

The Hidden Gem on Jones Hill

History of St. Mary's Center for Women and Children

Prepared for the Center's 20th Anniversary

October 30, 2013

The Genesis

The long journey of protecting and caring for women and children in dire need began in 1870. It was the beginning of a decade of depression, and the year that Dorchester was annexed to Boston. An infant, left on the steps of St. James Church in Boston's South End, was taken in by the Sisters of the Daughters of Charity, affectionately known as the "White Bonnet Sisters."

Four years, 1,500 infants and 300 unwed mothers later, St. Mary's Infant Asylum and Lying-in Hospital was established in a mansion on Bowdoin Street, Dorchester. It was just two years after the great fire of Boston, and the city was burgeoning with immigrants from many countries including Ireland, Germany, Russia, Poland, Syria and Lebanon.

At the same time, the social stigma of unwed motherhood became harsher and more apparent. But even as the numbers of abandoned babies and caste-out mothers grew, so too, did community compassion and generosity, and in 1894, St. Mary's was able to purchase the Green Estate on Jones Hill in Dorchester.

So began a rich history of dedication and service to women, children, and the community from the hidden jewel on top of Jones Hill.

In 1929, on the cusp of the Great Depression, St. Mary's Infant Asylum expanded into a general hospital, becoming known as St. Margaret's Hospital for Women. A nurse training program was soon established.

As America's involvement in the Second World War escalated, many nurse cadets were trained at St. Margaret's. The hospital continued to expand leaving no room for the orphaned children, who were moved to boarding homes; the babies remained at St. Margaret's.

In 1939 the Corcoran family – who were later to become immense benefactors of St. Mary's – moved from a triple-decker apartment on Jones Hill to a large Victorian owned by St. Margaret's at 58 Cushing Ave. – just at the end of the hospital driveway. Some of the nurse cadets boarded in their house, while Corcoran sons, John and Leo, were fighting overseas.

Shortly after the war, John was accepted at Boston College and while at school, returned to his old job at St. Margaret's, working the 4 p.m. to midnight shift in the new boiler room. In the late forties, John Corcoran started his real estate development company, which was to become so integral to the landscape of Boston and the communities of Dorchester, Roxbury, Mattapan, and beyond ...

Over the next 30 years, St Margaret's grew in reputation and expertise, and in the early 1970s, the State designated the hospital as a regional nursery for critically ill newborns, and as a center for high-risk obstetrical care.

By the late 1980's, forty percent of the 3,500 babies delivered each year at St. Margaret's, were high-risk births. At this point the Archdiocese of Boston was looking for affiliation or merger with a comprehensive tertiary care medical facility to support the free standing maternity hospital.

The Journey Continues: Establishing a sanctuary – once again: 1993-1995

In 1993, after 113 years, and after thousands of babies had been born and nurtured, and hundreds of teen mothers sheltered, in that hidden gem on Jones Hill, all operations of St. Margaret's hospital were moved to the new Women's Health Pavilion at St. Elizabeth's Medical Center in Brighton. The move was not without controversy. The archdiocese cited economic pressures, and the local community – with one of the highest birth and infant mortality rates in Massachusetts - felt abandoned for prenatal and post-natal care.

Although the hospital was gone, the founding service - St Mary's Home remained – with 10 pregnant teens in residence - and as part of the relocation agreement, St. Mary's remained under the umbrella of the archdiocese and was deeded the rights to the property.

The local community's fear that the hospital campus would become a refuge for vagrants was short-lived;

John Corcoran stepped in!

Seeing the value of the property as a real estate asset, and realizing the impact on the community, he was instrumental in stipulating that St. Margaret's hire someone to facilitate the transition from a hospital site to an entity dedicated to providing the community's at-risk families with the care and support services they needed, to move forward in their lives.

