The California Province, RSCJ Ministry in E. Palo Alto, California

St. Francis of Assisi Parish

By Irma Dillard

By 1960, East Palo Alto (EPA) was a small, predominately black community surrounded by richer, mostly white San Francisco and San Jose suburbs.  Its work force found employment outside the area.  East Palo Alto remained an unincorporated area governed by San Mateo County. Its residents had a limited voice in policies that impacted them. The widening of Highway 101 in the 1950s, for example, eliminated 45 of the community’s leading businesses. Menlo Park and Palo Alto annexed 25 percent of the community in the 1960s, depriving it of both population and property tax revenue.  Residents were also heavily taxed for county services, such as sanitation, water, and recreation.

To counter this secondary status, the people of East Palo Alto attempted to incorporate five times between 1931 and 1981.  They were successful only in 1983.  In the 1968 attempt, some local black leaders tried to rename the city Nairobi, after Kenya’s capital city. East Palo Alto became the largest African American community on the peninsula. Despite incorporation in 1983, East Palo Alto suffered through continued population loss, which followed increasing flight of its black middle class and crime rates spurred by drug sales and use.

EPA in the late 60’s was in turmoil and trying to find its identity separate from Menlo Park. African Americans were deep into the Black Movement and making it know that “they were black and proud”. At this time the Precious Blood priests had located their Provincial House to St. Francis of Assisi and the Holy Family Sisters were leaving the parish. They began talking to the Society, Sister Beth Nothomb, Provincial of the California Province. Providentially, RSCJ were being “called” into social justice ministries outside of the traditional institution.

Sister Marie McHugh began a series of meetings with the Precious Blood priests and the parishioners of St. Francis of Assisi. She wanted to hear from the people—what they wanted and needed. It was clear that education, CCD, home visits and adult bible study were top priorities. They worked closely with Richard Griever, Provincial, Anthony Gamble, Pastor and two seminarians, Bill Finn and Chris Sandholdt to design programs for the parish. At this time the parish was predominately African American with a growing population of Hispanics, majority from Mexico—“Chicanos” in California. The parishioners of St. Francis also included a few Italian families and older Irish widows that remained after the early sixties “white flight”, as well as a few Japanese families. There was a clear message & need: EPA was being ignored and there was a great need for education, resources and spiritual boosting.

Marie also went to visit and speak with the other RSCJ in the country who had chosen to leave “the schools” to live & work directly with the economically poor in their neighborhoods— to get a deeper understanding of the why.

1969: Sisters Marie McHugh, Sistina Pietrobono and Margaret Reilly moved into the newly renovated green two-story house that was given to the parish by the Kavanaugh family.

1970: Sister Linda Hayward joined the community. Sister Jenny Hills came to provide more assistance to the Spanish speaking parishioners.

1970: Margaret Reilly celebrated her 50th Jubilee of Final Vows at the parish rather than at “the Big House”. It was a beautiful event and the parishioners participated in this rare event! She had asked for her sisters to come in habit! Most were already out of that ugly, uncomfortable modified habit but they all showed up in habit! What a site but a real witness to religious life. The people had never had a celebration like this ever. It made them feel important and worthy of being in this place. Margaret put St. Francis on the map! She moved to Oakwood a year later but stayed in touch with the people.

They offered programs year-round for adults and children: after school program included tutoring, CCD, RCIA, Adult Bible Study, Summer Day Camp, Adult ESL, Women’s Jail Ministry, CYO for high school students and the afternoon Montessori Program. They became vital to the life of the parish. They had an open-door policy and many of the groups preferred meeting in “the little green house” rather than in the parish hall. Prayers groups emerged and they built relationships quickly. People felt at home.

1974: Sisters Toni Ramos joined the community to work in the afternoon Montessori Program. Early education was vital to the African American and Mexican American families. Sister Pam Yell came from Nova Scotia, Canada to join the little EPA community in teaching CCD and working with the parents.

Other RSCJ came during the summer months: Sisters Theresa Teshima, Barbara Dawson and Lucille Kramer.

Listing programs does not quite tell the story of what the religious gave to the community of St. Francis and EPA. All were welcome. They lifted people up and for the first time the people of St. Francis felt they had a voice and that they mattered. EPA located next to affluent Palo Alto and Atherton on one side and the up and coming Menlo Park on the other. They gave the people a thirst for education. Many of the youth in the neighborhood would not have graduated from junior or senior high school (these youth were first generation Californians either from Louisiana or Mexico) if not for the RSCJ. Some of these kids were the first in their families to graduate from high school!

Yes, they provided people with food and basic needs, but most importantly, they gave them tools to advocate for themselves and build on their gifts.

They provided spiritual guidance as well. The majority of the African American families of St. Francis came during the great migration in the forties from Louisiana. They brought their faith and their Catholic religion with them. The people had a deep thirst for scripture not the catechism! They had left their homes during the Jim Crow Era for a better life and jobs. They endured many challenges, but by faith and perseverance made a home in EPA, California. The RSCJ took the time to listen and understand the people. They heard each and every one’s story. They came to learn as well. It was a mutual learning experience on both sides. The people of EPA had lots to offer about life to the religious that had been in semi-cloister for years. And, there were some good times too! The sisters ate soul food for the first time: greens & cornbread, fried chicken, beans & rice, ham hocks, etc. They experienced Mardi Gras & Zydeco EPA style. They tasted real Mexican food for the first time and joined in the celebration for Our Lady of Guadalupe. Family is number one and the sisters joined with open hearts.

1976: Marie McHugh was leaving to join her sister Helen McHugh in Japan to teach at the University of the Sacred Heart in Tokyo, Japan. Toni Ramos was leaving to teach in her home country of Puerto Rico. Sisters Linda Hayward and Sistina Pietrobono continued for another year. There were no RSCJ available to join or replace them. They moved out in 1977. Sistina moved to Oakwood and Linda was offered a job at Santa Sabina Retreat Center in San Rafael with the Dominican Sisters. The work continued as the seminarians moved into “the little green house”. The Precious Blood priests pulled out of the parish a few years later, St. Francis of Assisi become an Archdiocesan parish again and “the little green house” was used as a law office providing legal assistance to the people of EPA.

**In 1988**, Sister Parrilla took a Marriage Encounter Training Program and began ministry at St. Francis of Assisi Parish in East Palo Alto, working with Marriage Encounter groups and youth and visiting the sick and prisoners, in both East Palo Alto and Redwood City.