



Mike Crupi/Catholic Courier

Sister Vicky (left) and Sister Frances take part in a tai chi exercise class at Spirit House in Irondequoit July 5. Spirit House is a residential-treatment home for women religious from around the globe.

## Program helps renew spirits

*EDITOR'S NOTE: The last names of some people interviewed for this story were withheld in order to protect their privacy.*

By Amy Kotlarz/Catholic Courier

IRONDEQUOIT -- Sister Vicky's life had spun out of control.

The woman religious from Iowa said her life had turned into waking up in the morning, doing what was necessary to get through the day, and then getting up and doing it all over again.

"I gave and gave and gave, and I didn't always take time for myself to renew my center," Sister Vicky said.

Several fellow sisters suggested she try Spirit House, a residential-treatment home for women religious from across the globe. The name drew her in: She knew that only the Holy Spirit could help her heal. Now she says her stay at Spirit House has made her feel like a whole person again.

“The community here lives very much by the Spirit,” she said as she sat in the robin's egg blue parlor.

Whether listening to the chirping birds on the patio, walking the grounds around the home to admire its Spanish eclectic architecture, or slowly healing through weekly tai chi, yoga, poetry, massage and other sessions, calm floats through the air of Spirit House.

“We’ve had lay people come in and say there’s such a peace about the house,” said Mercy Sister Mary Ann Ayers, the home's executive director.

She said some sisters have been treated for addictions and need a nonmedical setting to transition back to their routine. Others have been victims of abuse and need a safe place to heal. Others are overworked and burnt out. Still others have gone through a midlife crisis or depression.

Spirit House has helped women religious for 26 years, said Sister Ayers, who began working there in 1984. Three years later, the board of directors purchased the 8,000-square-foot, three-story former residence on 3.5 acres of land.

The home’s founder and first director, Sister Molly Brown, is still active with the home, which has helped more than 170 sisters with preventive, behavioral care. The hope is to treat women religious before they get into an emergency situation, Sister Ayers said. “We are a step below hospitalization,” she said. “Our function is to get people into the program before a person needs hospitalization.”

Sisters in the program receive basic group therapy, spiritual direction and counseling every week. The women also attend at least one retreat at Mercy Prayer Center, depending on the length of their Spirit House stay.

“The average length of a stay is six months to a year, and it depends on issues they are dealing with,” Sister Ayers said.

Many of the women arrive with pain and low self-worth, Sister Ayers noted. Spiritual directors help guide them as they pray, spend time with the Lord and write in journals, she said.

“Our responsibility is to see the goodness in them, and reflect that back to them,” Sister Ayers said.

Depending on their problems, women may be taught such skills as creating boundaries or structure.

“Let’s face it,” Sister Ayers said. “Women don’t know how to say no. They make sure everybody else’s needs are met before your own. We teach them it’s OK to say no.”

The women also live in community, cooking and cleaning for themselves. That is intentional, because most sisters will be returning to communities and need to be able to resolve personality conflicts, she said.

Sister Ayers said that Spirit House recently has helped women deal with reorganizations in religious communities.

“For a lot of our women, it is very difficult to acclimate themselves to this change,” she said. “We don’t want them slipping through the cracks.”

Sister Ayers said that up until two-and-a-half years ago, the home had more than seven sisters being helped at a time. Now, it averages about four.

“The numbers dropped off, and there are so many reasons for that: community finances, women are too embarrassed to say, ‘I need help,’” Sister Ayers said.

However, Sister Ayers noted, an untreated problem also can cost and disrupt a community.

“We have had a very good success rate with our women who have been here,” she said.

Sister Vicky said it’s hard for her to pinpoint the most important things she’s learned during her stay. However, she said she has gained a self-awareness, and she deepened her connection with God.

“My life will never be the same, and I hope the lives of those I touch in the future will never be the same because of this experience,” she said.

That’s also how Sister Frances, also from Iowa, feels about the program. Frances said she wishes she had heard about Spirit House sooner, but said she might not have appreciated it like she does now.

“The pieces of the program all release in you what’s already there,” Sister Frances said.

After retiring from teaching at age 70, she said she had been attempting to go on sabbatical, but medical issues, the loss of two siblings and a new ministry intervened. Once Sister Frances finally got the chance to pause for renewal, several friends had found out about Spirit House on the Internet.

“I’m 74,” Sister Frances said. “I’ve had a very wonderful life, and a very rich life, but I didn’t know how rich it was.”

*EDITOR’S NOTE: For details on Spirit House, call 585-544-5698, e-mail [spirithouse1@juno.com](mailto:spirithouse1@juno.com) or visit [www.wounded-in-spirit.com](http://www.wounded-in-spirit.com).*

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