

Dear Mark,

*Dining  
Roche (2006)  
(Sursum Corda)  
+ Article @ Ministry in low-income  
neighborhoods...*

Here you go. Your request set off quite hike down memory lane. I still dream about Sursum Corda often and had one such dream just before one of the residents wrote to tell me about the plans to tear it down. I heard that the tenants who want to move into the new development will be allowed to buy in with the money they are each receiving. Is this basically true? I'd love to hear your take on how this chapter of the story is unfolding.

I look forward to talking with you in May or early June when I am in DC. In the meantime, give my love to Alverta and Mary and any of the other folks who still remember me.

Warmly,

Diane

How long did I work and/or reside in the North Capitol Community?

My first visit to Sursum Corda was during the summer of 1974 when I was a 24-year old postulant. Sursum Corda had barely been open for five years and already it had serious financial problems and was beginning to look rundown. I remember looking through the drawers and closets in the community center and noticing that several doors were missing and that the locks were broken on most of the ones that were left. (I was told that the oil crisis had doubled the cost of utilities while rents had remained the same, making it impossible for the management to afford repairs.) I had left a job as Executive Director of a community learning center in a public housing project in Manchester, NH in order to enter the Society of the the Sacred Heart six months before and I was eager to get back to working with kids. That summer I ran a day camp with another RSCJ and literally fell in love with Sursum Corda and her people.

In September of 1974 I had to go to Boston for a year at the Noviceship, but by September 1975 I was back at Sursum Corda, running an after-school program with Alverta and another wonderful woman named Maurice Jefferies, who died soon afterwards of a heart attack. Both Maurice and Alverta worked for Ed Nesbitt over at Center City Community Corporation (4-Cs) and I became closely involved with 4-Cs too. For the next four years we raised money, ran programs for kids and started up a tenant association. Eugene Stewart, Richard McCooley, Horace McKenna and a few other businessmen from Georgetown did everything they could during this period to try and solve Sursum Corda's deepening financial problems, but Alverta and I could see that things were just getting worse. Drugs were beginning to play a more serious role in undermining the quality of life. Families who could afford to move out, were doing so and the families who replaced them were not screened at all. Our Tenant Association began to organize committees to address some of the

social problems. Catherine Dublin and Mary Gordon headed up the Senior Citizens group. Another group took on responsibility for maintaining and renting out the Community Center. There was a Beautification Committee that put up fences and panted grass seed. It was about this time that we started holding an annual Labor Day festival for the whole neighborhood, complete with talent shows and parades. We also invited a tenant organizer (Shell Trap?) from a Chicago-based group called Neighborhoods First to come and offer a workshop for the tenant organizations from Golden Rule, Sibley Plaza, Temple Court and Tyler House.

In 1979 I left Sursum Corda for a year, at the request of my congregation, to receive further training at our Noviceship and to earn a Masters Degree in Urban Affairs at Boston University. I used the time at BU to learn how other groups were addressing the problems that were crippling Sursum Corda. When I returned in 1980, Alverta and I began to seriously think about reviving the dream of Tenant Ownership that had initially been a part of the plan when Sursum Corda was built. While we still ran after-school and summer programs for the kids, tenant organizing became a much more important focus for our energy. We began to look at co-operative ownership as a realistic way for the tenants to gain control over some of the things that were making their lives so miserable.

From 1980 until 1983 Alverta and I worked on building up the strength of our tenant organization. Robert Wood started a wonderfully folksy newsletter (the Sursum Corda/Turnkey News) which came out every month. It contained updates on management issues, obituaries, editorials. I have copies of some of the editorials, but it would be a great resource for your research if you can find back copies of the paper itself.

During these three years, life in Sursum Corda felt pretty hopeful. We had found a good management firm (H&E Management) that was open to working with our tenant committees and little by little we made progress in dealing with maintenance problems. The grounds began looking good again, with little flower gardens popping up in front of people's houses. Alverta and I figured out how to make the broken fountain down in the Mini Park work well enough so that the kids could cool off there on hot summer days.

When it came time for me to leave again in 1983 to spend a year in Africa and Rome as part of my congregation's final vow program, I felt like I was probably not going to be coming back to Sursum Corda. When I made my vows in the spring of 1984 I accepted a job as Dean of Students at one of our schools on the West coast. The job required that I sign a contract promising to stay at least three years.

