

A bit of passion and hope in Jersey City

Arthur Jones

JERSEY CITY, N.J. - Imagine Bette Midler doing the Julie Andrews role in "The Sound of Music." Reincarnate Catholic Worker founder Dorothy Day as a nun - complete with deep prayer life, salty tongue, passionate commitment to the homeless poor and a pack of More cigarettes.

That's what it's like to spend time at the York Street Project here with Sr. Kristin Funari, a 1960s diploma- burning, Washington-protesting, heaven-and-hell-raising Sister of St. Joseph of Peace - who at 51 has lost none of her fire.

Born in-Massachusetts and raised in New Jersey, she has the kind of thudding accent that fits in the streets of this gritty city. Funari can look the mayor or the mob in the eye and not yield.

When York Street, the original U.S. foundation established by the sisters in 1885, began its 1980s multimillion dollar conversion into an alternative high school, transitional housing for homeless and battered women and a nurturing center for their children, the mob wanted a cut of the construction.

Funari threatened a public hunger strike. Said one sister, "They didn't want to tackle `the nun.' They backed off."

The sisters don't scare. In the 1980s, "after being jerked around for years by the Jersey City council - they wanted this harbor front land", said Funari, the entire St. Joseph Sisters, community dug in.

They rebuilt for the poor at Harbor Side Jersey City, which otherwise is being transformed into towering working world for the corporate rich. Manhattan is 15 minutes away on the Path subway.

The sisters estimate that gentrification in Hudson County and Jersey City has left more than 100,000 homeless or at risk of being homeless. This is in a area where some 21,000 children receive Aid to Families with Dependent Children, 51 percent of high school students drop out; 9 of 10 children under five lack adequate child care. York Street's families average income is \$7,000 a year.

Yet if Funari's story is as current as her refusal to vote for that damn President Clinton," because he signed the welfare reform act, it's also more than a century old. It's what Margaret Anna Cusack, "the nun of Kenmare," (Ireland), intended when she came with a few of her sisters to America - to work with poor women and children and provide safe living for immigrant Irish girls in New York.

Said Funari, "what they started over 100 years ago, it's still the same business today. Just the surnames have changed - the population is still as battered."

However, Mother Cusack's reputation so startled New York Cardinal John McCloskey and his assistant Archbishop Michael Corrigan that New York kept her at arm's length for three years.

They were fearful because Cusack, a public lecturer and writer of considerable skill and renown in England and Ireland, was an aristocrat, a convert from Protestantism, a probable ally of the Irish liberator Charles Stewart Parnell. And outspoken. New Jersey welcomed her.

For decades York Street housed the order's printing plant, an orphanage, its work for the blind and its outreach to women and families.

After the 1950s, said Funari, the sisters, like the U.S. population, started the "move to the 'burbs. The orphanage, the motherhouse, all moved - by 1973 even our spirit had moved out," she said.

That's the year Funari moved in - to work with another sister and the city poor at St. Boniface parish - clinical intervention, after-school programs, welfare advocacy for Puerto Ricans and Dominicans.

York Street remained a printing plant; space was rented out for drug rehab. Spurred by Vatican II (1962-'65) and changing times, the province closed the orphanage, sold the property and committed the proceeds to the inner city. Back to the origins - York Street.

Jersey City officialdom fought the sisters' plans for almost a decade. And lost. The sisters poured their reserved millions into transforming their city half-block.

Funari, now 23 years in the city working with homeless and battered women - she directs York Street's St. Joseph's Home - was general contractor for the construction. "She was there every day with her hard hat on, she loves the buildings," said Sr. Agnes Fox, she can handle broken pipes, maintenance issues."

Funari likes to give the guided tour. Heading through one classroom at The Nurturing Place where a boy toddler was proudly trying to piddle into the toilet she called out, "right on target! Nice shot!, Stopping to caress a sleeping infant, she added, "I can't handle the diaper thing."

Kristin Funari is one of three children in a family that has immigrant Italian grandparents on both sides. "Our parents didn't give us the tongue," she lamented as she described her father as "a salesman, sold furniture. A great pony man, a great woman man. So he always was a step ahead of a lot of trouble. A wonderful personality and brilliant. Big heart but a tad irresponsible."

Taught by the St. Joseph Sisters to 10th grade, she entered the novitiate in 1965, graduated in sociology from St. Peter's College, Jersey City in 1969.

Those were tumultuous anti-Vietnam war and college years - battling ROTC, fighting over academic freedom, facing down the college on how they treated the cafeteria workers. She admits to being "young and foolish" in burning her, diploma and vowing never to return to academe. Yet she remembers with affection the professors who were combining "scripture with very good political science. They woke those of us who had the ears to hear."

"Thank God for the Vatican Council," said Funari, who doesn't think she'd have made it as a teacher or nurse. Seasoned by working with the poor, she went to Fordham for her master's in social work and learned community organizing from "really smart Puerto Rican men who had come home to Jersey City from Vietnam angry enough and smart enough to demand decent housing."

