

'THE CHANGED LIFE OF OUR TIME'

Women Religious in Transition:

A 20th Anniversary Retrospective of Renewal

Part IV of a series

By Teresa A. Parsons

Her business card reads: "Sheila Walsh, SSJ, Realtor Associate."

A few times clients have puzzled over it, wondering if it's some new business degree. But most people, Catholic or not, recognize those familiar initials, and it's immediately apparent that this woman, who radiates enthusiasm and confidence in her businesswoman's role, is a Sister of St. Joseph.

She's watched as the realization hits people on the other side of the desk and they backtrack, wondering if they've said anything offensive.

"What's a nun doing in a dog-eat-dog world like real estate?" is frequently the next question, and she answers without hesitation. "Sisters ought to be in the professional world, out in the marketplace. You can bring the gospels anyplace, and if you are good and honorable, you can live those values as a witness to others," she said. "We need to be Church to people in a world that seems to be very secular. Real estate people have a reputation as being wheeler-dealers, but most I've met are very good people."

Her assertions echo the founding principles of the 17th-century French women who paved her way as Sisters of St. Joseph — common working women ministering to their counterparts in the workplace rather than living in cloister. Moreover, those assertions call to mind images from the lives of Christ and his Apostles, who were also common workmen bringing their message to tax collectors, Romans and public officials — to anyone who would listen.

While some might have difficulty relating real estate sales to ministry, for Sister Sheila the connection is obvious. She is committed to helping families, especially those with low incomes who may never have dreamed of owning a home, to find a way off what she calls "the merry-go-round of renting."

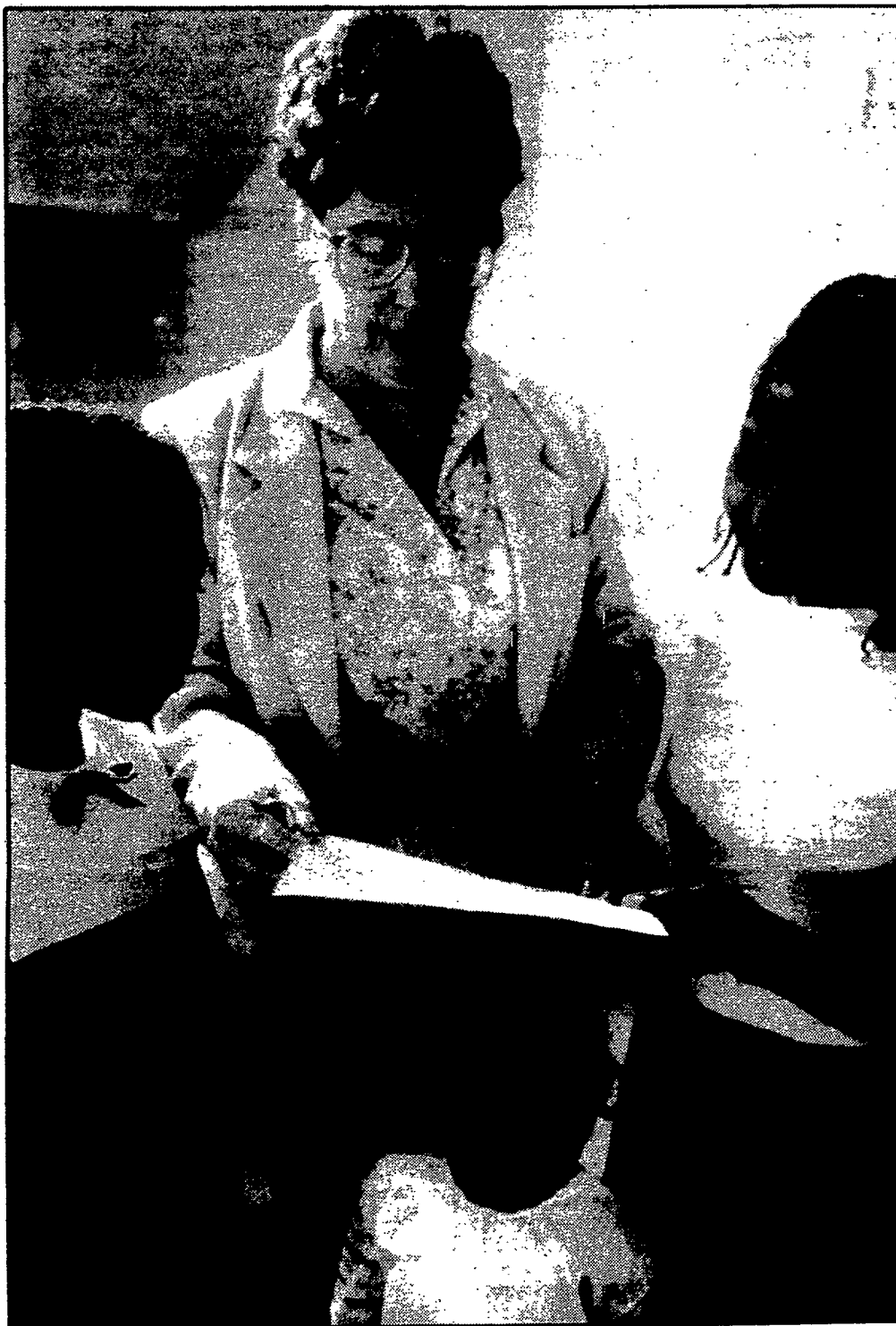
Her associate, Mary McCarthy, noted that the Federal Housing Administration and Veteran's Administration as well as the cooperative mortgage policies of a number of banks have made it possible, in many cases, to expend no more money on a monthly mortgage payment than would be spent on rent. And McCarthy's experience indicates that home ownership can change the entire pattern of family life and break the cycle of poverty for someone who may have a steady job, but can't seem to get ahead. When a family owns a home, McCarthy asserts, more money is spent on improvements and less on useless luxuries, the property itself is better cared for and even the housekeeping improves. And the family receives a tangible reward as the value of their investment increases with effort.