Enter, Joyce Murphy, the dynamic and visionary founding president of the St. Mary's we know today, and a group of dedicated Bostonians who made up the Board of Trustees. Working closely with residents in the community, as well as the city and the state, the group launched a capital campaign to reconstruct and renovate the hospital buildings and establish a collaborative of affiliated programs that would offer a full continuum of comprehensive therapeutic, day care, and educational services.

Within three years, the hospital administration offices had been turned into a day care center, and the exam and operating rooms became a residential complex for teen mothers, abused children and homeless families. The former neo-natal intensive care unit became the site for an alternative school for pregnant teenage moms. And, the hospital's oldest building had been demolished to make room for a playground.

The \$2.5 million redevelopment project - funded in large part by corporations and foundations - resulted in a four-building, 120,000 square foot campus that - within three years - was 95% occupied by St. Mary's and tenant partner organizations.

Responding to the acute needs of the community: 1995 - 2000

By the early 1990's Boston neighborhoods were filled with a new wave of immigrants from countries such as Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, Cape Verde, as well as Latin American, Asian and African nations. At the same time, families were becoming the largest sub-segment of the homeless population.

True to its mission, St. Mary's responded to the demand of providing safety and stability to families in crisis by establishing Margaret's House in 1995, immediately providing 26 families with transition and emergency shelter.

But the work didn't stop there. While site renovation was still underway, operations had to be kept going. Realizing that the Center could not operate without individual giving, John Corcoran, still a vital member of the Board, once again stepped up.

He made a 3-year challenge pledge of \$500,000 and required the Trustees to raise matching gifts of \$1,000 to \$5,000 from individuals over a three-year campaign. The

campaign was successful and created the foundation for the individual giving program - that is still effective today.

It was said that John willingly took a leap of faith in June 1944 as one of the first paratroopers to jump on D-Day. This was one of the many times he willingly and deliberately took a leap of faith on behalf of St. Mary's.

In yet another connection back to the founding institution on Jones Hill, just one year later, St. Mary's opened Bridge Home, an emergency residential program for children who have been abused or neglected. A pilot program - funded by the State as part of its Child Protection Initiative - within the first three months Bridge Home admitted 83 children, including 22 groups of siblings, who would most likely have been separated if forced to rely on traditional foster homes.

At this point, the former hospital had transformed into a collaborative of 12 affiliated programs - many open to the community as well as residents of St. Mary's - all targeted to expand the breadth of sanctuary by introducing therapeutic, day care and some educational services to help families move forward with their lives.

Joyce Murphy summed it up when she said in 1996 "We're all about helping women help themselves; not doing things for them, but empowering them to do something for themselves, and their children. We work in collaboration with other agencies to promote these goals."

With the advent of Welfare Reform in December 1998, the needs of the community became even more acute as thousands of families living in poverty - predominantly women with children - lost their welfare benefits.

While many of the mothers reeled from the reality of reduced or eliminated welfare payments, Judy Beckler - the new leader at St. Mary's - who had brought a wealth of hands-on experience and a deep and abiding passion to help the disenfranchised - approached the situation head-on. "It was imperative that resources be made available for these women in order to help them bridge the tremendous gap between welfare reliance and economic self-sufficiency."

The Women @ Work job skills training program was quickly established. The 20-week program integrated academic remediation and job readiness instruction with extensive, on-site case management to address the social, emotional and physical barriers to success.

The program drew from Margaret's House, and other community shelters, as well as women living in the community who were at risk of becoming homeless. Internship in rigorous occupational skill-training in the fields of food service, hospitality, and health care were also part of the program. At that time, graduates were placed in full-paid positions, many within the Caritas Christi organization, of which -St. Mary's was still a member.

The Hard work continues: Meeting the needs by strengthening the foundational programs: 2000-2004

Early in 2000, the administration and the Board of Trustees deliberately took the time to evaluate the impact of the services St. Mary's was providing, and to ensure that the funds of generous benefactors were being judiciously and appropriately directed. They embarked on an extensive evaluation and strategic planning process, which ultimately produced an aggressive commitment to providing even greater opportunities for women and children by enhancing the Center's education, training, and family literacy services.