Described by other sisters as "a fearless advocate for the poor," some see Funari nonetheless as almost traditional in her religious and community life. Dinner with the sisters with whom she lives in community is a mainstay of her day. So is "Star Trek."

"I live in a very honest community," she said. When I'm going over the edge, I have some sister, who love me very much and who can be pretty brutal in their honesty - some wise old ladies." Her province loves her enough that for six years she's been their representative on the congregation general council. "But I don't read enough and I don't meditate enough. Or listen to music enough. And I've got to stop smoking," she said.

Looking to the poor, she doesn't spare women religious. "Vacations? Sabbaticals? I mean ..." she said during a halt, eyeing her cigarette pack but pouring tea into the china set she bought for the times sisters of the English St. Joseph's province visit. "Look, don't get me wrong, I love Joan Chittister and Mary Jo Leddy. But their writing makes us comfortable when we're supposed to be countercultural. Look at what we came to do. All of our founders begged! Begged for the poor!" she said. "The poor are screaming.

"Sixty-eight per cent of the women here (at St. Joseph's House) have been sexually or physically abused in their early years. It's getting worse, the daily violence. It's a different kind of violence than it was in the 70s. I was doing play therapy then. Now the music, the lyrics they hear, the beatings these kids see ..."

She sees poverty today reaching a critical mass," with Housing and Urban Development cutbacks and welfare reform threatening to put more and more people out in the street. Back on tour, she proudly tapped the glass wall case that houses the rusted horseshoes and old ginger beer bottles unearthed during reconstruction, "The men loved to find those things for me," she said.

"This place eats me. It eats my energy and it gives me life. I learned my lessons when I was in the homes. In the '70's, 39 percent of the housing didn't have adequate or indoor plumbing. What hope I learned, the poor taught me. I was overwhelmed. I was overwhelmed with the stench.

"Today there's good men in parishes. But parishes aren't open to the kids after school. The Catholic school system, the wonderful Sisters of Charity - in the end no resources for educating the kids. We're not talking about big stuff here. We can't provide the food they need today and the family visits that people need today. What's killing me about it is the hypocrisy of it all. I'm choking on it."

She led the way into an empty classroom, describing how the children get one of the finest educational experiences in Hudson County - learning how to read, write, use computers, play, leaning about lakes, trees, mountains, learning to trust themselves.

"Jesus," she said, not quite in prayer, "where is everyone?, A teacher explained. the children were all out in the countryside, at a pumpkin patch.

Funari was stopped in her tracks. "Isn't that great," she said, genuinely, delighted, "Isn't that great?"

And the only answer was: Yes, it is.

Running the York Street Project

The Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace's York Street Project is a complex of buildings that totals 66,000 square feet, including an old, refurbished hotel. The complex, directed by Sr. Ann Taylor, houses:

- * Kenmare High School, directed by Sr. Agnes Fox, which provides women drop outs the opportunity to earn a high school diploma and to receive job training.

- * The Nurturing Place, directed by Sr. Barbara Moran, a child development center for children whose mothers are in the high school or living at St. Joseph's Home.

- * St. Mary's Residence, directed by Sr. Mary Donohue, provides accommodation for single working women, many of whom are recent immigrants.

- * St. Joseph's Home, Sr. Kristin Funari's responsibility, offers 18 months of housing for homeless mothers and their children.

"They can't be actively using (drugs)," said Funari. "We love 12-step people. They're so self-righteous and they've been down for so long, when they start coming up they're the best.

"We look for personalities that are strong enough that they have a chance to attain independence," she said. "We don't keep people who are actively psychotic. It wouldn't work in this setting."

And there's no rush. "Before we push the residents to anything, we just let them catch their breath. For three months they can eat bacon and eggs and ribs until they're full enough to feel that it's time, and they have the strength. They've been homeless. Battered. They've moved from bed to bed to bed for the last 5 to 10 years of their lives. They need time to heal. They need time to feel safe." They have one or two bedrooms for themselves and their children. Locks on their doors. A secure haven and a chance to start anew.

`Single-mindedly staying in community'

Sr. Kristin Funari has given the last two decades to homeless and abused women.

What drives her?

Passion, she said.

What is she passionate about?

"I'm passionate about the gospels. Passionate about the economy. I want to get more passionate about the poor. Get more passionate about the violence in our cities in the United States and say what can we do to change that. What can we do with the record industry, with the dirty cops, this drug question that I'm choking on every day - I've known for 20 years where those drugs come from and who protects that.

"I get passionate about not being able to wrap myself around the truth that I know and others know and do something about it.

"I get passionate about the suffering that's caused by all that and then the wrong people who are blamed.

"Passionate about us being able to peel that apart together and break it open together and single-mindedly staying in community, pursuing those gospel truths. That's what makes my passion.

"I get passionate when I see real struggle around who we say we are or want to be."

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