But McCarthy also admitted that few Realtors who are breadwinners can afford to devote a substantial amount of time and energy to this group of first-time buyers. While the process of finding an affordable, decent home and working out their budget takes more time and effort than average, the price of the home they purchase is relatively low and the commission small.

Sister Sheila is uniquely suited to the ministry of providing decent housing because her commissions are turned over to her congregation. So long as she makes enough to cover expenses, she is under no pressure to sell. But that doesn't mean she's not good at her job. It becomes clear after even a brief conversation that she is both knowledgeable and caring.

As any Realtor would attest, buying or selling a home is "a whole lot more than a business transaction." The skills of a psychologist, psychic and handyman would have obvious value, but Sister Sheila has also found countless opportunities to minister to people outside the realm of formal Church. "With customers, I get onto 'God' topics unexpectedly," she said.

One woman came to sell her home after



Sister Sheila Walsh shows Princess Peterson and her daughter Patricia, 11, a fact sheet on the home they are visiting, while Bridget, 3, waits patiently.

a divorce. She and Sister Sheila began sharing stories of growing up in Catholic schools and before their conversation ended, Sister Sheila had the chance to clarify some important misconceptions the woman had about Church teaching on divorce. Another woman she met in a business setting had been bruised and scarred by an encounter with the pre-Vatican II Church, but eventually asked for her advice and help in repairing the damage.

Another time, a young couple came to her, looking for their first house. As they described their needs, Sister Sheila realized that they were, in her words, "not together on this at all." She gently pointed that out to them and in the end, convinced them that what they might need more than a house was a marriage counselor. "I think they got divorced anyway," she said. "But at least they didn't have a house to fight over."

That kind of episode doesn't exactly make Sister Sheila a broker's dream, but Eastern Real Estate Services is a small firm which depends heavily on repeat business and word-of-mouth advertising. So although she may not generate as much gross income as another associate, the firm's partners, Patricia Kulaga and Mary McCarthy, believe she more than compensates with the good will she creates and the people she brings into the housing market for the first time. She, in turn, is comfortable with their relaxed and innovative approach to the business.

granted permission by her congregation to study religious education at Boston College, just as Vatican II changes were sweeping the country and the world.

"I was a member of the first class to graduate from the Institute of Religious Education ... we had the top theological professors and students from all over the country and the world. What a vibrant, exciting experience that was! It turned my life around," she said.

Sister Sheila grants that she was fortunate to return to a diocese as forward-looking, open and exciting as was Rochester under Bishop Joseph L. Hogan, and to a new assignment as director of religious education at St. Monica's parish. "Church was more than buildings there ... it was always a church open to trying things," she remembered. "Ed Zimmer's (Father Edward Zimmer, former pastor of St. Monica's) gift was to pull gifts from others. He might disagree with you, but he never squelched you."

One special recollection she treasures was a confirmation ceremony she planned with the theme "To Be Alive." As the song ended, each newly confirmed teenager was to hold up a "popper" or sparkler. Sister Sheila wanted to surprise Bishop Hogan with the unexpected display, but others argued he ought to be forewarned. In the end, the entire congregation was stunned when Bishop Hogan responded by pulling out a handful of fireworks and lighting them. "Word got around about St. Monica's 'carnival confirmation' but it's a day none of those kids will ever forget," Sister Sheila said.

At St. Monica's, Sister Sheila also experienced the changes renewal brought to community life, in particular government by consensus. "We were a dynamic group of people (living in St. Monica's convent) and we spent a great deal of time calling each other to growth. It was painful at times," she said. "But it impacted me with the courage to do something different."

She now lives with four other sisters in a regular house in an ordinary neighborhood, a move her congregation also heartily supported. Her new lifestyle has opened her eyes to some realities she didn't even realize she was missing.

"The poor have no choice in being poor. To say you choose poverty is just not realistic," she explained. "The very fact that you belong to a congregation that takes care of you and live in a convent means that you don't experience the real struggle to live on an income, to pay the utilities. It's not that I don't admire the choice to live simply, but we simply have no idea what it costs to live."

Small community living has meant that she can understand and relate to someone saying that they can't afford that. "And," she said, "I can also find ways from my own experience to show them how they can make it."

After 11 years at St. Monica's, during which she also founded the Upstairs Youth Agency, an ecumenical theatrical company for youth, Sister Sheila transferred to St. Mary's Church in downtown Rochester, where she was a pastoral assistant. There she concentrated on ministry to the elderly and took a fateful course in real estate with a friend. She was also affected by a study done by the Center for Research in Governmental Policy and Business that identified housing as the No. 1 need in Monroe County, especially for the elderly.

"I'm in real estate because it satisfies one of the three basic needs for life — shelter," she stated.

Since July of this year, when she began to work in real estate full-time, she has met with astonishment from clients and colleagues, but no strongly negative reactions. Some people have questioned how she can continue as a sister in the business world, but she dismisses their concerns with incisive logic. "My vocation is as a sister. My ministry is a job," she said. "You wouldn't get divorced just because you change jobs, would you?"

Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal