

few
ARE CHOSEN

House offers women religious place to heal

By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

In 1989, Sister Mary Pat Lardieri, CSJB, returned to teaching after nine years as a principal and — previously to that — three more as a vice principal.

She soon discovered, however, "I had used up any energy that I had left in my body — physical, emotional, mental."

Meanwhile, Sister Maria Fix, OSB, realized as a teacher in 1991 that she "was beginning to get depressed and trying to cover up things that happened earlier in my life. I was getting physically sick."

Today, Sister Lardieri serves as principal of St. Roch School on Staten Island, while Sister Fix is working with her congregation's senior members in St. Cloud, Minn.

In between their earlier difficulties and their current ministries, the two women religious spent time at Spirit House, 72 Dorvid Road, Irondequoit.

Founded in 1982 through the joint efforts of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester, the Sisters of Mercy of Rochester, and the School Sisters of Notre Dame, Spirit House is a therapeutic community for women religious. The current co-directors are Sister Mollie Brown, RSM, who was also involved with the facility's creation, and Sister Mary Ann Ayers, RSM.

An average of eight women religious reside at the house at any time. Approximately 75 women from across the United States, Canada and Mexico have completed the program since its inception.

At Spirit House, women take part in group and individual therapy sessions to help deal with a variety of stresses — including childhood and adult sexual abuse, mid-life changes, and problems related to being adult children of alcoholics.

Although there is time for individual activities, women work on their problems in a community setting at Spirit House, attending to household chores, planning menus and recreating together.

Sister Yolanda — a School Sister of St. Francis who is currently at the house and who asked that her last name not be used — said she finds "the program well-balanced" because of the group and individual therapy, including attention to the emotional, physical and mental aspect of each woman.

The community aspect was part of the program's appeal when she was searching for a place to rest, Sister Fix said.

"There's very few places like Spirit House in the country," Sister Fix said. "Spirit House was one that was specifically for religious women. I appreciated that because I did not want to lose that sense of community living."

The program, however, also helps women learn ways to live in their own congregations with what is frankly described in the house's brochure as the "sand paper" of community life.

"It's just like married life," commented Sister Mary, SSCJ, a current resident of Spirit House who asked also that her last name not be used. "The minute you put people together, you're going to have conflict."

When entering a congregation, Sister Lardieri noted, a woman does not lose the feelings and problems she has going in. But congregation training in the past often encouraged not thinking of one's self and needs.

"You just sort of put (your feelings)

aside," Sister Lardieri observed. "But eventually they do catch up with you."

Thus Sister Mary, who had been serving as a pastoral assistant in Ottawa, Canada, found herself worn out from responding to demands she and others placed on her.

"You don't know how to say 'no,'" Sister Mary said. "You don't know when to say 'no.' You become a catch all. Then you wake up and ask yourself, 'Who am I?' I'm a woman religious, but I'm also a human being."

At Spirit House, women work on their individual problems at their own pace.

"It's not intensive," Sister Yolanda acknowledged. "It's not like a specific program. There's not a time limit."

"To some it may look like a glorified holiday," added Sister Mary, "but it takes time to undo and redo ways of looking at things."

As a result of her time at Spirit House, Sister Mary continued, "I have learned to believe in myself, and that I have the right to speak up and to speak of my needs, to set boundaries that have to be set. I will no more become someone's doormat."

"I've learned to set limits on myself," said Sister Lardieri. "I don't have to be a caretaker."

"I don't have to spend 12 hours at my desk every day," Sister Lardieri continued. "I can be there 8 (hours), leave the building, and know that what I didn't finish then would be waiting for me in the morning."

"There's a peace and happiness that I've never experienced before in my life," Sister Fix concluded. "There were parts of my life when I felt I was dead. It's so good to be alive."



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer
Sisters Yolanda (left) and Mary are current residents of Spirit House in Irondequoit. The house was founded in 1982 through joint efforts of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester, Sisters of Mercy of Rochester, and the School Sisters of Notre Dame.

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