



The mission endures

Madonna University continues SWEEP model

By Martha Curry, RSCJ

This past summer, Religious of the Sacred Heart celebrated a milestone in the history of the Southwest (Detroit) Women's Education Empowerment Program (SWEEP), a project initiated by Religious of the Sacred Heart Annette Zippel and Martha Curry in the early 1990s. The history of SWEEP and its transition to a program fully operated by Madonna University is the story of a successful collaboration with partners outside the Society to advance Saint Madeleine Sophie's mission.

Meet Carmen

Carmen Ramos had a cosmetology license and worked in the beauty industry. She wanted to advance in her career but was not eligible for positions that required a college degree. She had been taking classes at Wayne State University's Center for Latino/a and Latin American Studies, but she was unable to finish because she had a child to support. Then she learned about SWEEP from a flyer. She learned she could take classes in her own neighborhood at times that fit her schedule.

"The convenience of classes in my neighborhood appealed to me," she wrote. "SWEEP provided workshops to support non-traditional students in adapting to college courses."

Carmen is now one of the more than one hundred students who have earned a degree through SWEEP. A 2004 graduate of Madonna University through SWEEP, Carmen wrote, "SWEEP has had a profound impact on me. It gave me the vehicle to complete my bachelor's degree. I am not sure I would have been able to complete the required courses if it weren't for the positive support I received from SWEEP."

Carmen has used her degree in social work to great advantage. "SWEEP taught me to use my voice well. I use my voice to serve and advocate for the underserved. To give a voice to those who are not understood or do not understand by interpreting, providing resources, educating and leading. ... SWEEP helped me become more



Far left: In the footsteps of Saint Madeleine Sophie, Religious of the Sacred Heart Annette Zipple and Martha Curry turned dreams to reality in Detroit.

SWEEP students can take classes in their own neighborhood, at times that fit their schedules.

empathetic, and I use these skills on a daily basis. Through SWEEP, I developed the skills to think critically and to assess and examine everything. I developed my professionalism and found the person I knew I could be.”

The history of SWEEP

SWEEP began when Rosemary Bearss, RSCJ, then provincial of the United States Province, called upon members of the province to reflect on how the Society’s ministries could address the realities of the twenty-first century. At the conclusion of the social analysis process, in 1992, the province published a seminal document, *An Act of Hope*, which called Religious of the Sacred Heart to structure concrete programs that would transform their dreams into realities. The Detroit area Religious of the Sacred Heart determined that the community’s most pressing need was access to quality education for the women of metropolitan Detroit.

Annette Zipple, RSCJ, had a dream, a way of living Saint Madeleine Sophie’s mission of educating the underserved. She dreamed of a project that would enable the women in southwest Detroit to earn degrees beyond the high school level. In 1996, she invited several women to the home she shared with Martha Curry, RSCJ, and asked them to share their hopes for strengthening themselves, their families and the community. Sisters Zipple and Curry learned of the challenges that

these women faced: limited financial resources, the absence of educational opportunities in their neighborhood, and the limits to advancement resulting from lack of education. They developed SWEEP as a way to address those challenges. Their plan was to bring college classes to southwest Detroit. By 1998, Madonna University, based in Livonia, Michigan, agreed to provide the classes if the RSCJ could guarantee twelve students for the fall enrollment. That September, twenty-eight women became the first SWEEP students.

Madonna provided the opportunity to earn bachelor’s degrees in three fields: social work, early childhood development and general education. Additional courses in business, finance, psychology and in both remedial and standard writing and mathematics were encouraged. Associate’s degrees and certificates were offered in such specialties as healthcare, hotel management and communications. Special programs also helped prepare students to continue their education in Madonna’s nursing program.

In the meantime, Sisters Zipple and Curry founded the Women’s Cultural Collaborative (WCC), a nonprofit organization that would provide funding for SWEEP. The WCC was itself funded in part by the Duchesne Fund for Ministry of the United States Province. The WCC helped provide the extras that the women needed to work toward their degrees, such as child care, books and fees. Occasionally the Women’s Cultural Collaborative even stepped in to help with a mortgage payment or utility bill.

