

SR. MARY SCULLION, PROJECT H.O.M.E.

## Establishing a National Model To Aid the Homeless

**R**ecently named by *Time* magazine to its list of the world's 100 most influential people, Sr. Mary Scullion, RSM, has spent her life combating homelessness. Project H.O.M.E., the not-for-profit organization she co-founded with Joan Dawson McConnon in 1989, has helped reduce Philadelphia's homeless rate to one of the lowest of any major city in the United States. According to U.S. Census Bureau reports, one in 96 persons is homeless in Los Angeles; in Seattle, one in 301; in Chicago, one in 1,800; in Philadelphia, one in 5,122. More than 90 percent of those living in Project H.O.M.E.'s supportive housing programs break the cycle of homelessness, a fact that has made the program a national model for other U.S. cities.

Scullion was a student at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia when she first got involved with the homeless. A Eucharistic Congress held in Philadelphia in 1976 with the theme of "The Hungers of the Human Family" inspired Scullion to help the hungry in soup kitchens and, eventually, on the street. In 1976 a small but growing number of women who were mentally ill had been deinstitutionalized. Scullion began spending time with them as a volunteer. Then, in 1978, she began working full time at Mercy Hospice, a shelter sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy for homeless women and children and for women on the street who were mentally ill. It was the beginning of Scullion's 30-year career.

Project H.O.M.E. began modestly, starting with the opening of the Mother Katherine Drexel Residence in the locker room of a local recre-

ational center in 1989. Established to offer temporary shelter to homeless men in Philadelphia during the winter months, the shelter proved far more successful than many had anticipated. Most of the men had been chronically homeless for five years or more, yet many found the Residence an effective way to reconnect to mainstream society. A large number of them accepted substance abuse or mental health treatment along with employment and job training.

"People did not believe that the men who were on the street would come off the street, but they did. Many of the men made choices that they wanted to be housed, that they wanted to be part of a community," Scullion said.

What made the Mother Katherine Drexel Residence successful, Scullion said, was that it was about people. "It was a safe place. It was a place where people genuinely cared. It was about those relationships that were founded in the very beginning that made that place unique. Twenty years ago, people did not understand that homelessness could be solved," she said.

The Mother Katherine Drexel Residence closed after only a year, but, since then, Project H.O.M.E. has grown into an organization operating 11 residences in the city of Philadelphia and offering comprehensive support services for the chronically homeless. In its efforts to address the root causes of homelessness and poverty, Project H.O.M.E.'s reach includes education, health care, employment training, outreach, community development, advocacy and neighborhood revitalization. The breadth and number of its initiatives is astonishing. Project H.O.M.E. operates a free health clinic and boasts that 94 percent of the residents living in the 459 units of housing it provides have health insurance. The outreach program it developed canvasses the city 24 hours a day linking homeless individuals with shelter and access to physical and mental health care. Its employment initiatives include a thrift store, the H.O.M.E. Page Café, the Library Restroom Attendant Program and an adult literacy and arts program.





The Honickman Learning Center and Comcast Technology Labs is a 38,000 square-foot education and technology center that offers formerly homeless people and those living in economically distressed areas access to computers, literacy training, G.E.D. preparation, job training and an array of programs and classes for all ages. Project H.O.M.E.'s economic development program targets a 33-square block area in north central Philadelphia for neighborhood revitalization, working with residents, foundations, churches and government to green vacant spaces, develop affordable rental housing, renovate homes and enrich educational and employment opportunities for people in the neighborhood.

All of this is on top of the wide range of transitional and permanent housing Project H.O.M.E. offers, from entry-level safe havens for seriously mentally ill men and women just coming in off the streets to transitional residences to half-a-dozen locations offering permanent supportive housing. Providing residents food, shelter, health care and access to case management, recovery and mental health services, Project H.O.M.E. offers a full continuum of care, with 60 percent of its funds coming from private sources and 40 percent from government. The organization has won numerous awards, including The National Alliance to End Homelessness' Non-Profit Sector Achievement Award, and for five consecutive years the Charity Navigator's four-star award for sound fiscal management.

The executive director and the dynamo at the center of Project H.O.M.E., Scullion holds a master's degree in social work and is the recipient of numerous honorary degrees. She is adamant about the right that homeless people have to a decent life and has been a forceful advocate for them, championing their right to vote and to live where they wish. In 1991 Project H.O.M.E. filed a federal lawsuit that three years later secured homeless people the right to live in the neighborhood of their choice, thus clearing the way for one of its residences for mentally ill homeless men and women to open.

What makes Scullion so effective?

"Her absolute passion about the people who are most in need," said Sr. Christine McCann, the president of Scullion's Sisters of Mercy community. "You can't be with Mary too long and not be energized by it and caught up in it yourself."

A longtime friend of Scullion's, Sr. Kathleen Sullivan, RSM, vice president of mission for the

Sisters of Providence Health Care System in Springfield, Mass., credits Scullion's willingness to challenge the status quo.

"Nobody really wants to deal with the problem of homelessness in our society, and Mary has really had the courage to call the question — that we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers."

### **Scullion returns frequently to the idea articulated by Martin Luther King Jr. that we are all caught in an inescapable web of destiny that ties us to one another.**

Scullion seems as committed as ever to the goal of ending homelessness. The motto of Project H.O.M.E. is "None of us is home until all of us are home," and in conversation, Scullion returns frequently to the idea articulated by Martin Luther King Jr. that we are all caught in an inescapable web of destiny that ties us to one another.

"I think that many people think that people who are homeless are very different from them, but over the years I've learned that it's not 'There but for the grace of God go I,' but rather it's 'There go I,'" Scullion said.

Scullion believes affordable housing is the key to ending homelessness today. Though housing the homeless costs money, she said that it is far less expensive than paying for their maintenance in prisons, psychiatric hospitals, emergency rooms and detoxification programs.

Scullion's work has brought her unexpected supporters, including former President Bill Clinton. She is cited in *The Soloist*, the memoir and movie that is bringing fresh attention to the links between mental illness and homelessness. "Mental illness is an equal opportunity disease. It's in every economic sector. It's in every family," Scullion noted.

Scullion, 55, was nominated to *Time* magazine's 2009 list of influential people by Elizabeth Gilbert, author of the best-selling book *Eat, Pray, Love*. Asked what she thought of *Time*'s decision to list her alongside such public figures as Angela Merkel, Paul Krugman and Oprah Winfrey, Scullion said, "I have no idea why I was on the list, but I think what we've been able to demonstrate with Project H.O.M.E. is that with a sense of community and meaningful opportunities people do break the cycle of homelessness. People choose to accept those opportunities." ■