

LaBelle: A Mission as Fruitful as the Surrounding Fields

Join RSCJ this summer
in southwest Florida

By Pamela Schaeffer

In her sixth year in southwest Florida, Sister Marie-Louise Wolfington surveys the good work completed by Habitat for Humanity of Hendry County and, in the next breath, laments all that is yet to be done.

“We are proud of what we have accomplished. We can stand tall,” she said. “But dreaming keeps me alive.”

Sister Wolfington came to LaBelle in 1998, one of many RSCJ who had stopped in at the Society’s mission here to bolster the spirits of two grieving sisters and to help carry on the work. It wasn’t hard to see that, like the sugar cane plants and citrus trees that grow abundantly in the region, the mission had brought nourishment and sweetness to many lives, and Sister Wolfington decided to stay.

The fruit of the work in LaBelle includes education, housing, parish work and, above all, friendships. It was those friendships that helped to sustain bereaved RSCJ following the sudden deaths of two members of their religious community in 1995. Sisters Mercedes Posada and Rosa Maria Orjuela, two of four RSCJ then working in LaBelle, were killed in a highway accident on the morning of November 16 while transporting a young woman to a job interview.

Left behind were Sisters Madeleine Desloge and Bienvenida Velez, both deeply committed to the local people who had poured out their love and shared so deeply in their grief.



When the accident happened, Sister Velez lost not only a good friend. She lost a companion in ministry and community of forty-three years. Beginning in the early 1950s, she, a native of Puerto Rico, and Sister Orjuela, a native of Colombia, had lived together in Cuba until they were expelled by the Castro regime in 1961. From there, they had gone to Miami, where they were “foundation stones,” members of the RSCJ community that helped establish Carrollton School of the Sacred Heart. Their role was to oversee El Jardín, the



Above, Sister Wolfington points proudly to a sign showing Habitat for Humanity’s progress. Below, Sister Wolfington enjoys a visit with Maria Pequeño, who recently moved with her husband and three children into a new Habitat home.

graceful mansion that serves as the architectural landmark of the school.

Then in 1972, in faithfulness to the Society’s commitment to solidarity with the poor, they began working with migrant farm workers in Naranja, a town south of Miami.

The commitment to serve the poor and to work for a just society, though strongly articulated at the General Chapter of 1970, springs from the Society’s roots in the determination of Saint Madeleine Sophie Barat to provide quality education to those who were educationally deprived.

Five years later, in 1977, Sisters Velez and Orjuela responded to an invitation from Father Frank Guinan, pastor of Our Lady Queen of Heaven Church in LaBelle, to move north and work with a growing number of migrants in the area. LaBelle is in Hendry County, one of two poorest among the sixty-seven counties in the state. The two nuns went to the migrant camps and invited the workers to join them on Sunday at Mass.

At first, the migrant workers resisted opening their doors to sisters in secular dress. “They were used to seeing nuns in

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*Above, Sister Wolfington and Demesha Giles, program coordinator for Habitat for Humanity of Hendry County.
Below, graves of Sisters Mercedes Posada and Rosa Maria Orjuela.*

habits,” Sister Velez said. “They thought we might be Jehovah’s Witnesses, and they would refuse to let us in.” When the Spanish-speaking residents did speak to the sisters, they often declined their invitations, pointing out that Masses at the local parish were celebrated only in English.

“Just come. Come this Sunday,” the sisters urged them. Meanwhile, Sister Velez bought some fabric and stitched up some simple habits. The migrants obliged. “They packed the church,” Sister Velez said. “We were taking chairs from everywhere.” The pastor soon agreed to offer a Spanish Mass, with Sister Orjuela doing the readings and delivering the homilies.

The Spanish Mass flourished, and the people helped raise funds to expand the church. Relationships between the migrants and the sisters flourished too. The sisters often provided transportation for people who had no car. They loaned money, using donations as a source of funds, and they opened their home to those who needed a phone to call families in Mexico. The workers came on payday with reimbursements.

In 1981, Sister Mercedes Posada, like Sister Orjuela, a native of Colombia, came from Boston. She taught religion to young children and helped to maintain the parish hall.

The three sisters in LaBelle kept in close touch with RSCJ working with migrants in southern Florida: Sisters Carol Putnam, Joan Gannon, Esperanza Jasso and others in Indiantown, about twenty miles from Florida’s eastern coast. Looking for a way to serve “the poorest of the poor,” Sisters Putnam, Gannon and Connie Dryden had gone there in 1978 to respond to the needs they would discover. In time, they founded Hope Rural School and a parish social service center.

Meanwhile, Sister Velez saw the need for a native English-speaking RSCJ to assist with religious education for a growing number of Anglos in LaBelle. Sister Madeleine Desloge, then working in St. Charles, Missouri, was longing for a simpler lifestyle. For years, she had hoped to work in missions overseas. She had asked to go to Japan, then Africa, but was told her skills were needed at home.

