

## ***Social Justice: Liberation through Working Together***

*Sister Lesley Sacouman (SNJM) will be one of the guest speakers at the upcoming Annual Diocesan Social Justice Conference, on March 2nd (1), where she will discuss the joys, challenges and miracles in creating Holy Names House of Peace, home to twenty immigrant and refugee women.*



When Sister Lesley Sacouman and Sister Vera Hoelscher settled in at the Holy Names House of Peace, in downtown Winnipeg in September of 2004, she didn't know exactly what the mission of the former residence of the Franciscan Friars would turn out to be.

“It simply unfolded, notes the Executive Coordinator of the House of Peace. We had financial support from the Sisters of the Holy Names and from Bob Dick, a volunteer from the community who bought the building and allowed us to rent it at a low price. But we had no specific dream, although we knew there was space for people to live with us.

“What we did have in abundance was faith. God works for us and with us. We leapt out into the dark, trusting that the net would unfold beneath us. And it did. Within a month of our arriving, a woman in need asked to live with us.”

Since then, the House of Peace has been a home for some 145 immigrant and refugee women, 18 years and older, who have each stayed at the facility for up to two years. At any given time, 20 women live at the House of Peace, while learning English, gaining employment and getting their footing in a new country.

“The women are from everywhere. They are Sikh, Hindu, Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant. And we have many Muslims too. House of Peace is a community, with all the women contributing to that community. I live here with them. Our home is beautiful. We’re an extended family. We celebrate each other.”

Are there cultural challenges in creating that extended family?

“To me, they’re opportunities, not challenges. Every woman comes to the House of Peace with a personal and cultural richness. Even when several women are from the same country, say in Africa, they can be from very different tribes. There’s plenty of cultural diversity to go around. And of course, as a Canadian, I have a richness too. We all have something positive to contribute. We learn from one another. And learn to compromise on certain things.

“For instance, my culture says that we should all have dinner together, to share each other’s company. That’s not possible here. These women are trying to learn English. They’re in school all day, they come home to eat and then run out because they have jobs, many of them cleaning offices. Their lives are so fragmented that they’re exhausted.

“So people eat at different times. Some eat with their hands, others with a fork and a spoon, or with a fork, knife and spoon. There are all sorts of bread. And different spices. Some that would eat right through me! We make sure we have the types of foods that help them feel at home. We all have foods whose aroma and tastes bring us comfort. For our women, that’s important. May have been through a lot of trauma. So, when they cook, it’s therapeutic.

“Just like work. The women work hard. Often, the work is physical. I’ve learned that this can also be therapeutic. The physical activity helps work out some of the trauma, all that nervous energy that they’ve carried since the initial traumatic events in their home countries. Our women work with a purpose. They want to bring their children or their husbands over to Canada. The hardest is when they can’t get work. The long hours of inactivity can make them dwell on their sufferings. On war, trauma and being separated from their families.”

At the House of Peace however, the residents support each other emotionally. For Sister Lesley Sacouman, “that’s a real positive”. “Many of our women speak multiple languages. I can’t. I can try to provide a positive atmosphere, but I’m not always the one who is doing the encouraging and the supporting.

“And that’s good. I spent 30 years at Rossbrook House, helping street kids. I learned lessons there and continue to learn and grow at the House of Peace. There’s an Aboriginal saying: *If you’ve come to help me, go home. But if your liberation is tied up with mine, then let’s work together.* That’s key. There’s no upmanship here. I don’t say to our residents *I know how to do things and you don’t.* I accept each woman where she is at and focus on her strengths. And by doing so, I’ve become a much nicer person than I was before!”

The House of Peace has grown since 2004. In fact, in 2008, it raised two million dollars to add two floors to the building. “This was in the middle of a recession, notes Sister Lesley Sacouman. And still we were able to raise that capital. There are other miracles to ponder. We didn’t have a cent in 2004. We operated with volunteers for seven years before we hired our first employee. I don’t have a salary. Nor does our financial advisor. We operate 13 hours a day, seven days a week. We have 27 tutors to help our women go beyond what they are learning in their English classes.

“Plus, the deaf community has made the House of Peace its church. Our chapel is open seven days a week, with mass and confession. What other church can say that? As well, we’ve opened the House of Peace to programs like Cocaine Anonymous and Al Anon. And there’s a domestic violence group that meets here too. Clearly, there’s a

need for this space downtown. People recognize this and are generous with their donations.

“The coming together of all these volunteers, all these people working together for the betterment of others is the embodiment of Catholic social justice. It’s also a miracle.”



“The House of Peace is my family. At Christmas, I didn’t go anywhere because I’m loved here. And I know it!”

Born and raised in Winnipeg, Lesley Sacouman has been a Sister of the Holy Names of Mary and Jesus since 1963. In 1970, she moved to Winnipeg’s inner city. In 1976 she co-founded Rossbrook House with Sister Geraldine MacNamara.

Sister Lesley also taught for 17 years at Holy Cross School, St. John Brebeuf School, Sir Maurice Roche in Flin Flon, St. Ignatius School and Hugh John Macdonald School. In 1990, she helped start Anishinaabe Oway-Ishi, an educational, employment training program for Indigenous youth and in 1997 helped found Esther House, a safe home for women recovering from addiction. Most recently, Sister Lesley helped launch Marie Rose Place, affordable apartments for newcomer women and their children.

### **(1) Annual Diocesan Social Justice Conference – Saturday March 2, 2019**

The Annual diocesan social justice conference will be held at St. Boniface Cathedral in the lower level meeting room, from 10 AM to 3:30 PM. Registration at 9:30 AM. Guest speakers: Kevin Gallays (Society of St. Vincent de Paul), Gordon Janzen (Canadian Food Grains), Daniel St Vincent & Charles Gagné (Action Marguerite), Sr. Lesley Sacouman (House of Peace) and Derek Pachal (Jubilee Fund Inc.). Admission is free. Information: Claude Courchaine ([courchaine1@gmail.com](mailto:courchaine1@gmail.com)), Tina Montemayor ([montefalcon@live.com](mailto:montefalcon@live.com) or 431-334-9908) or Louis Balcaen ([libalcaen@gmail.com](mailto:libalcaen@gmail.com), 204-424-5434 or 204-392-7267). To view poster, [click here](#).