

Strengthening Price Hill Families

By S. Mary Bodde

The Women's Connection, located at 4042 Glenway Ave., Price Hill, serves more than 2,000 individuals each year and attracts more than 200 volunteers who assist with programming, office support and fundraising activities.

"That's what we want to give," according to S. Mary Jo Gasdorf, its founding executive director. "Our goal is to break the cycle of poverty, which often extends over four and five generations."

S. Mary Jo, a native of Price Hill, recalls how much has changed in the neighborhood. Her needs assessment research in the mid-1990s revealed "*more single moms in Price Hill than anywhere in the city of Cincinnati!*" A neighborhood center to advocate for and refer people, especially women, to services they didn't know were available seemed the answer," she said. "It also was a direct response to the 1996 Sisters of Charity Chapter call to serve women and children."

With a grant from the Sisters of Charity Ministries Initiatives Fund, she listened to residents in the neighborhood and learned what their needs were. These included leadership and employment skills, health care, support groups, counseling for abused women and children, parenting skills, mentoring, GED assistance, mental health services and appreciation for diversity. The neighborhood consisted of Caucasians, African-Americans, Hispanics and Appalachians. After the research, The Women's Connection received a generous start-up grant from SC Ministry Foundation.



S. Barbara Padilla (back) volunteers her time at The Women's Connection through the Las Hispanas program for women.



Jori Cotton (left), youth program coordinator, and S. Mary Jo Gasdorf, executive director of The Women's Connection, a neighborhood center in Cincinnati providing support for women, children and families.

To further develop her own skills, S. Mary Jo volunteered at Bethany House, a transitional housing facility for women and children, and participated in group discussions with women there as well as at Santa Maria Community Services and the Urban Appalachian Council. She convened a meeting of 18 Sisters of Charity to discuss the assets and needs of the Price Hill area; participated in the

Stand for Children Rally in Washington, D.C.; and attended the Reaching Beyond Borders gathering in San Diego, Calif.

S. Mary Jo recruited a task force of Sisters of Charity (Sisters Marie Tessmer, Ramona Chisholm, Ruth Kuhn, Mary Grafe and Pat Saul) with advisory members (Sisters Julia Mary Deiters and the late Mary Assunta Stang, and Sisters Pat Malarkey and Martha Walsh as resources from the Ministry Office). Other women religious, clergy at neighboring parishes and many lay leaders offered their input. S. Mary Jo and her sister, Jean Hasselbeck, canvassed the area looking for a 'store front' building on a bus route for easy access.

S. Kathleen Hebbeler, OP, a Dominican Sister of Hope, is associate director of The Women's Connection, and has been with S. Mary Jo from the very beginning. "She serves as grant writer, and keeps us financially on track. We couldn't do all we do without her expertise," S. Mary Jo said.

S. Ruth Hunt joined The Women's Connection early on as secretary. She continues to volunteer at the center during its busiest time – the Cabaret fundraiser.

The Women's Connection opened its doors in May 1997, at the corner of Glenway and Gilsey avenues. It holds offices for a staff of eight, four public computers, copiers, Internet and fax machine, and phones for people in the neighborhood to use. A second building at the end of the block on the corner of Glenway and Iliff provides space for programs. The first two programs – a quilters' group called 'Piecemakers' and an AA group for nonsmokers – "are still going," Sister said. S. Ann Hunt oversees the Piecemaker program, as well as scrapbooking and basic machine sewing, which are offered weekly.

A 'working' Board of Trustees for this separately incorporated organization is chaired by President Linda Panzeca from the College of Mount St. Joseph.

"Our Board is fantastic," S. Mary Jo said. "They keep us focused on our mission: *to be a neighborhood center providing support for change by educating, empowering and enriching women, children and families.* Every member is on a committee. They take part in our sponsored activities, like the Block Party, and offer ongoing generous support of our programs.

"From the beginning we have focused on *hope.* Early on, the Price Hill Literacy Council called schools to help with education. Price Hill Will brainstormed with us about what we needed to help make change occur. We initiated several successful collaborative



The Women's Connection hosted its annual neighborhood Block Party in June.

events: the Back to School Fair, Health Fair and Adult and Teen Job Fairs. Through these collaborative efforts, neighborhood families could access their goals. Through the Back to School Fair, originally held at Seton High School and now at St. Lawrence School, more than 1,200 children received school supply packets this year.”

An annual, collaborative Health Fair provides free screenings and helpful hints on living more healthy lives. S. Mary Jo recalled trying to encourage a woman to attend the fair, but she wouldn't. “She didn't want to find out that she would need medical follow-up when she didn't have enough money for food for her children – an instance of the poverty in the area.”

St. Lawrence parish, St William parish and both Seton and Elder high schools have offered space for the larger programs and events.

“Now we are serving the ‘new poor’ – people coming with resumes that don't know how to do a job search or navigate an online job application,” Sister said. Linda Keller, the employment/education coordinator, provides one-on-one assistance to create a plan of action and support toward employment, job search tools and resume writing, with additional resources and referrals. She offers workshops to develop job search and life skills, and information about employment and career opportunities.

“You'll hear clapping in the building when someone gets a job,” S. Mary Jo smiled. “This is a happy place.”

Other programs for women include: a Women's Survivor Group for those dealing with domestic violence and/or sexual assault; Friday “Meetups” – opportunities to explore relationships, self-esteem, domestic issues, community building and stress relievers; and Las Hispanas, opportunities for Hispanic women to increase their knowledge, express their creativity and experience art and entertainment.

“We provide child care (one of the greatest needs besides transportation) with every program, and all programs are free,” S. Mary Jo noted.

Other staff members are very involved in being present to the women and children. Jori Cotton coordinates programs for youth: a Girl's Club for ages 8 to 10; Girl's Life for ages 11 to 13; Girl's Night In for ages 14 to 18 to help them make healthy life choices; and Teen Mothers to discuss issues, receive information and participate in activities. She also offers an eight-week summer program for girls, and coordinates the annual neighborhood Block Party. Alisa Franks is the social worker who meets initially with those who are in need of services; she provides information and referrals. Aimee Shinkle is the marketing and development coordinator, and Theresa Bengel is the office coordinator.

“Our Congregation has been wonderful!” S. Mary Jo said. “Our Sisters and Associates have been so generously supportive. Many Sisters and Associates have served as volunteers. Sisters from other congregations, especially the Dominican Sisters of Hope, support our efforts by taking part in our fundraising events, and making donations of materials and supplies. Each person's gifts benefit so many. Those who have gone before us have paved the way for a thriving Women's Connection, and we are grateful!”

We are here to listen ...

Not to work miracles.

We are here to help each other discover what we are feeling ...

Not to make feelings go away.

We are here to discover how we can help ourselves ...

Not to tell one another what to do.

We are here to discover our strengths ...

Not to rescue each other.

We are here to learn how to choose ...

Not to make it unnecessary to make difficult choices.

We are here to provide support for change.

- Carol Parsons