In response, the Women's Learning Center, an Adult Basic Education program, was established in 2002, instructing up to 20 students at any given time in preparation for the GED testing series. The program was highly flexible - offering rolling admissions and the option of part-time and full time instruction, with lessons tailored to the individual's needs. Students took anywhere from 3 months to two years to complete the program depending on their initial skill levels and schedule.

Consistent with its mission, in 2004, St. Mary's embraced the responsibility of GRLZ Radio, the first of its kind, after-school youth development program for at-risk teen girls from the Dorchester community. Through daily web broadcasts, the program allows young women to develop technical skills, gain self-esteem, and speak out on issues important to them.

During this time, the 4th floor of the North Building was growing an array of health, education and wellness services, including the Jones Hill Family Clinic and Healthworks Foundation Fitness Club, a full service, free-of-charge fitness center open to St Mary's residents and staff, AND residents in the community.

At the same time, thanks to generous corporate and individual donations, St. Mary's Home - which had been essentially untouched since St. Margaret's days - was

renovated to provide better living conditions for the residents including individual bedrooms, a communal kitchen and play spaces for the children. The average length of stay at this point was 3 months. During this period, the Center added parenting skills, nutrition education, child development education and self-esteem development to the training it was giving to its young residents.

So - as the Center celebrated its 10th anniversary, it had steadily grown from a small residential sanctuary for pregnant and parenting teens to a leading human services center that provided a full continuum of residential, clinical, educational and employment programs to an ever-more diverse constituency of women, children and infants.

The Changing Face of Homelessness: 2004-2008

In the first decade of the 21st century the face of homelessness in Boston changed dramatically. According to Boston's Emergency Shelter Commission (ESC), between 1988 and 2008, the number of homeless children increased by 340%, rising to over 2,000 in 2008!

In 2004 there had been 1,181 homeless children in the City. By 2009, the number had almost doubled to 2,336. Although homeless children represented just about 20% of the homeless population in 2004, they represented 60% of the growth in homelessness between 2004 and 2009.

The ESC attributed the rise to decreases in federal and state housing subsidies, families staying longer in shelters, the state's high cost of living and the federal government's emphasis on reducing chronic homelessness.

The impact of the changing face of homelessness was evident throughout the City, and two trends had emerged that demanded action on the part of St. Mary's.

By 2005, the Center was at capacity serving more than 150 women, teenage girls, children and infants each day. The original average stay for homeless families in Margaret's House had been 35 - 40 days. By 2005 that stay had increased to 9 months or longer. A mother and child - or children - living close to a year in a 125-150 square foot room!

The space that had accommodated short term, emergency stays was no longer adequate. Added to that, families were also requiring increased levels of support in their efforts to successfully transition from homelessness to permanent housing.

To tackle the long-term space issue, Judy Beckler and the Board of Trustees launched a \$620,000 fundraising campaign to renovate and update Margaret's House to allow for private study space for 32 mothers and a calmer, more predictable environment for parenting - and for children.

Thanks to the generosity of various Foundations, corporate philanthropy, and a grant from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, the campaign was successful and the renovation completed in just 5 months!

On the learning, skill and job training front, and as part of the effort to break the escalating cycle of homelessness for women and their children, the Women's Learning Center expanded its curricula to meet additional student needs and accommodate those with undiagnosed learning disabilities.

The Women @ Work Program, which was graduating 30 women each year, deepened and broadened its integration with employer partners and deliberately aligned the program curricula with employer needs – those of Health Services and Professional Services Industries. Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts, Carney Hospital, and St. Mary's Center, were major employers of the graduates

The demographics of the program participants was reflective of the demographics of the homeless population. The majority of graduates represented African American (60%) and Hispanic (26%) backgrounds; 77% of the women were single, and 91% raising one or more children. And, an increasing number of participants were new immigrants, with 25% reporting a first language other than English.