However, I soon began to receive disturbing news from Alverta and Mr. Wood that things were not going well. Every time I would return for a visit, I would return to the west coast filled with outrage and frustration. Changes in the tax laws had made it possible for a huge syndicate to buy Sursum Corda. They got rid of the good management firm and proceeded to undermine the work of the Tenant Association, preferring to see the Tenant Association as

- CONDOR  
Management  
Margaret  
Spencer

their enemy instead of a valuable partner. The quality of the managers they hired deteriorated as conditions in the development became more and more dangerous and unattractive. Finally; in 1987, when I heard that one of the managers lasted less than 2 weeks and took the company Xerox machine with him when he left, I called the headquarters of the syndicate in California and asked them if they would be interested in hiring me to be the resident manager. To my utter amazement and delight; they said yes immediately and told me what kind of real estate course I would need to take to qualify for the position:

Margaret Westkamp  
Housing Resources Management in California  
ZALCO Mgt in Silver Spring

That was how I returned to Sursum Corda for the last time in 1987 to spend the next <sup>Six</sup> years as the resident manager. (Some details of this period are covered under the question about Crack cocaine and the effect on the neighborhood.) One of the first things Alverta and I did was to lobby the new owners to put H&E Management back in charge. The next thing was to begin fixing up the 43 vacant units so we could reestablish a cash flow. Several DC non-profits (DC cares; Doing Something and DC Habitat for Humanity) played a huge role in getting these vacancies back on line: They also pitched in and helped us catch up on the huge backlog of maintenance requests in the occupied units.

But the main thing that Alverta and I worked on during these three years was finding a way to turn Sursum Corda into a tenant-owned Cooperative. We attended meetings of the National Association of Housing Cooperatives, talked to people who lived in coops and approached HUD to see if there were some way they would sell the property to the tenants. With enormous help from H&E management; we applied for and received a FLEX grant from HUD and secured their help in rehabbing all the apartments, installing Heating and Air conditioning units in each apartment; refurbishing the community center; repaving all the parking lots. The Ford Foundation gave us a grant that allowed us to offer training for all the residents regarding their new responsibilities as co-operative owners. In the spring of 1993 we signed the papers that turned Sursum Corda into a tenant-owned HUD subsidized coop.

When my Provincial called a few months later and asked if I would consider leaving Sursum Corda to serve as Director of Ministries for our Province, it seemed like the right moment to say Yes. Christine Nicholson; the president of the Tenant Coop and Annie Hall, my assistant manager, were eager to have a chance to run Sursum Corda on their own: We had a solid management firm in place. There was a waiting list for vacancies as they became available and a good system for screening applicants had been established. The property looked good and the level of violence had declined, in part because the drug dealers had settled their turf wars.

On Jan 1st; 1994 I left Sursum Corda for the last time.

What do you know about the origins of Sursum Corda, the story of the community?

What I heard was that Gonzaga needed to build a football field but the land they wanted was densely populated by very poor families. Gonzaga enlisted the help of several prominent alums to find a way to offer new homes in the same neighborhood to the families who would be displaced by the building of the football field. Horace McKenna was deeply involved with the planning of Sursum Corda and it was even said that the young Kennedy brothers took a personal interest in the project: The dream was to build a community of low-rise town houses that would be like a village. Each apartment was to have a small, private yard, a washer/dryer, central air conditioning, large closets and a storage shed outside... all things that the future residents asked for. The tenants were also told that some day they would own these homes. The buildings were grouped around landscaped courtyards; some of which

contained fountains and play equipment. As a result; there was already a strong sense of community among the first group of tenants to move in and a huge sense of hope that their lives in Sursum Corda would continue to improve. It was Horace who asked the Religious of the Sacred Heart to move in when it became clear that the Notre Dame nuns were not going to be able to do it.

