, corn and sunflower fields situated not far from the railroad tracks that divided the towns where I worked and lived.

Who could have guessed or predicted this path for my life? All I needed to do was to pay attention to where I was being led. May that be your truth.



Bethany Apartments

Women and children experience great despair at the intersection of domestic violence and homelessness. And sometimes, unwittingly, one problem is resolved in the attempt to solve a quite different problem. Here is a case in point.

It was in the late 1980s when Western Printing offered the Racine Dominicans their building on Erie Street. It was an offer of the return of the former Dominican College dormitory which closed in the mid-1970s.

The task of exploring "needs" was given over to S. Evelyn Lins who happened to have had volunteer experience at the Women's Resource Center, a 30-day shelter for women who were victims of domestic abuse. Her thoughts easily drifted in that direction because she was aware that the Executive Committee of the Community had expressed a hope that a potential project would help women in need.

S. Evelyn returned to the resource center to better understand the women's struggles, among which were leaving children behind, inadequate time for respite, no long-term plan for successfully terminating a violent relationship.

As S. Mary Fran Wilcoxson was the executive director of a shelter program in Milwaukee, she became an invaluable conversation partner. Her shared insights helped to mold the model needed for Racine.

The Wheaton Franciscans became collaborators in defining the project that would offer these essentials: two years of housing for women and their children with accompanying services, e.g.,



Bethany Apartments kitchen today

case management, education, parenting skills, employment readiness, etc. This would be, and yet remains, the only long-term option in Racine.

And, as it happened, the Western Printing building was not ideal for this ministry. A school building in the heart of Racine was better suited. But not without contention. One public official flatly said, "We don't want your kind of people in our district." However, through the influence and work of Dennis Kornwolf, the County Executive at the time, the building was secured.

In 1990 Bethany Apartments, a program of Catherine Marian Housing, opened its doors. From its beginning, 281 women and 408 children have called Bethany Apartments their home. Today it continues to keep its promise to provide holistic services to women and children who enter its doors.



Bethany Apartments' beginning

To learn more
see <https://www.bethanyapartments.org/>

Eco-Justice Center

The modern environmental movement began in the '60s and '70 with rising awareness of air, water and land pollution. Over the decades the movement has evolved to address complex, multifaceted matters of environmental justice such as global warming.

This movement did not go unnoticed by our sisters and associates who during the community's 2000 Gather the Dreamers weekend grappled with what work held claim to our energies at the time, what ministries summoned us. Educating for justice and care of the Earth was an emerging call.

Ss. Kathleen Bohn, Rose Marie Dischler, Jean Ferstl, Janet and Mary Ann Weyker and Associate Penny Sorensen began to actively explore possibilities and design a plan to educate and care for Earth. Each of their parents had close connections to the land; the sisters were all teachers.

Although the Racine area has parks, arboretums and nature centers, there was no place where one could experience gardening, connect with the natural world, see models of sustainable living and witness the examples of renewable energy. A passion to educate young and old about the care of the environment and living in right-relationships by means of hands-on learning propelled the women toward the "dream" of the Eco-Justice Center.

After being in the planning stage for three years, S. Carol Wester led the community in taking a risk as we sought a new place for this ministry even while many had reservations about its feasibility. However, S. Sharon Zayac, a Springfield Dominican, encouragingly said, "At the time of the American Revolution,



Some of Eco-Justice Center founders, sitting on an 1858 foundation: Ss. Jean, Kathleen, Mary Ann, Rose Marie, with Penny and Gracie the dog



Eco-Justice Center today: an education center constructed in 2008 on the foundation shown below

one-third of the people were for independence, one-third were against it, and one-third didn't care either way. Look at what happened! Don't worry, the Universe wants an Eco-Justice Center!"

Rooted in Hope Racine Dominican Eco-Justice Center (EJC) was founded in 2004. The center is located on 15 acres of land with historic buildings at 7133 Michna Road, approximately five miles north and west of Siena Center.

Over the years, the mission and values of the center have been maintained. The ministry of environmental education has broadened to teaching high school students and college interns the skills of organic gardening and animal care. In the beginning, volunteers helped maintain the grounds and assist with educational tours and activities. Today the center's staff has grown to include a full-time executive director and several part-time employees. Outreach and collaboration with other environmental groups, local businesses and schools have increased. EJC welcomes over 6,000 visitors each year. Another dream – greater cultural inclusivity and diversity in all aspects of its operations and programming.

Learn more at
<https://ecojusticecenter.org>



HOPES Center

Few would have called S. Mary Ann Pevas a sower; yet, her notion of a storefront ministry caught the imagination of a group of sisters and took root! The idea was cultivated by sisters who together dreamed of applying their gifts and talents in ministry.

In true Dominican fashion, Ss. Peg Gabik, Lisa Kane, Pat Mapes, Linda McClenahan, Maryann McMahon, Ann Pratt and Kathy Slesar, along with Jan Jedlicka, Jim Schatzman, and Vicki Wuolle set out to find the unmet needs of Racine.

In the mid-2000s, homelessness was already having a devastating impact on Racine. Mental health was both a cause and result of homelessness. Globalization directed a spot light on global and local poverty.

Employing a social entrepreneurial strategy, a coffee shop and fair trade store were established to support a counseling and healing arts program... all at one storefront location!



HOPES Center's early home

This phase of the process was filled with focused energy and excitement. Intuitively, HOPES Center was an early attempt to address the intersection and interconnected nature of social categorizations. This is reflected in the HOPES name, **H**ealing, **O**ppportunity, **P**eace and Justice, **E**cology, and **S**pirituality.

