

CONNECTIONS

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SERVING THE DEAR FAMILY

*At Journey House, sisters walk with women
rebuilding their lives after prison*



The women of Journey House say grace before dinner.

Serving the Dear Family

**SISTERS WALK WITH WOMEN REBUILDING
THEIR LIVES AFTER PRISON AT JOURNEY HOUSE**

By Barbara K. Roberts



**FOR THE RESIDENTS,
JOURNEY HOUSE IS
MORE LIKE THE FAMILY
THEY WANTED RATHER
THAN WHAT THEY HAD.**

their ups and downs and to support each other.

While other halfway homes have security cameras, on-site parole officers, and around-the-clock security, Journey House has Sister Martha—greeting, hugging and listening to all—who helps provide the security these women want. She further fosters well-being by leading a 12-step program for these women and others in the community.

Fifteen women reside at Journey House for up to 90 days. Since its opening in September 2015, over 200 women have called it their home. The demand is so great, it's booked six months out. Although it serves those most prone to re-incarceration—those with mental illness, addiction and a history of going in and out of prison—less than five percent have returned to prison, a remarkable feat, considering the national recidivism rate is 68 percent.

What makes Journey House so successful that a former resident held her wedding reception at the home? To the sisters and women, the answer is simple—they are a family.

It was the vision of Georgia Walker, executive director at Journey to New Life (JTNL), to establish Journey House, with the aid of Sister Rose McLarney. Sister Rose's background in restorative justice for former inmates made her a natural choice to help launch this innovative program. Sisters Martha, Gabrielle Smits and Patty Clune, all enthusiastically joined the call to serve their dear neighbor by living and



Sharing Hugs: Above, Sister Martha Niemann and JH resident Melissa. Below, Sister Gabrielle Smits and JH resident Teresa.



JH resident Shelly works with Sher Bialczyk, the resident manager.

A roller coaster of activity surrounds Sister Martha Niemann from her peaceful perch in the living room at Journey House, a transitional home in Kansas City, Missouri, for women returning from prison. She takes it all in: from a sister returning from the bus station with a new resident, to women off to their daily rehab meetings, job training, or preparing dinner, then later, group circle time. Residents stop by to share

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THE SUCCESS IS SO PERVASIVE THAT MANY WOMEN COME BACK TO VISIT, WITH A COUPLE EVEN COOKING DINNER FOR CURRENT RESIDENTS. THEY CONSIDER JOURNEY HOUSE THEIR HOME. AS ONE COMMENTED, “THIS IS THE BEST PLACE I’VE LIVED.”



Sisters Gabrielle Smits, Martha Niemann and Rose McLarney with several Journey House residents.

ministering with them. For the residents, most of whom had never met a nun, Sister Martha laughs, “They didn’t know what to expect and then they saw we were old sisters!”

For Sister Rose, the value of the sisters living with the women are the “spontaneous things that happen that show we care and support them. It’s not having to wait for an appointment to talk to someone. It’s the security of

the sisters always being there for them. There is a reason behind their behaviors, and addressing their issues is what makes a difference.”

While at Journey House, the women receive substance and mental health counseling, vocational and educational training. After they leave, JTNL provides housing assistance.

The sisters also agree that Sher Bialczyk, their house manager, has

been a “tremendous help” to their success. A former inmate with a background of substance abuse, “Sher understands the women, where there may be some instances that we may not know what’s going on, and (she) is a role model for them. If she can do it, they can also. She knows what they are going through,” says Sister Rose.

The women’s self-motivation for recovery is another key to their success. While still in prison, a phone interview is conducted with potential residents. They then write a follow-up letter stating why they want to come to Journey House. Two weeks prior to their arrival, Sister Martha writes to them. The women then sign a resident agreement prior to moving into the home. At the end of 30 days, caseworkers interview the women to see how they are progressing, with the sisters also sitting in on these meetings.

For the residents, Journey House is more like the family they wanted rather than what they had. One resident says, “It’s the freedom, the love. These women [the sisters] are heroes. They make you want to love them just by the things they do, the way they talk to you. They are always there. It’s a huge difference from prison.” Another says, “The sisters know all about us, but that doesn’t make a difference.”

The sisters find that wherever they go, there is a sincere interest in Journey House, including with their fellow sisters who have volunteered at the home. “People have been very generous. Not only monetarily, but also donating household items, clothing, and volunteering their time, and that is very meaningful for the women. It shows them somebody cares about them, that these people respect them,” Sister Gabrielle shares.

The success is so pervasive that many women come back to visit, with some even cooking dinner for current

residents. They consider Journey House their home. One resident says, “this is the best place I’ve lived.” Another echoes, “The sisters are heaven sent. They do it not because they have to. They do it because they want to.”

To aid in recovery, the sisters and women come together for circle time, where they listen and talk about issues, then come up with a solution. A recent session opened with Sister Rose sharing that, while shopping, she discovered that all of her money had been taken out of her wallet. She was “hopping mad,” and further shared what the experience was like for her. Others then shared how the incident impacted them, and how they felt about it. Within five minutes of the group breaking up, a woman came to Sister Rose and confessed to taking the money. “She told me it was the hardest thing that she ever had to do,” she recalls.

“That is restorative justice,” Sister Rose continues. “When they realize the implication of their actions on others. We take every chance to reinforce that. It’s not that you’re a bad person. It’s that you did a bad thing and you need to consider what you are doing, how it impacts others, and look at what is going on that makes you act that way. Because otherwise they are going to continue acting out, doing whatever they are doing.”

For Sister Rose, it’s moments like that which inspire her to continue what she’s doing. She’s been asked countless times when she’s going to retire from her numerous ministry activities. Her response: “This would be the last thing I give up. I love it here.”

And the Journey House women love their sisters—their family.



Sister Rose McLarney gives a high five to JH resident Teresa.



JH residents Christy and Shantel have a chat on the porch with Sisters Gabrielle Smits and Martha Niemann.

Special Recognition: The Johnson County Library System (metro Kansas City area) has recognized writer Barbara K. Roberts and the sisters’ work at Journey House by selecting a version of this story as the winner of their “Build a Better World” contest. The library states, “Roberts’ ability to capture the women of Journey House—both those who work there and those who come to stay—gives readers a vibrant example of the impact one can have when they try to build a better world.”