At the same time, thousands of other buildings in the North Capitol St. area were slated to be torn down, too. Just as the Catholic Church had agreed to take on a leadership role in the planning and construction of Sursum Corda; other church groups formed non-profit corporations and developed Temple Court; Golden Rule and Tyler House. HUD loans and tax incentives over the years made it possible for these developments to survive financially. The idea was to form a "super block" of low income housing and provide these families with a full range of social services. However; the social services did not materialize, which is one of the reasons why; despite so much good will and private investment; all of the developments (with the notable exception of Golden Rule) very quickly succumbed to the stresses caused by lack of employment; substance abuse; absentee fathers, health problems, illiteracy etc.. The suffering caused by this unfulfilled promise was one of the driving forces that led Paul McElligot to create the Perry School program.

What were the roles of St. Al's and Holy Redeemer?

Because of Horace McKenna; the Jesuits at St: Al's always took an active interest in what was going on at Sursum Corda. Sometimes the pastor of St, Al's would serve on the Sursum Corda Board. The Tenant Association always had easy access to meeting and performance space, the Gonzaga school bus or any other resource they needed that St. Al's could loan them. In the early days, I don't remember Holy Redeemer being too involved although during the brief period that the RSCJ ran the school; there was certainly a lot of back and forth. After I left in 94 I heard Holy Redeemer got a great new pastor who became very active in the community.

How did the arrival of crack cocaine change things; if at all?

Crack arrived sometime during the late 1980's. When I decided to come back and take the job of resident manager in the fall of 1987, I was shocked and saddened by the terrible condition of the houses and the out of control violence. All the progress we had made in the early 80's had been wiped out. For the first time in all the years I had lived in Sursum Corda, I was afraid, and with good reason. All of the maintenance men quit before I arrived after stealing every thing of value from the supply room. The first 10 or 15 men I tried to hire all turned out to be crack addicted. When I finally began to find some decent staff; I was afraid that they would be shot for simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time. All night long I could hear guns being fired all over the property. We were told that this was because gun dealers from NY were demonstrating their wares to prospective clients on our parking lots. When I heard police sirens and screaming I would get up to go out and find out who had been killed. It was at this time that we started a Neighborhood Watch patrol and began to develop a fairly good relationship with the Police Department; the ATF and the FBI to see what we could do to regain some control over our neighborhood. We even interviewed a group of black Muslims to see if they might be able to offer a solution but we didn't have the money to hire them. We invited the police to set up a sub station on First Terrace but it was set on fire before it even had a chance to open. I saw people who had been loving parents when I knew them in 1983 leaving their tiny children alone in the house all day long while they sold

themselves for crack in front of Golden Rule Supermarket. Sursum Corda had always had a certain group of tenants that abused drugs but their behavior did not prevent the rest of the tenants from living their lives in relative peace. Crack changed all that. I did an informal survey once just to see what percentage of the households were affected in some way by Crack (i.e. had a family member who used or sold) and found that there was fewer than 10 families that were not involved.

What do I remember about the history of community organizing and resistance to displacement?

I remember Henry Alston, who was the Housing Specialist at 4-C's when I first came to the neighborhood in 1974 talking about the year 2000 report which was a supposedly secret document in which the city planned to get rid of all the low income housing in the North Capitol area and replace it with luxury high rises. I think all of us assumed that our tenure in NW 1 was limited but we were determined to do what we could to postpone the inevitable as long as possible.

Key Leaders and others who played an important role:

Alverta Munlyn, Mary Judd, Ed Nesbitt, Elaine Johns from Tyler House, Corrine Rogers, Henry Alston, Mr and Mrs Edmonds, Thelma "Sugar Baby" Howard; Wesley Washington; Robin Brown, Shirley Jones(?), Paul McElligott, Robert Wood, Lou Brown, Horace McKenna, John Wilson (city councilman), Freeman Hair (H&E Management), Miles Glasgow; Sr Alice McDonell; Sr, Kate McDonnell, Sr, Faine McMullen, Sr. Julie Yachtis; Sr, Hellen McCulloch, Mary Gordon; Catherine Dublin, Catherine Estes, Mrs, Gonsalves, Maurice Jefferies, Eugene Stewart and his sons, Mr, McCooley, Mr, McManus. Christine Nicholson; Annie Hall; Mr. Fletcher, Paul (one of our maintenance men); Mr. Hearn; Mr. Jones. Mark, please don't share this list with anyone since I have undoubtedly left off many important names and I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings

Best and Worst Memories

My best memories include one of my birthday parties in the community center on New Year's Eve (probably in 1988) when all the maintenance men and other staff joined with the tenants and danced until 2 or 3 AM. I also love my memories of our Labor Day Festivals with their parades: And the very first Miss N.W. One Pageant...

