



Volunteers and members of the Little Sisters staff dish out donated food to neighborhood residents who joined in celebrating an agency anniversary.



After having her face painted at the street fair, this young girl was among lucky winners of dozens of gift baskets that were raffled off for free.

# Little Sisters, Big-Time Services, In East Harlem

**BALLOONS BOBBED ON TETHERS** in the imperceptible breeze of a mid-July day, a sign that something special was happening at the five-story building that houses Little Sisters of the Assumption Family Health Service in East Harlem – although the multitudes connected with the agency (clients, staff, volunteers, collaborators and donors) could argue that, with or without balloons, something special happens there many times each day.

Staff members who weren't already involved in the physical set-up of the special event took breaks from work to peer from windows at the bustle below. Would people turn out – enough to fill the space, wondered Judy Garson, RSCJ, executive director of the agency putting on this street fair to mark the anniversary of its thrift shop, The Sharing Place, and to thank neighborhood residents for a decade of support. She surveyed the street, now closed to traffic and filled with empty folding chairs.

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Atziri (left) and Janed were among Little Sisters' clients who participated in a pottery class at Convent of the Sacred Heart (91st Street) earlier this year.

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She needn't have worried. As the appointed hour approached, children and adults came in a steady stream from housing projects and apartments nearby. Kids got their faces painted or made chalk drawings on the street. Parents and elders found chairs to await a fashion show of used clothing, or lined up to fill plates with chicken wings and side dishes, most donated by local merchants.

After decades of helping people cope with some of the most intractable problems in this neighborhood, the agency today was dealing in pure fun.

Most days, though, it's serious business at Little Sisters, where services to the poor people of East Harlem – just a few blocks north of New York City's tony Upper East Side – are legion, addressing a wide range of family needs with a collaborative network that is larger than life. Over the years, Little Sisters has brought together religious women of various orders – including a dozen members of the Society of the Sacred Heart – with laity, paid professionals and volunteers, foundations and wealthy benefactors, interested in helping the poorest of the city's poor.

Annual reports and a regular newsletter, appropriately called "The Open Door," help to tell the story, though statistics fail to relate the extent of human suffering – and the satisfaction of finding solutions – that is at the agency's heart.

Just helping families stay together is a key goal, Sister Garson said – easing the tensions that tear families apart; preventing children from going into foster care.

Health care and education are the basic elements of the canopy of care that Little Sisters brings to the community it serves. They stem from the missions of two religious orders: the Little Sisters of the Assumption and the Society of the Sacred Heart.

The East Harlem agency was founded in 1958 by the Little Sisters of the Assumption, an outgrowth of its founding mission to help poor people cope in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution in France. Inadequate health care, substandard housing and lack of legal protections were tearing families apart. The Society of the Sacred Heart, with its mission of providing education to the educationally underserved, came to the agency much later, when Sister Garson arrived in 1984.

Among many of Little Sisters' telling numbers, an emergency food pantry had more than 5,000 visits last year and provided families with more than 39,000 meals; and six staff nurses, including Eve Kavanagh, RSCJ, made more than 1,700 home visits. These included nearly 900 visits to care for new mothers and babies; more than 650 to care for people afflicted with diabetes, and nearly 175 in support of some 80 children afflicted with asthma.

(Asthma is a health problem so prevalent in East Harlem that the agency has developed a multi-faceted prevention program.)

Home visits and the much-utilized food pantry give the Little Sisters staff a broad understanding of community needs, Sister Garson said. Severe housing problems, language barriers, parents needing support services and education, children with learning disabilities or trouble coping in school, and an array of health needs are daily fare for a staff of seventy and almost as many volunteers.

Little Sisters could never meet so many needs alone, but in Sister Garson's twenty-three-year tenure it has become a city-wide collaborator, drawing on government programs, public and private organizations, legal services – anything that can help address clients' needs. The statistics go on and on; the stories staff members tell give them life.

East Harlem, also known as Spanish Harlem, has long been noted for residents who come from Spanish-speaking countries, though other recent arrivals may come from West Africa, Yemen or Bangladesh, and many long-time residents are African-Americans. Most of the neighborhood real estate is divided between public housing projects and privately-held apartments.

“We do quite a bit of housing work,” said Lucia Russett, a former Catholic Worker, who directs Little Sisters’ client advocacy program – the official name for the ongoing challenge of assessing and addressing needs. “The housing stock is increasing in value in East Harlem, and many landlords are trying to push people out of rent-stabilized apartments, so that they can write new leases at a higher rate. One tactic is directly harassing renters; another is refusing to make repairs.”

In one case, Russett learned that a landlord was trying to free up a rent-stabilized apartment by harassing her client with a bogus complaint: too many residents. In reviewing the lease, Russett noted a series of fishy-looking rent increases, all rounded off to zero. She filed a complaint. The landlord was cited for illegal rent increases, and the client’s struggling family got \$10,000 in rent-free living. That felt good, Russett said.

