

Nuns: 'It's always about people'

Four sisters who had ministered in Apopka for decades will be honored for their ministry by Amnesty International.

Terry O. Roen

APOPKA

Despite threats from the Ku Klux Klan, four young white women moved into an all-black neighborhood 31 years ago to empower farmworkers to air their objections over low wages and poor working conditions.

The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur organized games for the children, showed Super-8 movies on the outside of their cement-block home and hung out at the local produce market to get to know the local farmworker community. They have held placards in demonstrations, rocked feverish babies, stood in welfare office lines and taught farmworkers how to unite in solidarity to improve their quality of life.

Sisters Cathy Gorman, Ann Kendrick, Teresa McElwee and Gail Grimes will be honored for their dedication, hard work and support of farmworkers as Seekers of Justice and Peace during the 2002 Human Rights Award Dinner Nov. 19 at the Radisson Hotel Lake Ivanhoe in Orlando. The event, sponsored by Amnesty International Orlando, features 1992 Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu Tum as guest speaker.

The beginning of a journey

The sisters have followed their vows of making God's love of the poor known through the way they live their lives in prayer and action. They moved into a small house on the end of South Central Avenue in Apopka and stayed there for 28 years. The blacks called them "white ladies," while Latinos whispered about "las monjas" (the nuns). They committed their lives to taking a stand for the low-wage earners, especially women and children in what was once Orange County's poorest area.

Apopka was a small town with dirt roads that connected the muck farms and citrus groves when Sisters Gorman and Kendrick received an invitation from Bishop William D. Borders to tour the labor camps of Harlem Heights and DeNeff Village. The bishop, who was from a mining family in Pennsylvania, recognized the importance of the church's response to the needs of farmworkers, according to the women. The pair had worked with Caesar Chavez in California to promote farmworker rights.

"It was a rural, citrus area," said Sister Gorman, 58, coordinator of the Office for Farmworker Ministry. "Initially I didn't know if I'd survive. But the community just won our hearts."

Making a move

The sisters first moved into a house in Winter Park Pines, which meant hours of driving to the farming communities. They asked the residents of the black community if they would mind white



Notre Dame de Namur Sisters Teresa McElwee, Ann Kendrick, Cathy Gorman and Gail Grimes are surrounded by Kids in Motion at the Apopka Family Learning Center.

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neighbors. There were no integrated neighborhoods at the time and the sisters said there were threats from the Ku Klux Klan about their chosen location. "Our home said a lot about who we were going to serve," said Sister Kendrick, 58, who heads the Notre Dame Mission Volunteers Americorps program. "It was not difficult to be accepted."

Living amid their neighbors set them apart from the others who saw ministry to the poor as donating goods, but not as working to solve the problems of poverty. Today, people would call their technique networking. Over the years they got to know the cultures and traditions of the black, Latino and Haitian farmworkers they served. They danced at Mexican festivals, ate soul food, learned the colloquialisms of Spanish and prayed for the perseverance to stay long enough to witness change. Worried about the four young women living alone in a dangerous area, Bishop Borders asked them to wear some type of dress that set them apart. They went to a local uniform supply store and picked out nurse's uniforms. Women kept bringing them babies with high fevers and Sister Gorman said their lack of medical training forced them to "dump the uniforms."

Welcoming two new sisters

Although two of the original four sisters moved to Chicago, Sisters Kendrick and Gorman were not alone for long. At that time, Sister Teresa McElwee, who now serves as director of the Justice and Peace Office, was principal of St. Bernadette School in Philadelphia. She often sent her sister nuns markers, tape recorders, dittos and cash collected from the affluent school. Also at the school was Sister Gail Grimes, head of the science department. She and Sister McElwee became familiar with Apopka when they visited the area to attend fiestas and help in the area. Sister Grimes, 63, said she felt a certain compatibility with the Apopka sisters and the farmworker community and both agreed to join them in their mission for social justice in 1971.

"We love the community and the people," said Sister McElwee, 73. "They are materially poor but have a resiliency of spirit — a very real trust in God's goodness. They have been my spiritual educators."

The four women spearheaded the creation of eight separate nonprofit organizations that offer health care, tutoring, naturalization and immigration advice, education, housing assistance and family and legal services to the farmworker community. Community leaders head six of the agencies.

Speaking about the sisters

"They are my sisters," said H. Lewis Kellom, executive director of Homes in Partnership of Orlando, a builder of low-cost housing. "Many years ago these nuns moved in and everyone wondered why these white nuns (were) in the neighborhood. They were nuns but they didn't wear their habits. They say they were nuns but we don't know (*sic*). We wondered what is their motive. After years and years we found out their motive was to help poor people. They have been great assets to our community. We know one thing for sure at the end of the day it's always about people."

The sisters met Tirso Moreno in 1976 after he emigrated with his family from Mexico to the United States. He was 26 at the time, and said he remembers the sisters helping them organize to acquire benefits from Coca-Cola, which owned the Minute Maid Company. Moreno volunteered as an organizer for the United Farmworkers of America and has worked with the sisters since 1980, as general coordinator for the Farmworker Association of Florida.

"Moving to Apopka was not a very popular thing to do at the time. I remember meeting them in the fields where I worked," said Moreno, 49. "They talked to the workers and were in solidarity with them. They came to our union meetings and participated as supporters. Now second and third generations of our community know and

love them."

At home with 'family'

The sisters' home has been both a haven and shelter for immigrants and family members who have no place to turn.

Three years ago, the sisters were forced to sell their first home in Apopka and move to a safer section of the city because of an increase in crack cocaine, drug dealers and guns. They said the safety of the neighborhood had changed and were loath to leave their home. The Orlando Diocese purchased another home for them in the area.

The sisters' home life can be described like any other family, where members take turns cooking, cleaning and consoling each other. Each of the women has different skills from raising funds to dealing with social service agencies or counseling teens.

"This work can be very difficult and discouraging and we use each other as a support system," Sister Gorman said. "We attend funerals, help people with cancer and deal with family grief. Sometimes we are four exhausted women dealing with crisis. We offer each other solace. We all work in the same environment and have agreed we can't always bring it home."

Each Friday morning, one of the sisters leads a prayer service in their home that often deals with how to work Scripture into their daily lives. They also pray together on Tuesday evenings. Every Mother's Day, they open their home to neighbors for a luncheon and prayer service.

"Sometimes, I'll be stopped in I-4 traffic and I look over and see the aggravation on someone's face," Sister Kendrick said. "So many people go to jobs they hate. We are blessed to have something meaningful to do every day."

The public is invited to attend the 2002 Human Rights Award Dinner. Tickets are \$45 apiece each Nov. 12. For more information, call Cheyl Ellefson at 407-682-1018.