Drawing from many neighborhoods in Boston, on average, 37% of the participants were homeless during their involvement in the program and an additional 9% reported being homeless the previous year. The majority relied solely on public assistance, and 100% were unemployed or severely underemployed at the start of the program.

Realizing the ever evolving and acute needs of its constituency, and to fulfill its commitment to social justice, once again the Board of Trustees embarked in 2007 on a rigorous, strategic planning process to develop and expand St. Mary's programs along lines consistent with known best practices, in order to better target outcomes and make a real difference in the lives of children and families. Major outcomes of the process were to decrease family homelessness and increase the economics and social self-sufficiency of families living in poverty.

At the same time, St. Mary's also manifest its growing identity as a human services provider by voting to remain with the Archdiocese of Boston, but to split off from the Caritas Christi Health Care System when it became apparent that that Caritas was on the verge of sale to a national chain of Catholic Hospitals. With this move, St. Mary's became a more independent charitable organization, but remained a social justice ministry under the auspices of Catholic Charities.

Establishing a clear path to housing and increasing the tools towards self-sufficiency: 2009 - 2013

With one of the major strategic planning goals in sight, St. Mary's entered into an exciting new initiative in 2010 – a partnership with the archdiocese to develop affordable housing on the 2.2 acre site of St. Kevin's Parish, and closed school campus in Upham's Corner - just steps away from Jones Hill. "Affordable, permanent housing is crucial to the long-term stability and success of families." said Judy Beckler at the time. "This partnership strengthens our ability to provide critical support services to mothers and their children and assist them further as they transition out of poverty into vibrant, mixed income communities."

With the other strategic planning goals in mind, major enhancements were made to the Women @ Work Program – now becoming Women @ Work Plus - enhancements informed by best practice research on transitional jobs. The employer partnership was expanded into three stable industry sectors with high growth prospects: Real Estate Management, Health Care and Higher Education. Employer partners at this point include: Corcoran Management Company, Winn Properties, Beth Israel Deaconess, Carney Hospital, the Dimock Center, State Street, John Hancock, and UMass Boston.

More than 84% of the women who graduated from the first W@W plus cycle received offers of jobs from their internship employers and were successfully employed in permanent positions. In fact, the program was endorsed by the Social Impact Research organization for its unique and innovative program design, its network of partners, and the outcomes of the Women @ Work Plus graduates.

Judy Beckler was very succinct when she spoke of the program to a reporter, "We are not looking for minimum-wage jobs as a pathway out of poverty. It won't happen. So, what we have done is to be every intentional about designing a program that allows women to learn the skills they need to apply for a job in industries that are successful and thriving in the Boston area."

Further opening the door to economic self-sufficiency, higher education classes through Bunker Hill College became available on St. Mary's campus.

At the same time as making programs stronger, deeper and more relevant, Judy Beckler and her leadership team were also at the table, in the State House, in City Hall, at conferences, working with officials and organizations to advocate for breaking down barriers and making major improvements in the opportunities for women and children to forge better, independent and sustainable lives.

It was due in great part to the reputation of Judy Beckler as "best-practice" standard bearer and the success of St. Mary's evidenced-based programs, that the Center added a 7th program in 2012 when the Crossroads Family Center in East Boston became a subsidiary of St. Mary's. Crossroads provides family shelter, case management, housing search, stabilization services, and a food pantry to more than 70 families each year.

Over the years, St. Mary's has been blessed with many benefactors and collaborators. No benefactor was more effective than John Corcoran; no collaborator more constant than Mayor Thomas Menino.

Today, in 2013, the gem on Jones Hill -St Mary's Center for Women and Children- celebrates its 20th anniversary amidst a thriving, dynamic campus that, through its seven integrated programs ensures that - those who might otherwise remain trapped in inter-generational poverty and homelessness have the support they need to help them reach their full potential.