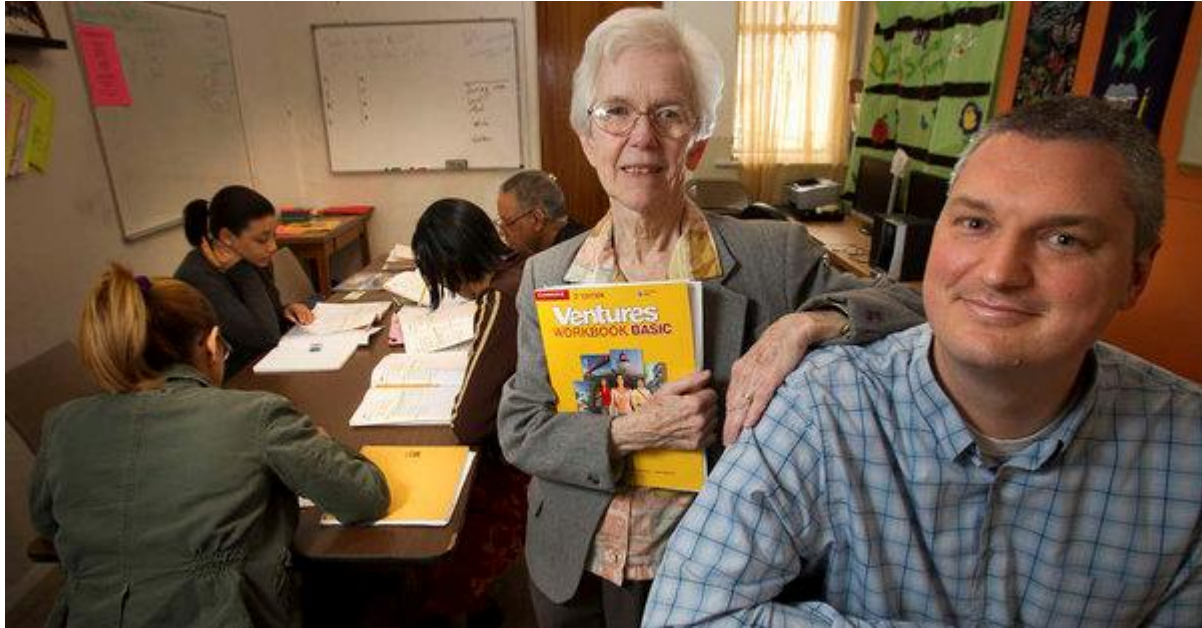


Providence Center, a continuing legacy of service



ALEJANDRO A. ALVAREZ / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER Sister Peggy Doherty and executive director David Chiles at Providence Center during one of their English-language classes.

By Helen Ubinas, Daily News Columnist

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SISTER PEGGY DOHERTY shies away from the word *legacy* when talking about what she and five fellow sisters built in a renovated North Philadelphia rowhouse 20 years ago.

But the nuns continued a long tradition of service when they chose to start Providence Center in the Fairhill and Kensington neighborhoods after their parish closed.

"Mostly, we felt we had something to give, and also a lot to get from the people in the community," Sister Peggy said. "We had wonderful relationships with people, and we really wanted to stay."

When St. Edward's Parish shut its doors at 8th and York streets in 1993, the Sisters of the Holy Child had some big decisions to make. They could move to other parishes and other assignments. They could retire. And some did.

But six faithfully feisty sisters decided differently. "We were part of the community for 100 years," Sister Peggy said. "We wanted to be part of the community for 100 more."

So the sisters laced up their comfortable shoes and hit the streets. And then they did what more leaders should: They asked residents of a neighborhood struggling with high poverty and crime how they best could serve them. Imagine that.

Residents of the mostly Latino neighborhood wanted two things: English classes and more programs for their children.

For a while, the center, on 4th Street between Huntingdon Street and Lehigh Avenue, also offered sewing classes. There were computer classes, too, but those didn't really catch on the way the English classes and after-school programs have. Next year, the center is partnering with Temple University to offer a summer camp. It is also looking for a larger location to expand its after-school programs.

The day I visited, Sister Peggy was in the middle of an introductory English lesson with four women. All but one were from the Dominican Republic.

As I listened to the women tentatively, but ably, read passages from their instruction book, I was taken by what a hidden gem the center was.

A person could easily pass by the center's rowhouse, tucked into the middle of the block, without realizing its history or impact.

The center has been part of 22-year-old Ashley Rodriguez's life for as long as she can remember. Her grandmother, who lives right next door to the center, took English classes there. Rodriguez attended its after-school programs and then became a teen leader.

"It played a huge part in my life and in my choices," she said. "If not for the program and the mentors I met there, I'm not sure I would have figured out what to do with my life." Rodriguez, who hopes to graduate in December from Chestnut Hill College, plans to pursue a career in criminal justice.

This year marks Providence Center's 20th anniversary. A celebration is planned Oct. 5 to honor its founding sisters.

Of the six original sisters, only Sister Peggy still works full time at the center.

"I'm the survivor," 73-year-old Sister Peggy jokes.

Sister Nancy Hagenbach, who until about five years ago was the center's director, retired (although she still teaches an English class). Another sister also retired, two others went on to other assignments and one died.

As the sisters have aged out or moved on, it's been a time of natural transition.

Two years ago, David Chiles became the center's executive director. That he is now the keeper of a long legacy of service is not lost on him.

"There's pressure, certainly," he said. "But it's a really beautiful thing to be part of. It's this legacy of people who look at their neighbors and say, 'Where there's a need, I am going to do what I can to help.' "

It's also a lesson for what can be done as more parishes close.

"It seems like oftentimes, the school closes and then that's the end of the Catholic presence within the community," Chiles said. "Providence Center is a good example of what can happen even after the larger institutions can't be sustained. It doesn't mean that the presence and the support and accompaniment of that community has to end. There are other ways of serving people outside the structure of a parish and a school."

Amen.

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