My worst memory was when the crack addicted daughter of one of our tenants set their 6 bedroom house on fire by putting cooking grease on the stove and forgetting all about it: Two tiny children burned to death. Later the family sued Sursum Corda, saying that the 3rd floor smoke detector wasn't working, even though my maintenance records showed that we had repaired it the Friday before the fire. The case didn't go all the way to court but the family got a huge settlement anyway,

What did Sursum Corda mean to me?

I fell in love with Sursum Corda in a totally inexplicable, unreasonable way and I continued to feel that passion for almost 20 years. I needed and wanted to learn everything Sursum Corda had to teach me about low income housing, race and poverty in America, the relationship

between drugs and violence; the limits of social interventions. But mostly I just loved being there. I knew the names of every person and every pet on the property. I would wander around early in the morning with a cup of coffee and dream about planting flowers or building retaining walls. On some level, I even loved all the problems because Alverta and I kept coming up with surprising ways of addressing them that were sometimes very effective. It felt magical or blessed...the way people and resources kept appearing just when we needed them.

People to talk to:

Paul McElligott, Mr. Freeman Hair, Helen McCulloch, Julie Yachtis

Article #: 601

Section: Sisters 600

Head: What is it about nuns?

By Sister Diane Roche, R.S.C.J.

Deck:

There is something about the communal effort to serve others while living simply and without a mate that makes religious life a sign of hope, even to people who are not Catholic.

Body text:

I was once invited to a festive dinner sponsored by a community organization near my own inner-city St. Louis neighborhood. I was both eager and a little apprehensive as I drove down the dark, unfamiliar streets straining to find the Fifth Baptist Church where the event was to be held.

After close to 30 years of being a nun, almost all of them spent living and working in poor neighborhoods, I tell myself that I am fairly streetwise. But, if I am honest, I know that what has kept me safe and allowed me to work joyfully and effectively in dangerous surroundings has less to do with wisdom than with an utterly unearned kind of grace that seems to hover when I'm where I ought to be, doing what I need to do. And I also know from the writings and examples of others who have described this same phenomenon that sometimes the path requires paying the same price as the people among whom we serve. So it was with some relief that I parked safely and found myself at a table with some friendly faces.

During dinner the conversation turned, as it always does, to curious questions about nuns. I used to dread the obvious ones ("How can you possibly live without sex!" and "How can you stand just living with women all the time?"). But as I have grown older the questions addressed to me have become more thoughtful. This time the 50-something African American woman sitting next to me wanted to know, "What is it with you nuns? You all seem to have this incredible energy and belief that any good thing is possible."

I think I told her that it was because we were less likely to get discouraged by the kinds of deeply painful and personal betrayals that can only be caused by a spouse or child, the kind that cause people to lose their sense of direction in life and to doubt that the future is going to bring any healing. I say "less likely" because I know of nuns who have suffered at the hands of church authorities or been hurt by members of their own communities. And there are members of religious congregations who struggle with fears and depressions often rooted in experiences they had as children.

A sign of hope

But as I reflected later, I didn't think my answer told the whole story. While not all nuns are incredibly positive people, the ones in the worst material circumstances or doing the most difficult work with the least attractive populations, do tend to radiate a kind of energy that inevitably attracts notice.

That same energy is present when we serve in more affluent surroundings, but it's less obvious because there is already a lot that is positive in those environments. I've also recognized this same energy at work in men and women of many other faiths, but I think there is something about the communal effort

to serve the needs of God's people while living simply and without a mate that makes religious life a sign of hope, even to people who are not Catholic.

I think of a conversation I had one night while passing out flyers in the neighborhood. "Sam" belonged to a family with a reputation for drug dealing, and I assumed that my efforts to increase police surveillance on the block had aroused some resentment. Still, when I saw Sam out in his yard, I decided to give him a flyer and see if he would consider coming to the meeting. At first he was hostile, full of bitter accusations about local politicians, angry about the trash and abandoned buildings, but as we talked back and forth I could feel something melting in his attitude.