S. Brenda Walsh was particularly helpful in creating the first mission statement with its focus on the dignity and worth

of all. S. Carol Wester served as the first Board President and helped to develop the financial structure. Volunteers in great numbers contributed time, talent and resources throughout HOPES' growth.

Collaboration was key to the development of the ministry. The University of Wisconsin Community Partnership program provided initial start-up grants and training for HOPES



HOPES Center today

Center and the other social service groups that it partnered. Collaborators included Racine Vocational Ministries, University of Wisconsin-Parkside, Racine Unified School District, Gateway Technical College, Racine Continuum of Care, Racine churches and many others.

Incorporated in 2008, HOPES Center has evolved into a ministry that uniquely serves the needs of people who are homeless through programs such as Street Outreach and Rapid Rehousing. HOPES retains that essential belief in the dignity and worth of every person and extends hospitality to all who share in the ministry.



Learn more at <https://www.racinedominicans.org/hopes-center>

Senior Companion Program

The times they are a-changing! This is the refrain in S. Joyce Ballweg's recollections of the beginning of the Senior Companion Program (SCP). Although at its formation her observations were from afar, from 2008 to 2013 she was the SCP administrative assistant and then executive director.

In the 1970s, the sisters' eyes were on change. Nearly one hundred fifty sisters resided in the "new" motherhouse (est. 1964) on Erie Street. Sisters there and throughout the country were no longer assigned the typical teaching ministries, but rather were able to apply for and do work that best suited their talents and inclinations. Hence, as S. Joyce observed, the world became their new classroom.

And just what did their eyes see? People were living longer! The elderly population was rapidly growing. Many were living alone and in isolation, having grown children who may have moved elsewhere. Also, because so many were no longer able to drive, connecting with family and friends and going out to socialize with others were neither easy nor feasible.

Ss. Michelle Olley, Emily Oszewski and Brenda Walsh held many conversations about how, as sisters, we could respond to the multiple needs that were evident in the Racine area. They were also eager to create yet another ministerial possibility for the sisters living at Siena.

A number of the sisters were invited to be a companion volunteer. If willing to visit someone, they were introduced to a person or persons who wanted to be visited. The

sisters would visit regularly. Sitting with another, sharing experiences, listening to another's story were just some of the rewards of companionship. Ss. Michelle, Emily and Brenda had a listening ear, compassionate heart and a spirit of eagerness to enrich the lives of others! Thus in 1978, this Senior Companion Program was formally established as a sponsored



ministry of the Racine Dominicans.

The SCP grew. As Racine residents became aware of this no-fee service, they were willing to be part of the program both as one who is visited and one who goes out to companion another, a visitor.

In the beginning the SCP was a simple friendly kind of service. As time moved on, more office personnel were needed as corporate record keeping, grant writing and safety concerns became more complex. Yet, the Senior Companion Program, a 501(c)3 organization, still offers a friendly kind of service!



Learn more at <https://www.seniorcompanionprogram.org>

Siena Retreat Center

The 1960s were a turbulent time enflamed by change. Changes such as the Civil Rights Movement were happening in society, and changes such as the renewal prompted by the Second Vatican Council were happening in the church. The confluence of events brought people together asking, how do we make sense of these times? S. Agnes Claire Lanser seized the moment when in 1966 she invited an ecumenical group of area women to gather for a weekend at Siena Center to reflect on the sweeping shifts of the mid-1960s.

While the idea of a retreat center had not yet even been conceived, that gathering marked the birth of the retreat ministry of the Racine Dominicans. Those first participants observed that "the [gathering] was a chance to talk about meaning. It went to the heart of what life was about." And, "by learning from other faith traditions, one can get a deeper perspective on one's own faith."



Original Retreat Center

From that time on, the ministry began to take form, accommodating more and more opportunities for both women and men to explore the dimensions of their spiritual life at the intersection of their daily experiences. Opportunities for ecumenical and interfaith dialogue were enhanced with a growing library of resources made available to area churches.

When the growth in numbers of women entering religious life was at its height, Siena Center was built to accommodate large numbers of women. Because those numbers did not come to fruition, in time an entire wing (80 bedrooms and several meeting rooms) of the Siena Center became available to retreatants.

When S. Audrey Williamsen, Coordinator of Center Activities/Retreats, began her tenure in the mid-1970s, another need emerged, the need for a contemplative space for other groups' use. Thus, the notion of hosted retreats began, i.e., providing space for groups whose purposes aligned with the mission of the ministry. S. Audrey observed, "There is a great need for a retreat and conference center in this area." She also pointed out that "it takes the cooperation and generosity of all the sisters who live at Siena to make retreats possible."



Siena Retreat Center today

From the 1980s and for the next 30 years, Ss. Marie Gertrude Mlodzik, Mary Michna and Rita Lui continued to give form to what has become a nationally known ministry. They invited eminent speakers and retreat leaders, cultivated relationships with hosted groups, opened a bookstore, created specialized programming, e.g., the Spiritual Guidance Training Program, and eventually shepherded the center into a new construction, Siena Retreat Center.

What is emerging amid the turbulence of the present times?

Learn more about Siena Retreat Center as it is today, visit www.sienaretreatcenter.org

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**"...to sustain the fundamental right
of every person to pursue the fullness of life
and to share in the common good."**

*– Article 8 (partial), Constitution of
Sisters of St. Dominic of St. Catherine of Siena*



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