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Catholic Sentinel

August 17, 2009

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News Stories

Taaffe homes merge with Catholic agency

Print Edition: 08/06/2009

By Ed Langlois

Three Salem-area homes for pregnant youths and girls with infants have merged with Catholic Community Services, which has long provided housing for youths in need.

The late Msgr. Charles Taaffe and lay collaborators founded the St. Brigid, St. Monica and St. Therese homes in Salem starting in 1975 and expanding slowly through the 1990s. The priest's aim, shortly after the U.S. Supreme Court legalized abortion, was to create the caring, nurturing side of the pro-life movement.

The cozy homes have abided, housing 10 to 12 girls at a time in total. When Msgr. Taaffe died in 2008 at age 81, it became clear how the project of his lifetime would continue. He had in previous years met with Catholic Community Services officials, who were enthusiastic about his work.

The mission of Msgr. Taaffe and Catholic Community Services "really lined up," says Jim Seymour, executive director of the Salem agency.

"Father Taaffe really celebrated life and he was a man with such deep compassion for others," Seymour says. "You could see it in his eyes. He felt there was so much unnecessary suffering."

Oregon has one of the highest teen pregnancy rates in the nation and Marion County one of the highest rates in Oregon. The aim of Catholic Community Services is to work both on housing pregnant teens and on the social conditions that lead to teen pregnancy.

"We've found that the girls come from broken homes and neighborhoods with high crime rates and hopelessness," Seymour says.

Susan Roberts, who worked with Msgr. Taaffe for more than 20 years, has continued in leadership of the homes as an employee of Catholic Community Services. The merger has been a "godsend," she says.

Under the Catholic Community Services umbrella, workers have more time to do the ministry, as opposed to worrying about raising funds. Employees get more extensive training designed to help girls deal with modern problems. Alcohol and drug treatment and mental health counseling are readily available, as are many other services that the homes' leaders once had to locate and secure.



The late Msgr. Charles Taaffe and staff of St. Brigid Home visit girls getting aid in this 2005 photo.

Sentinel photo by Gerry Lewin

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The smooth access and improvements that services engender help the girls stay in the homes longer. That helps them get more solid footing before venturing out.

House moms, the women in charge at each home, like the new training system and the feeling of being backed up.

When the idea of a merger first came up, Bob Thomas was "dubious." As chair of the board for the Father Taaffe homes, Thomas thought the two organizations were too different. But when Msgr. Taaffe died and Thomas met with Seymour and took a long look at Catholic Community Services, the former chief of the Keizer Police changed his mind.

There was even a study done that showed high compatibility. The houses are still known collectively as the Father Taaffe Homes and Thomas and other board members are still on a committee of advisors.

The work started in 1975 with \$50 and a lot of faith.

Msgr. Taaffe made no harsh rules, but he had strict expectations. Girls must go to school, must stay off alcohol and drugs, must abide by curfew, must help around the house and must care for their children.

"I don't know why God called me to this," Msgr. Taaffe said in 2005. "But I am so grateful if I've had a little part in saving even one baby."

The homes never took public funds. Catholic Community Services does apply for and receive government grants.

Most girls at the homes have had a rough family life.

"I've dried a lot of tears on the girls because mom or dad say they'll come to get them and then never show," Tonya Sorensen, head house mother at St. Teresa Home, told the Sentinel in 2005.

The best thing the homes do is offer the girls some unconditional love, says Danna Jones, who has worked at St. Brigid's for 11 years.

Jones, head house mother, tells the story of one 17-year-old mom. Kelly, a pseudonym, had spent the last seven years in and out of foster care. She found herself pregnant after struggling with drugs and alcohol and hanging out with the wrong crowd.

She was required to go through residential addiction treatment after choosing to keep her baby. During that time, Kelly grew strong in her love for her unborn child and began to turn her life around. When she completed the program, Kelly and her 6-month-old daughter came to live at St. Brigid Home.

While living there, Kelly learned to trust because people cared for her. Her confidence grew, and she became focused on improving her and her baby's lives. But one night, Jones got a call from the house mother on duty. Kelly was having a hard time. Her baby was teething, up all night and fussy throughout the day. Still little more than a child herself, and trying to handle the situation on her own, Kelly became frustrated, was sobbing, and ready to pack her things and run.

Jones told Kelly that every mother gets overwhelmed and sometimes needs a break. That helped the girl get through the tough night. Out of that low moment, says Jones, "a miracle began to unfold." Kelly eventually became reunited with her birth mother and welcomed the older woman to St. Brigid's, to see her child and her home.

"Whenever I think of that evening," says Jones, "I look at our founder's photo on the mantle and say, 'Thank you, God, thank you, Father Taaffe, and thank you everyone who helps us continue this very important work.'"

