

# Sisters for sustainability

The Immaculate Heart of Mary sisters lead by example, both inside their building and outside in the garden

Retired Catholic sisters rooted in Christian faith typically don't come to mind when thinking of activists. However, in promoting, creating and living a sustainable life, the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM) in Monroe, Michigan are challenging everyone by example.

According to the IHM community, they consider sustainability, "A moral mandate for the 21st century. Our growing ecological consciousness places all humans in interdependent relations to one another and to all life on the planet."

## Community garden and farm

One of the ways the sisters demonstrate ecological living is through the St. Mary Organic Farm. The farm was originally a certified organic Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm begun in 1999. They decided to make it more accessible to the area and less costly to run by turning it into a community garden this year. The difference is a matter of ownership. In a CSA, members pay a fee and share in the produce grown, feast or famine, and some members help maintain the garden. A community garden requires each owner (center) of their plot to care for it and deal with the challenges, with help from other gardeners and IHM. The name change is meant to resurrect the name of a large farm that existed here from the 1940's to 1970's. There is also a peren-



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nial, herb and small fruit area for renters.

The community farm requires the forty-five plot owners to "Grow in a sustainable way using sustainable practices, i.e. no chemicals," according to Sharon McNeil, Ecology Director. This includes fertilizers and pest controls, unless they are accepted by an approved organic certification agency.

McNeil is suited to this position and describes her background: "I was born in Highland Park and grew up in Clawson. I am a registered nurse, licensed social worker, and certified spiritual director—a graduate of Michigan State undergraduate and graduate programs. The health care field is my professional background. Knowing Mother Nature is a great healer, gardening was a perfect fit for me and my work. I became a volunteer gardener in 1998 and a full-time employee in 2001."

The farm accommodates wheelchair-bound owners with raised beds and provides



The perennial, herb and small fruit gardens are available to members. Children from Monroe's last Earth Day created the flags for the pergola.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SANDIE PARROTT



Sisters Margaret Ann Henige and Rosalind Naebers are tying up tomatoes in their community garden plot. They have been members since the beginning of the garden.



The flags were made by children at the IHM booth at Monroe Earth Day. They are displayed on the pergola, originally intended for vine crops.



The manufactured pond filters sink and bath water through special vegetation and pea rock to return it as clear water for the facility's toilets.



Sister Loretta Schroeder plants purple tomatoes. She is a former Principal of St. Mary of Redford and rents a plot with her two sisters.



The 376,000 square foot IHM Motherhouse underwent a \$40 million green refurbishment, completed in 2003.

renters with soil amendments (IHM compost), bed preparation, a drip irrigation system, education, and coordination of surplus produce donations to charitable organizations. Approximately half of the plots are rented by the retired sisters with the other half consisting mostly of Monroe area residents along with a few from Toledo, Ferndale and Royal Oak.

#### **Motherhouse renovation**

The history of this society goes back to 1845 when two visionaries, Father Louis Gillet and Sister Theresa Maxis, responding to the need to educate young girls, began this spiritual community. The sisters wanted to preserve this history while updating their building for the future.

The Motherhouse serves as the IHM headquarters and is home to over 200 sisters, with roughly half requiring supportive and memory care. There are also 120 lay associates, 245 staff (most working at the Monroe campus, 266 acres facing the River Raisin), and additional volunteers from several organizations.

When the massive 376,000 square foot structure, built during the depression in 1932, needed remodeling, the sisters could have

taken the easy way by destroying the old and building a new facility. They decided not only to remodel, but to do it in a way that is kind to the earth. They considered not only the building but the land and people, believing everything is connected.

"Green" house renovations include an energy-efficient geothermal heating and cooling system; passive natural energy systems; 800 refurbished wood windows and 500 cherry doors; low-flow water conserving fixtures; high-efficiency lighting; retrofitted period light fixtures; 45,260 square feet of carpet (half of the old was donated to a non-profit organization and half was incinerated, none went to a landfill); and a heat recovery system that obtains heat exhaust from ductwork and reuses it in outside air ducts. Green products were used for flooring (cork) and painting (low VOC content). During demolition, plaster and other materials were sorted and recycled.

With the help of consultants, architects and landscape specialists, many earth-friendly and cost saving systems were incorporated into the renovation. Specialists in ecological planning put together the gray water system. This system pumps used water from showers



This old oak tree is the site for meditation, meetings and the annual Blessing Ceremony to bless the earth and the planted crops.



Beekeeping began when the queen bee arrived this past Earth Day from Randy and Judy Durfy, beekeepers and donors.



The labyrinth path, which also accommodates wheelchairs, encourages walkers to ponder life.

and sinks into a prepared and planted pond where it is cleansed by vegetation and pea rock, then pumped back into the building for use in toilets. According to Jeff Coffey, Director of Facility Operations, "The water looks completely clear when it comes out the other end of the pond."

#### **Outdoor sustainability**

Other outdoor changes to recreate the land as it once was include swales planted in the parking lots which minimize costly grooming, storm water runoff captured to relieve the city drainage system, and habitat provided for birds and butterflies. A prairie area was planted to eliminate mowing and gas use. Plantings were used as a buffer between nearby residences. An oak savannah is being reconstructed (removing invasive and non-native species and putting in paths) on 35 acres on the north end of campus. At one time there were 600,000 acres of oak savannah ecosystems in southeast Michigan, now only two percent remain, according to IHM literature. Ponds and wetlands have also been added along with a windmill to keep the largest pond aerated and clean.

They have also just begun keeping bees.

"Randy and Judy Durfy asked if they could bring honeybees to the IHM land this past April. They are the beekeepers. The queen bee arrived on Earth Day. Because honeybees are disappearing at alarming rates, this is our way to support and care for the species. We plan on enjoying some honey too," McNeil explained.

A tranquil labyrinth was added in the last few years. A labyrinth is a single path leading to the center and back. According to IHM literature, a labyrinth has been found in religious traditions and history throughout the world, usually placed in the floor of many early Christian churches. It is considered a path of prayer or personal exploration. This particular design is a circle with three divisions, from the Christian tradition of the trinity. The center pattern has its origins from a Faience tile at the main entrance to the Motherhouse. The pavilion design replicates the St. Mary Center tower. McNeil said, "It was installed in memory of Sister Ann Chester, a spiritual leader and visionary in the IHM community and donated by Toni Babcock, an IHM Associate and close friend. Anyone can

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These raised beds are for renters with physical challenges. The tool shed contains communal equipment for all to use.

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walk it and it is designed for wheelchair use."

IHM has won several awards and received recognition for their sustainable design and implementation, including the 2008 Keep Michigan Beautiful award; NBC Today Show ("God Goes Green"); WDIV-TV Channel 4 ("Nuns Go Green"); American Institute of Architects ("Top Ten Building Projects"); the *New York Times* ("Citing Heavenly Injunctions to Fight Earthly Warming"); and a certified rating of 27 points from the U.S. Green

Building Council LEED-NC.

Any individual or group can take a two-hour tour of the facility and land for a small fee. The tour begins with a short video "The Blue Nuns Go Green," followed by an indoor tour and time to explore outdoors. Call Sharon Venier for more information at 734-240-9754 or check out the IHM website at [www.ihmsisters.org](http://www.ihmsisters.org)

*Sandie Parrott is a garden writer and photographer who lives and gardens in Oakland County, MI.*



Sharon McNeil, Ecology Director, shows off one of the raised beds created for wheelchair patients, donated in memory of her parents, Stanley and Helen McNeil.



IHM Archives

Sisters were transported to and from St. Mary Farm during the 1940's in their full habits. It was the largest farm in the area at the time.