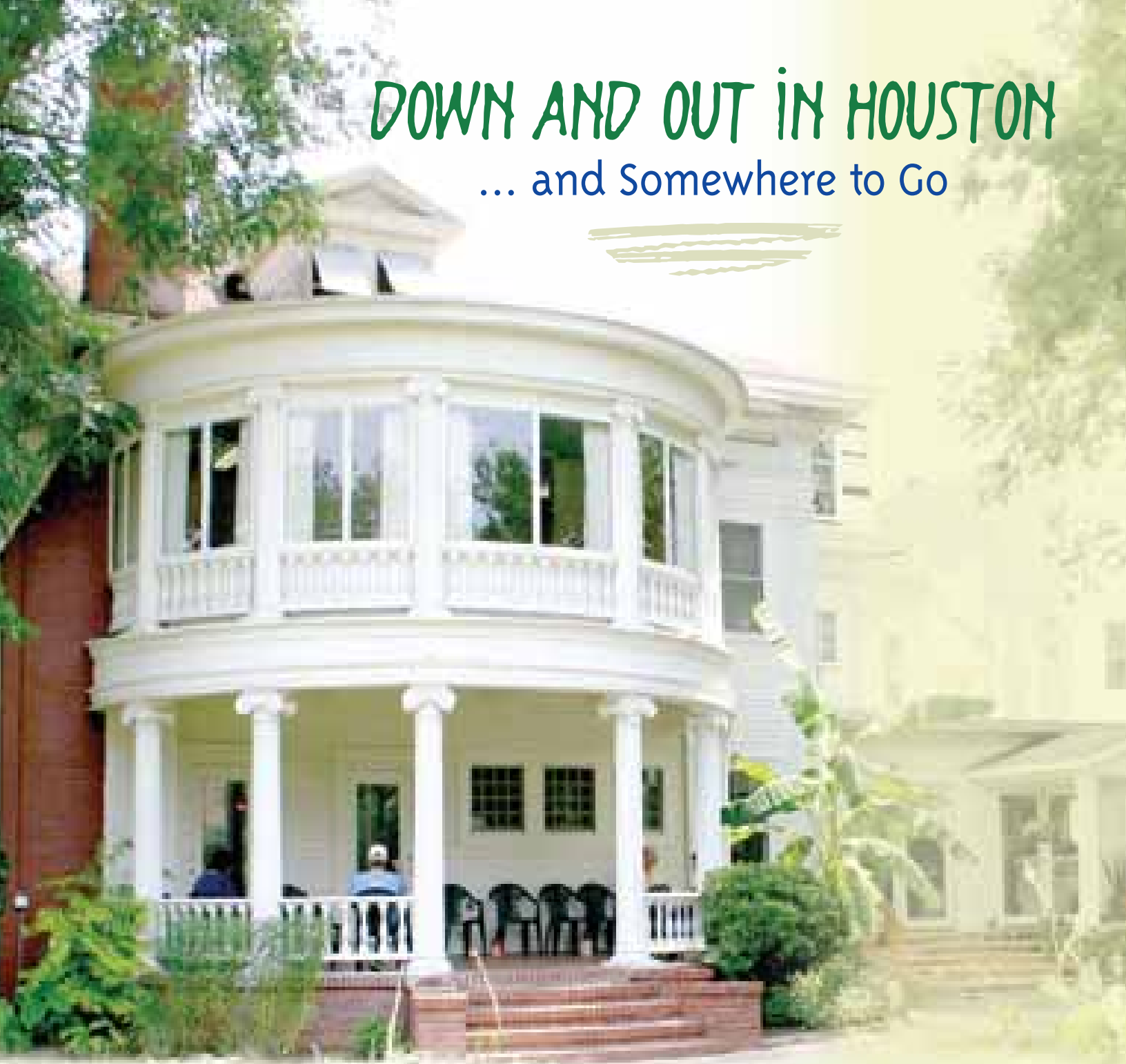


DOWN AND OUT IN HOUSTON

... and Somewhere to Go



In Houston's Midtown, a cluster of well-kept homes serves, among other things, as a temptation to race-walkers and joggers, causing some to slow their pace to look. Several of the houses are spacious bungalows in the Arts-and-Crafts mode. One is a picturesque century-old neoclassical mansion surrounded by lawn and gardens that flow into a small park. In an otherwise bleak part of town, these structures hark back to an era when quality perhaps counted for more than profit.

Who would guess that this urban oasis is a complex of shelters for the homeless; that the former mansion is a psychiatric rehabilitation center, the only such program in Texas to be certified by the International Center for *continued*

This neoclassical mansion, where programs are offered for people with mental illnesses, anchors an urban oasis of homes for the homeless operated by Magnificat Houses in Houston.