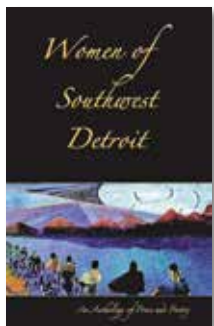
Sister Zipple served as director of the board for the Women's Cultural Collaborative; Maryellen Harmon, RSCJ, was the treasurer, and Sister Curry the secretary. Over the years, other RSCJ and associates also served on this board.

SWEEP quickly caught on with area residents. Affordable tuition, accessible classrooms and help with child care made getting a degree a real possibility for more women.

Notable accomplishments

One of the notable events of SWEEP's history was the establishment of the Ana Tabares scholarship. Ana Tabares was actively involved in the community of southwest Detroit and by 2008 was one semester away from completing her bachelor's degree through SWEEP. Unfortunately, she died unexpectedly that year. In her honor, the Ana Tabares Educational Assistance Fund was established, offering tuition grants to Hispanic students registering for the first time. In this way students received an initial incentive, seed money for their future investment in their education.

Two publications grew out of SWEEP classes. The first, *Women of Southwest Detroit: Anthology of Prose and Poetry*, published in 2004, consisted of essays written for SWEEP classes. This publication, according to the authors, gave a voice to women who previously thought that no one wanted to listen to them. They knew they had a story to tell, an important message to convey, and in vivid and loving tones they found this voice. The second volume, *Stories of Hope & Learning*, was published in 2013.



Transition

By 2013, Sister Zipple, who had been actively involved in SWEEP throughout its fourteen years, realized she could no longer continue as director of the SWEEP board. She recognized that it was time to dissolve the Women's Cultural Collaborative and hand over its remaining assets to Madonna so that SWEEP could continue. The transition was accomplished through the endowment of a scholarship. The board decided to name the scholarship in honor of Elizabeth Briggs Fisher, the mother of Mary Elizabeth Fisher, RSCJ, and a graduate of the Academy of the Sacred Heart in Grosse Pointe. Through the years, the Briggs Fisher Foundation has been the major donor to WCC, and it seemed right to name this scholarship in honor of the matriarch of a Sacred Heart family with ties to Detroit. As Sister Fisher said, "From heaven Mother would be thrilled with all the help that SWEEP has given Detroit women."

A second donation from WCC funds was to Freedom House, a temporary home for survivors of persecution from



Some members of the SWEEP team who gathered to celebrate the promise of the future for non-traditional college students in southwest Detroit.

around the world seeking legal shelter in the United States and Canada. The money will be used to assist Catherine, a twenty-two-year-old refugee from Uganda, whose dream is to become a nurse. (Catherine's last name is withheld because she is in the process of seeking asylum in the United States.) Freedom House will turn over the donation from SWEEP to Madonna so that Catherine can enter its nursing program.

The celebration of the transition last summer included the SWEEP board, several Detroit area RSCJ, Madonna University president Sister Rose Maria Kujawa, Madonna's director of Outreach Programs Dr. James Novak, SWEEP coordinator Tia Silva, several others from Madonna, current and former students, friends and neighbors. All celebrated the fulfillment of the dreams of the Religious of the Sacred Heart, of the women of southwest Detroit, of Madonna University and of the generous donors who made it all possible.

Madonna University will continue to fund SWEEP scholarships for students from southwest Detroit majoring in child development, social work or computer technology, and taking classes at the center in southwest Detroit. Eligible students pay a small fraction of the tuition costs each semester. In addition to providing the scholarships, Madonna University also provides a discounted tuition rate for SWEEP students.

SWEEP is moving on without Annette Zipple or Martha Curry, but their imprint remains on the program and on the women – past, present and future – who saw the value of education for themselves and its impact on their families and community.

Saint Madeleine Sophie knew that the way to rebuild a community is by educating the girls and women. Her daughters in the Society are following in her footsteps – and passing the knowledge along. ❀

Photos courtesy of Cheryl Phillips, RSM and Madonna University.