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Gazette, Len Sidaway

Sister Margot Power: Serving 'the oppressed' of Little Burgundy after 30 years among the Westmount rich.

Power goes to the people

Sister Margot Power spent 30 years of her life working with the rich, but for the past four years she has dedicated herself to the poor.

Little Burgundy is her home.

She lives in a second-floor flat and her neighbors are working class people, some of them unemployed or on welfare.

"It wasn't easy to come down the hill," said Sister Power referring to her last job in Westmount — principal of the exclusive private girls' school, The Sacred Heart Convent.

But when Sister Power reached retirement age in 1973, it was up to her to choose a new ministry for herself.

"For 30 years I had taught the social teachings of the church. Now it was time to follow them," she said.

On August 6, 1973 — 30 years to the day after Sister Power made her vows of profession as a Sacred Heart sister — she moved into her flat "down the hill" from her old Westmount life.

"I started from scratch. I didn't even know how to cook anything...I never

had to before. All those things had been done for me in the convent."

Sister Power had been a cloistered nun — a "contemplative" who prayed for four or five hours every day and did not mingle with the public aside from her teaching duties.

In 1970 her order was told by Rome to give up its cloistered role. The nuns opted for life in small communities among the people they were working with.

"What a change it was — in an institution they don't come to visit you if they are neighbors...only friends and graduates come," said Sister Power.

"But here I met my neighbors right away and they were dropping in to visit or I was dropping in to borrow a cup of sugar or something.

"I began to see the oppression and the struggles of these people and I wanted to help them."

Sister Power spends a great part of her day working with Association pour la defense des droits sociaux, a group trying to help the workers, unemployed

people and welfare recipients protect their rights.

"After a while I was getting to the point of having to deal with the same problems all the time. I was repeating and repeating and repeating my actions but the situation still remained.

"So you ask why? — what are the causes? — and then you become political.

"It's the system that creates the unemployed and those on welfare. I wasn't here very long when I declared solidarity with the exploited and the oppressed — poor is not a descriptive enough term.

"I had come from the convent semi-innocent with an evangelical commitment to serve the poor after serving the rich and very rich for 30 years.

"Less than 10 percent of the people here go to church so I had to go to the people to reach them...not wait for them to come to church.

"Now I've joined humanity and I've joined life."