Sister Thompson, here inspecting a room at Stuart House for transient men, finds herself to be more student than teacher among the poor.

Clubhouse Development according to standards designed by and for the mentally ill.

Welcome to Magnificat Houses, Inc., where Sara Kay Thompson, RSCJ, has found a home for her heart and her commitment to live out the mission of the Society of the Sacred Heart.

Sister Thompson, 43, entered the Society in 1987. Since then, she has worked at a women's prison in St. Louis and at the Academy of the Sacred Heart, Bloomfield Hills. She has earned a master's degree in art therapy at Wayne State University in Detroit and worked as an art therapist with psychiatric patients at Henry Ford Hospital. In 2002 she moved to Houston and was hired as a program coordinator at Magnificat Houses, Inc., a small non-profit organization that owns the Midtown complex. Before long, she was promoted to assistant director of the whole enterprise, reporting to Rose Mary Badami, its founder. "I've never been happier," Sister Thompson said. "It is wonderful to invite people here and see them grow."

Magnificat Houses serves a wide range of residents. Some come directly from jail or prison or

from a life of chronic homelessness. Some are mentally ill; some are just down on their luck for a time. They may stay for weeks, months or years, or be intolerant of the structured programs and leave after a day. "No two people are homeless for the same reason," Sister Thompson noted. "Everyone thinks the homeless person is the drug addict, and yes, there is that. But some are moving through a bad period and are sincerely hoping to better themselves."

There is Vincent Portillo a talented artist who has lived in an apartment owned by Magnificat Houses since 1986. He sells his paintings on the Web and paints furniture for the houses. There is Woon, a Vietnamese woman who came for temporary relief after she moved to Houston from Los Angeles and could not find a job. She is a member of the clubhouse staff. There is Jeffrey, who moved to Houston about seven years ago to help care for his ill father. His father now lives with another son and his wife, and Jeffrey said he could too, but for one thing: "I don't want to be a burden to my family."

Similarly, Billy Shepherd came to Texas to care for his late mother. In Seattle, his former home, he managed a restaurant, worked at a nursing home, volunteered with Native Americans, raised money for children with AIDS. Now he runs Loaves and Fishes, a soup kitchen operated by Magnificat Houses, using his ingenuity to turn donated ingredients into tasty meals – "paella without the shellfish," for example. The facility, closed only on Mondays, serves tens of thousands of lunches a year. Areas businesses, schools and churches send volunteers to help.

Ken is another resident who has stayed. He serves as house manager at Stuart House, a home for eighteen highly transient men, a post he earned by showing responsibility. Now he tries to get others to do the same. He makes sure the men get up in the morning, make their beds and pick up clutter. "I try to make the transition (from living alone on the streets to living with others) as easy as possible." But "easy" doesn't mean unoccupied.

"We keep our people busy," Sister Thompson



Billy Shepherd lives at Magnificat Houses and runs Loaves and Fishes, the program's daily soup kitchen downtown.

said. Residents with construction skills, however minimal, help to maintain the houses. Others cook and clean up, sew, assist with programs. After thirty days, working residents are eligible to receive a stipend in addition to their room and board. The goal is to get residents into drug rehabilitation programs if they need it and to help them into mainstream society by preparing them for jobs. Sister Thompson noted that lack of job skills is a huge factor in homelessness. She cited a recent study: Of 12,000 to 14,000 homeless men and women in Houston, eighty-eight percent say they are unprepared for employment.

At the same time, Sister Thompson said, “We are not a social service agency. We are a ministry. We feed, clothe and shelter people; we try to give them comfort, and sometimes we even bury them. We do all the corporal works of mercy here.” Founder Badami counsels tolerance over idealism. “You cannot have any expectations at all,” she said. “To be intolerant of people who have had so little security in their lives is unthinkable.”

A realistic lack of expectations applies to the state of Texas. “Texas ranks forty-ninth in mental health programming,” Sister Thompson noted.

Badami founded the organization in 1968 after working in a school for delinquent girls and being shocked to learn of their dysfunctional home lives. Badami’s own experience had been so different. As a child in Denison, Texas, during the Depression, she had watched her grandmother, who spoke only Italian, feed “railroad bums” at the family table. On the way to daily Mass her grandmother would greet each passerby, including strangers. “She would tell me, ‘I am saluting the Christ in them,’ ” Badami said. These experiences jelled into her unshakable belief in the dignity of each person.