Then in the early 1980s, an era when RSCJ in their sixties were unlikely to get new assignments overseas, Sister Barbara Dawson, then director of ministry for the U.S. Province, proposed, “Why not work in a mission in this country?”

“I didn’t know there were any,” Sister Desloge recalls replying. Before long, she was on her way to LaBelle. In addition to overseeing religious education for children, she took charge of RCIA, the program for adult converts.

By 1995, the four sisters had been working together for twelve years, living in a home provided by the diocese – first the Archdiocese of Miami, and later, when the archdiocese was subdivided, by the Diocese of Venice, Florida.

As a sign of how their ministries were valued, Bishop John J. Nevins and thirty-three priests concelebrated the Mass for Sisters Orjuela and Posada. They had been killed instantly when a van suddenly crossed the road in front of them to get to a convenience store on the other side. The others involved in the accident survived: the driver of the van, the woman the sisters had been transporting, and the woman’s young child.

On the day of the funeral, migrant workers carried the two caskets on their shoulders for eight blocks, leading a procession of hundreds of mourners to the civic center for the Mass. Buses normally used to take migrant workers to the fields were dispatched that day to take worshipers to the cemetery, where the sisters – one known as *madrecita*, “little mother,” the other as “Mercy” – were buried side by side.

The headstone marking the sisters’ graves, donated by Cecil Akin of Akin-Davis funeral home and Owen Luckey, a local lawyer, is a large replica of the Society’s profession cross. The Society’s mission – “dedicated to spreading the love of Jesus through the work of education and the service of the poor” – is inscribed across the bottom of the cross. Carved in granite ledgers, one placed over each grave, is a synopsis of the life story of each of the two nuns.



In 1998, Sister Wolfington came to visit Sisters Velez and Desloge in LaBelle. She recognized a need for better housing in the area, where substandard housing abounds. Before long, she had established a Hendry County chapter of Habitat for Humanity International, the Christian, nonprofit organization that provides homes for low-income people around the world.

The Habitat program in Hendry County has steadily grown. It has a full-time director, Sara Townsend; a program coordinator, Demesha Giles; a full-time Vista volunteer, and a pool of part-time volunteers that includes an annual stream of “snowbirds” from the North in winter. Local supporters include K.C. Stanley-Lynn and her husband, Richard Lynn, both former riverboat captains from Kansas City, Missouri, who moved to LaBelle in 1998 and built a house overlooking the Caloosa River, which flows across the state.

So far, Hendry County’s Habitat program has provided eleven houses for families who have met Habitat for Humanity’s eligibility requirements, which include making a

Top, Sister Bienvenida Velez sits astride a tricycle she uses for errands. Bottom, Madeleine Desloge, RSCJ



\$1,200 down payment and putting in 500 hours of “sweat equity.” During the next year, Sister Wolfington expects the number of Habitat houses in Henry County to nearly double.

Sister Wolfington keeps in touch with several Sacred Heart alumnae in the area and was inspired when one said last year, “Wouldn’t it be great if alumnae could help build a ‘Sacred Heart house’ for Habitat.” Soon Sister Wolfington was organizing the first Network summer program for Sacred Heart alumnae, to be held this summer in LaBelle.

She has sent information to every alumna who, as a student, participated in a Network summer service project. But any alumna of a Network school is welcome in LaBelle this summer, she said. Participants will help to build a Habitat house and reflect together on their life experiences in light of their religious beliefs. Special events will include a barbecue and swim at the home of K.C. and Richard Lynn.

Sister Gannon, who went on from Indiantown to work in New York with people suffering from AIDS, and is now a member of the U.S. Provincial Team in St. Louis, said the choice of LaBelle for the first program for Network alumnae is significant in many ways.

“For the same reason that the U.S. Province wants to remain closely linked with the Society’s Mexican Province – because they have such a strong commitment to being with the poor – LaBelle is an important symbol for us,” she said. “The ministries in Florida have blazed a trail for us. They represent for our Province one of the first steps of our living out that 1970 call to work for justice and be in solidarity with the poor.” ❖



Sacred Heart alumnae are invited to LaBelle, Florida, July 13-18 to help build a Habitat for Humanity house and to reflect on spiritual and social realities they have experienced. Participants will have opportunities for recreation, including swimming and kayaking, and for spiritual direction. Participating RSCJ will include Sisters Marie-Louise Wolfington of LaBelle; Nancy Koke of Chicago; Diane Roche of Verrettes, Haiti, and Maureen Glavin of St. Charles, Missouri. Fee for the six-day program, which includes room and board at a retreat center overlooking the Caloosa River, is \$200. Alumnae wishing more information are invited to contact Sister Wolfington at mwolfington@rscj.org, or by phone at 863-675-3724. Registration forms are available at www.aash.org. Deadline for registration is May 31.