Client advocate Pura Cruz illustrated the critical problem of deficient language skills – much greater even than a parent’s inability to communicate with a child’s teacher – with a story of a woman who nodded her head in response to questions from a city social worker and, as a result, had her child taken away. “Often immigrants don’t understand what is being said to them, but they nod their heads as if they do,” she said. Clearly, it’s a habit that can have disastrous results.

In another case, a woman with no official identification borrowed documents when she went to a hospital to give birth. The result: the wrong mother’s name appeared on the infant’s birth certificate. Cruz got involved (it’s what client advocates do) and is struggling her way through the legal morass – which includes DNA tests for the child and mother – to get the child’s real mother on the books.

Client advocates deal weekly with reams of paper, deciphering and translating bureaucratese for clients who are often helpless and bewildered.

Another staff member, Martha Andrade, fills the role of education advocate, helping parents navigate the city’s school system – a huge bureaucracy, she notes, providing services to a million students in an astonishing sixty-three languages. Often parents aren’t aware of available programs, or they miss meetings with teachers, because they can’t read notes and information sent home, she said.

Andrade, formerly a teacher in California, works with volunteers and staff members, including Maisie Lufkin, RSCJ, who teaches English as a Second Language. Like a number of others on the staff, Andrade came to Little Sisters as a volunteer and liked the place so much she joined the staff.

Education at the agency takes many forms. Last year, more than twenty classes served nearly 500 adults and children. Many classes were aimed at developing literacy and language skills of immigrant adults; others at boosting math and reading skills of bright but educationally deprived youth, making it possible for them to gain entrance and scholarships to the city’s Catholic schools. Summer programs provide enrichment and



Top photo: Sara Muller, RN, MPH, a community health nurse on the Little Sisters staff, checks on a newborn during a home visit.

Above: Joel Adas, coordinator of asthma prevention services for Little Sisters, clowns around with kids in the program.

time away from the city’s streets; a dance group offers lessons in ballet and modern dance to girls. A tutoring program for thirty-two students in elementary school matches twenty-eight reading specialists, all volunteers, with students whose potential is high but reading skills are low.

Other major programs include a toddler nursery and home-based intervention services for very young children with developmental delays.

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Paola, a Little Sisters' client, shows off certificates earned in educational programs.



Religious of the Sacred Heart on the Little Sisters' staff are, from left, Eve Kavanagh, Maisie Lufkin, Judith Cagney and Judith Garson.

## The satisfaction of finding solutions is at the agency's heart.

It's a wonderful place to work, said Judy Cagney, RSCJ, who oversees finances for the agency and lives with five other RSCJ in East Harlem. Sister Cagney earns high praise from Sister Garson for her financial juggling skill, which assures that funds from an irregular income stream are available to meet expenses of \$4.5 million a year. The Sharing Place, the thrift store celebrating its anniversary, brings about in \$25,000 a month, according to Elsie Sanchez, its director.

Sanchez notes that the store is much more than just a place to shop. It's where people come together to socialize, resulting in a stronger community.

After years of agency services operating from various neighborhood sites, all now share one roof at 333 East 115th Street in a colorful 23,000 square-foot building. When it opened three years ago, the building was hailed in *The New York Times* for its innovative, functional and low-cost design.

Many staff members cite Sister Garson's direction as a reason they stay. It's a happy place, they said, where employees are nurtured. Although she insists, "I never set out to be executive director of anything," she had honed educational and administrative skills during years of Society service.

A native New Yorker with a bachelor's degree in Russian and a master's degree English and education from Manhattanville College, and a master's degree in Slavic languages and literature from Columbia University, Sister Garson has served as a teacher and administrator in Sacred Heart schools in the East, including school head at Stuart Country Day School of the Sacred Heart, Princeton, New Jersey, from 1972 to 1977.

For five years after that, she was a member of the Society's General Council in Rome and, on official visits to provinces worldwide, witnessed firsthand the often oppressive effects of U.S. policies. At the end of her term, she was determined to serve less fortunate people at home.

In 1984, Sister Garson was invited to work at Little Sisters by Margaret Leonard, then-provincial of the Little Sisters religious order in the United States. When she arrived, she found the tradition of collaboration well established: Members of five other religious orders were working there.

Sister Garson knew little about health care – a core service of the agency – and had doubts about her ability to lead. But she was persuaded by the tremendous opportunity to provide collaborative services to the poor, and by a public health model that she recognized as activist and "profoundly educational."

"I started to learn what I needed to know about health programs and social services. Most important, I learned that there is a way of being a health care worker, a social worker, a teacher, that is both educational and empowering," she said. During her tenure, the client base has increased tenfold and the staff has increased threefold.

If the turnout for the street fair was any indication, the number of people the agency serves may grow still more. "I see a lot of new faces here," Sister Garson said, surveying the crowd, in particular the parents, children and grandmothers she hadn't seen before.

You could almost see her brain ticking, her focus shifting from "will lots of people come" to "how can we work with those who did?" What can we offer these people of our neighborhood beyond a good time for an afternoon? What do these families need in order to cope, to stay together, to thrive? ❖