

Sister Ginny, Padua, and the star fish that gets saved

Eight years ago, Sister Virginia Welsh was sent to the Toledo neighborhood once known as Kuschwanz and now known as Kwanzaa Park with a simple but very large writ: Find out what they need there and do it.

The Catholic Church was closing parishes. Four formerly mighty Polish parishes had dwindled to a few handfuls of families. St. Anthony of Padua Church was, Sister Ginny told me when I visited her the other day, the CedarCreek of its era. It once had 4,000 members. By 2006, it had fallen to about 100 families.

But could the church keep a presence in the neighborhood in the form of service?

Sister Ginny walked the neighborhood and asked the people what they wanted. (They needed



Sister Ginny

many things.) The eventual result was the Padua Center, which is a place as hard to define as Sister Ginny herself. I guess I would call the Padua Center a neighborhood hospitality house, centered on kids and education.

The Padua Center is in the old St. Anthony of Padua rectory. Two major programs — both for children — are run there. One is for students who have been suspended from school in grades K through 6. This program keeps the kids up to date with school work and simultaneously tries to work on their behavioral issues. Sister Ginny tells me they teach peace education. “We tell them: You have power, and when you misbehave, you lose that power. We teach them how to restore their power.”

The second program is a summer tutoring program and day camp for kids in grades K through 8. The hope is to prevent summer academic slippage. On the day I visited, about 25 kids were there. During the school year, a thousand or so kids might come and go in the course of a year. Padua does this with three paid staff members, interns, and

One boy who came to Padua during the school year, dealt with his issues and went back to school, asked if he could come back to Padua. Why? Sister asked him. “Because,” he said, “no one bugs me here, I can get my work done, and if I need help, I can get it.” He was in fourth grade.

Many of the kids come back, just to say hello and thank you.

Padua also runs occasional special programs, including, in the past, nutritional awareness for adults and “how to be gentlemen,” for boys.

Sister Ginny is a no-nonsense, straight shooter. She has no time for social or political pieties. She told me she didn’t come to Kwanzaa Park to maintain people in their poverty but to help them break out of it. She was an old teacher. Learning, she thought, was the key. Empowerment, not charity. She still thinks that.

Padua also offers a neighborhood coffee hour every day for those who want it. It sponsors an NA meeting and a UT scholarly study group. Most significantly, perhaps, it runs a large community garden where the whole neighborhood can come to get healthy food. And, in fact, to compost, plant, and recycle. Sister Ginny told me: “I am a Franciscan. We grow things.”

She is trying to teach children and their parents how to do the same — and, generally, about healthy living and the connections of nature. In addition to the Ujima (collective work) garden, across the street, Padua does some vertical hydroponic farming at the center, and they raise chickens. The kids love the chickens and they learn that eggs

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come from them and not
Kroger. Sister told me that
most of her kids were sur-
prised to learn that
oranges come from things
called orange trees, which
cannot grow in Toledo.
The Padua gang even have
a worm farm. The children
think it is "gross" but fasci-
nating.

Padua gets no money
from the diocese, but runs
its own small fund-raisers
and survives on these, oc-
casional grants, and small
service contracts with TPS
and Lucas County Chil-
dren's Services.

Grant givers want data.
Sister Ginny sees people.
She tells me about the
mythical lady who threw
star fish back into the sea
after high tide. The woman
was told by a friend that
she was fighting a losing
battle. Hundreds of star
fish wash ashore every
morning and evening. You
can't throw them all back.
So what difference does it
make? Sister's answer: It
makes a big difference to
the one that is thrown
back.

***On Tuesday: How inter-
vening institutions like
Padua can help kids and
build neighborhoods.***

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A 3rd road to change

I wrote Sunday about Sister Virginia Welch and her work at the Padua Center. They are on to something there.

I was struck with three things: First, Padua is a small organization. That means that



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it is almost impossible for a parasitic bureaucracy to grow on top. It also means that, whatever Sister Ginny and her team do, it is personal — friend to friend and not service provider to client.

Second, Padua respects the folkways and customs of the neighborhood and tries to address what people say they want and need. Conversation, rather than imposition.

And, third, Padua does not limit itself. Its emphasis is early supplemental education, but Padua has branched out into community gardening and nutrition — because that is a need Sister Ginny perceived.

So, the keys to the success I see at Padua are flexibility, listening, community roots, and a reasonable scale.

When it comes to addressing the causes of blight or crime — like lack of jobs, family disintegration, or mediocre schools — part of the remedy may lie with smaller, more flexible organizations than city government or Toledo Public Schools.

I first heard about Padua from Councilman Jack Ford. Last year he insisted that I cover a fund-raiser where the art of Padua students was auctioned off.

Padua is essentially self-sustaining and this art auction is its major fund-raiser. This event also includes a dinner and a lecture, which was given in 2013 by Lynne Hamer of the University of Toledo. Ms. Hamer has done extensive research with Padua and on

In that talk, about seven months ago, Ms. Hamer spoke of “intervening institutions,” which are basically voluntary associations that fall between the individual and the family at one end of the scale and large official and semiofficial institutions on the other end — like the state, the city, and TPS.

These smaller organizations have greater resources than individuals and families but can respond to human needs in a more personal and creative ways than officialdom.

If you are hungry, you need shelter, or you need help cutting the grass, you don’t think of the city, necessarily. You may not even think of your church.

But you may think of a neighbor. Sister Ginny and Padua are neighbors.

Most of the shelters in town are intervening institutions.

Food for Thought, which runs mobile food pantries and distributes sandwiches to folks downtown on Saturdays, is an intervening institution.

This vehicle of the intervening institution is a middle way to reform and where we probably should put more of our money and effort. And I’ll be writing about other examples in this city in the future. This may be the most promising mechanism now available for breaking cycles of poverty and dependence.

Sam Melden, who manages Food For Thought, summarizes the strength of an intervening institution when he talks about his gang handing out peanut butter and jelly sandwiches each week across from the library: “The thing is, it’s impossible to tell the so-called server from the so-called served.”

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