In 1967, while studying sociology at St. Thomas University, she opened the Santa Maria Hostel for girls in Houston, hoping to break the cycle of delinquency that leads to a life behind bars. At the university library, she was introduced to the work of Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement in a New York slum. Badami struck up a correspondence with Day and, in time, came to know her personally.

Over decades, Badami has adapted her outreach to meet changing needs. In 1968, when deinstitutionalization put mentally ill people on Houston’s streets, she opened a house for recently discharged patients. She gradually expanded her efforts, acquiring the Midtown properties while



Vincent Portillo lives in an apartment owned by Magnificat Houses. He sells his art from a website and paints furniture on the grounds.

Below: Staff members and residents at Magnificat Houses pray together at daily Mass.



values were low. Today, Magnificat Houses consists of ten group homes in central Houston, inside the I-610 Loop – a total of 122 beds. Like Stuart House, each home is operated by the residents themselves, usually with house managers appointed from their ranks.

Badami opened Loaves and Fishes in 1976 beneath a downtown interstate in Houston’s skid row. Above the soup kitchen is Miryam’s Hostel, the city’s only overnight shelter for street girls. When HIV/AIDS became a major health crisis, Badami opened Morning Star Hostel, a home for up to six men and women with HIV/AIDS. One small Midtown house serves as a dispensary for prescribed medications.

There is a deeply Catholic ethos about the complex. Although attendance is not required, Mass is offered daily in one of two chapels on the grounds and on Sundays at the soup kitchen. Stations of the Cross are nailed to trees outside one of the chapels. In addition to Sister Thompson, there are seven nuns affiliated with the program. They include Mary Bernstein, RSCJ, who serves on the board,

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and Joan Gannon, RSCJ, who, until a recent move to Albany, New York, helped served lunch at Loaves and Fishes.

In choosing to work with homeless people, Sister Thompson keeps company with several other RSCJ, such as Sisters Ellen Collesano and Kathleen McGrath, featured on these pages; Sarah Brennan

Rose Mary Badami, once mentored by lay activist Dorothy Day, has nurtured the growth of Magnificat Houses since founding the organization nearly forty years ago.



in Chicago; Rosie Statt in San Francisco, and Leontine O’Gorman in New York City. Before joining the U.S. provincial team, Sister Anne Byrne directed the New Life Center for homeless women and children in Opelousas, Louisiana. Sister Joan Kirby formerly served in shelters in New York City. She is now affiliated with that city’s Temple of Understanding.

Sister Thompson feels “totally blessed” to be where she is as a member of the Society of the Sacred Heart, to be revealing God’s love to those who may need it most. “Madeleine Sophie is so present

to me here,” she said. “She always believed in the whole person, regardless of socio-economic background.”

Paradoxically, though, while she regards her ministry as an expression of the Society’s educational mission, she sees herself as more student than teacher, at least for now. For example, she has been forced, like some of those joggers who pass by, to slow her pace. “The poor know no time,” she said. “They don’t wear watches. They travel on buses and on foot. It may take them all day to get somewhere.”

She paused, then added: “The poor are some of the wisest people around because they have nothing to lose. They can be the teachers of us all.” ❖

Moving Ahead in Boston

Kathleen McGrath, RSCJ, who holds master’s degrees in business and theology, has been working



Sister McGrath with graduates of the Moving Ahead Program

with people who are homeless ever since she entered the Society of the Sacred Heart in 1999, though she had not previously worked in the field. Soon after entering, she was sent to New York City, where she worked in a program founded by two religious women. “Our

team would go into thirteen New York City shelters and try to build community using a faith-based empowerment model,” she said. She has also done spiritual direction with women who are homeless in San Diego and served as co-director of a church-based program in Chicago.

Today she teaches critical thinking and life skills in the Moving Ahead Program at St. Francis House (www.stfranchouse.org) and regards education as the surest way to redirect individual lives.

Providing Services in Miami

After six years on the U.S. provincial team, Ellen Collesano, RSCJ, sought a ministry where she could put her master’s degree in social work to use. She moved to Miami, where she had lived



Sister Collesano with coworker Clifford Petit
Homme

previously, while teaching at Carrollton School of the Sacred Heart. She now works as a clinical intake specialist at Camillus House, a program for the sick and homeless founded by the Brothers of the Good Shepherd and named for St. Camillus de Lellis. Camillus House, in its forty-sixth year, provides

a variety of services, including housing, food and medical care, in several downtown locations. (www.camillushouse.org) Sister Collesano interviews applicants for a residential treatment center serving people with chemical addictions and mental health disorders. “To me, this work carries out the Society’s mission by helping people transform their lives and by enhancing the dignity of each person,” she said.