"I really need your help, Sam. When you see me out here picking up trash with the children, come join me. Your anger could be a powerful tool if it were harnessed and used for positive change."

His face changed, and he said, "Don't get me wrong. I see what you're doing, and it's good for the neighborhood and good for the kids. I don't really even know your name, but we all call you 'Miss Nun.' That's why you can be out here walking through the alleys and no one will lay a hand on you." I felt the presence of that gratuitous cloud of grace and knew that he was speaking the truth. I had heard the same thing from other drug-involved men in my old neighborhood in Washington, D.C.

#### Repeatable patterns

So, what is it with us nuns? How does that positive energy that people notice get generated? Are there patterns that can be recognized and replicated? My own experience of having served in five very different American cities and one foreign country tells me that there are a few things that tend to happen whenever the Spirit is at work in me or one of my sisters.

First, there is usually a strong desire to go and serve, born out of a sense that we could make a positive difference in a painful situation. Like lymph, we need to flow to the place where the hurt is greatest and just be there as a buffering presence. *I think of one of our sisters who can't stay away from the Middle East where she and her community bear witness to peace as houses and orchards are bulldozed into the ground.* Perhaps update this example?

A second common insight is that our presence is not going to change things overnight. We go for the long haul, prepared even to see no noticeable change in our own lifetime. In the Middle East, healing may take generations. In more favorable circumstances, there is the hope of seeing small changes almost immediately. My presence in North St. Louis brings about such change through the faithful repetition of small, "gentling" acts.

It becomes a subversive act to ride a bike and smile at people along the route, despite the conventional wisdom about avoiding eye contact. Learning the names of every neighbor within an eight block radius and finding out what talents they have breaks down the "fortress" mentality that often pervades an inner city neighborhood. As relationships are restored, the physical healing of the neighborhood can begin. *After September 11th, one of the local merchants said to me, "Sister, you're kind of like the terrorists. They build quiet networks of relationships to destroy people but you do the same thing to build up this community."* Update this example?

A third insight that I have only recently begun to clarify for myself has to do with the use of power. When I first came to St. Louis, I was reluctant to use the title "Sister" in my work, since I worked for a secular nonprofit. I told myself that it wasn't necessary for everyone to know that I was a nun; that it



might actually be counter-productive. I also worried about my community organizing efforts turning me into an unofficial mayor of my neighborhood and causing resentment.

What I have learned over the past five years is that power in itself is neither positive nor negative. It tends to pool wherever an individual or group has made a significant impact on their environment, for better or for worse. If I were serious about wanting to make a positive difference, I had to accept the fact that I would have to end up gathering and using power. The drug dealers and real estate speculators have no qualms about their impact on the neighborhood, and neither should those who wish to be a healing presence. What I heard from the neighbors, in addition to some gentle ribbing about being a "little general," was genuine gratitude that I was willing to take on a leadership role. In their eyes the title of "Sister" was an asset for our neighborhood, a tool I should use on behalf of the people I served whenever it seemed appropriate.

#### Disarming adventure

A while ago, I had one of those inner-city adventures that seemed to perfectly illustrate the odd, unpredictable way that love can disarm negative intent. As I was bending over my truck one sunny afternoon to unload groceries, I heard footsteps running up behind me. I assumed it was one of the neighborhood kids coming to give me a hug, as they often do. So when a young man came up close and said, "Give me your purse, I have a gun," I made the positive (although incorrect) assumption that it was one of my teenagers playing with me. I turned with a big grin and said, "I don't think so, Honey . . ."

I don't know who was more surprised when we looked at each other face to face! My affectionate response so confused him that he forgot trying to get my purse and decided to try for keys to my truck by shoving his hands into my coat pockets, where luckily the keys happened to be. While he was trying to get the truck door open I was heading for my house (with my purse!) As I opened the door to my house I heard him shout, "Keep your @#%#@# truck. It's a stick!", and he threw my keys back to me over the fence!

As I reflected on this experience, I realized once again that I had been protected not by my own "street smarts" but by that hovering cloud of positive energy. Do only nuns have access to that kind of grace? Absolutely not, thank God. But I do believe that when a religious commitment is lived communally at the service of a population in great need, it can be a powerful tool for good.

*Sister Diane Roche, R.S.C.J. is a member of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. She currently ... [Update this ID](#)*

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