

# Up to code: Sisters bring social activism to every venture, including the eco-friendly renovation of their home

*January 26, 2003*

**BY JUDY ROSE**  
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

The 500,000-700,000 metro Detroiters taught by the Roman Catholic IHM sisters know this feisty group of women has a steady vision of what's right and what's wrong, as well as the drive to make things right.

Behind the self-effacing name -- Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary -- are the campaigners who run an AIDS hospice in South Africa, who work for social justice in El Salvador and who bought Detroit Edison stock so they could protest against Monroe's Fermi nuclear plant at stockholder meetings. They called it eco-justice.

So when their elegant, 1930s motherhouse in Monroe -- home to 240 retired sisters -- was deemed obsolete, their response was not a surprise. They researched, then tackled a massive renovation that turned the 376,000-square-foot building into a masterpiece of energy efficiency. The goal was a sustainable, or "green," building, one that uses the least possible non-renewable resources.

Total cost was \$56 million -- more than a conventional renovation and more than razing and rebuilding.

But the frugal group of 600 nuns embraced the enormous debt with zest. In the words of sister Janet Ryan of the IHM leadership council, "treading lightly on the earth" was the moral choice.

On Wednesday the retired sisters -- median age 86 -- will start moving back into the renovated building after 2 1/2 years in temporary quarters -- a 1930s girls school dormitory, now St. Mary Center. During construction they've lived in slivers of space created by dividing the small student dorm rooms in half.

That included two hot summers on the top floors with no air conditioning.

"It was edifying to see those elderly sisters," says Sister Mary (Coronata) Laubacher, 85. "They never complained."

Consulted every step of the way in this renovation, the retirees asked for just one luxury in the new space -- their own bathrooms.

Before this, the elderly group walked the equivalent of half a block to a dorm-style bath.

"We are not a complaining group. We are used to making do," says Sister Jean (Eymarda) Laubacher, who calls herself one of the younger elders, at just 79.

Indeed, retired Sister Celeste (Palmyre) Rabaut, an IHM nun for 65 years, recalls teaching at Annunciation School on Detroit's east side. The convent there had just two bathtubs for 15 sisters.

"We had a bath schedule," she says. "Each sister would get a half-hour two times a week."

### **Drawing visitors from afar**

The pioneering project -- one of the nation's largest sustainable renovations of a residential building -- is drawing visitors from around the country.

They're coming to see features like the new three-acre wetlands area in back, built to recycle about 40 percent of the building's water.

Meanwhile, some plumbers, electricians and carpenters say they've never had such an experience.

Each group's first day on the job began when Mary and Jean Laubacher, who are blood sisters, asked them to come to the chapel with a tool of their trade.

"We gave a brief history of the building," says Mary Laubacher. "We told how thousands of sisters came here as young women, mostly to prepare for teaching. We told them how they worked and prayed and died here and were buried on the grounds in the cemetery.

"We wanted to impress on them they were working on sacred ground."

A reading from Genesis followed each time. Then the sisters asked God to bless the workers, their families and their tools. Jean Laubacher then sprinkled holy water on the workers and tools.

A final "Amen" and workers were handed a list of rules for working on this project -- hard hats at all times, no loud radios, respect for the sisters and no cussing.

Respect, it turned out, went both ways.

"Time and time again on the job, they would compliment the guys, express their appreciation," says Joe Connors, owner of Monroe Plumbing & Heating Co., who had as many as 40 workers at a time on site.

"Frankly, we're not used to that in the real world.

"Most people just want us to get out."

At one point, his crew gave a tour of what's called the chiller room -- heart of the project's geothermal heating and cooling system. They were startled at the end of the presentation when the sisters broke into applause.

There were other differences, says Lynn Rogien, project manager for the major contractor, Christman. Far more than most clients, he says, the sisters researched each decision and acted as facilitators for every design meeting.

Outside planners like Rogien were surprised the first time a sister rang a bell to halt discussion.

That meant talk was becoming contentious or unproductive. Participants were asked to pause several minutes in silence, re-center themselves, then search their hearts for the right thing to do.

### **A party for those 90 and older**

Besides a private bath, each new room will have such state-of-the-art facilities as a high-speed computer line. These are aimed at older people in the general population, who will eventually follow the sisters.

Religious vocations are more rare these days, and the community is aging.

Typically, three women a year enter the group and take preliminary vows. But in one recent week after Christmas, four of the sisters died. With the chapel closed for construction, that meant four funerals in an auditorium with 300 colleagues in folding chairs praying around the white-draped coffins.

Enough of the retired sisters are 90 or older that they recently held a party for themselves, barring youngsters of 89 or less.

When the retired sisters become too few to fill the facility, it will be converted into assisted independent and nursing care for aging lay people -- "generations of senior citizens who will come to rent when we're out there in the cemetery," says Mary Laubacher.

For now, it will care for about 120 sisters who need skilled nursing care and provide housing for 120 active retirees, with the emphasis on "active."

Like most nuns, IHM sisters retire late, then keep working.

"The whole group is involved in justice and peace advocacy," says communications director Holly Knight. They work and write letters supporting the antiwar and pro-environment movements.

Retirees volunteer as tutors and librarians; they go to senior homes to read to residents or help them to write letters.

Jean Laubacher works now as a driver for more elderly colleagues. Mary Laubacher is the group's education secretary, keeping records of the sisters' work. Marie Gabriel Hungerman, 77, heads the IHM library.

These retirees come from a highly educated group. The 600 sisters include a medical doctor and several lawyers. Nine in 10 have master's degrees; one in 10 has a doctorate.

## **The tough decision**

By choice, IHM sisters spend little on living expense, so \$56 million is a staggering sum.

"Good night! By our vow of poverty, we have always recycled, reused, done without," says Jean Laubacher.

"We live very, very frugally," says Mary Laubacher.

Until about 1970 they raised their own produce, meat and dairy products on a nearby 900-acre farm.

"We've always done that -- for the past 70 years," says Sister Jane (Marmion) Johnson, 81, who taught in Uganda during the reign of dictator Idi Amin. "We'd peel potatoes during the day for meals, then at night the peels would be taken out to the farm to feed the pigs."

Today most sisters wear conventional clothing, but they used to spend their vacation from teaching by piecing, turning and mending their dark blue habits -- the source of their old nickname -- the blue nuns.

It was 1994 when they faced the need to renovate the motherhouse. The type of renovation was never an issue; the IHM's own teaching material calls sustainability "a moral mandate for the 21st Century."

"We knew we wanted a sustainable building," says Danielle Conroyd, hired in 1998 to coordinate the project. "But we didn't know how to get there."

Years of research followed.

It was 2002 when hundreds of IHM nuns came from other locations to see the full design and learn the final cost. Acceptance was not guaranteed. The community had to agree.

They were stunned to learn the entire project would add up to \$150 a square foot -- almost twice the price they'd been told earlier. With 376,000 square feet, that was more than \$56 million.

The sisters broke into groups to discuss it and report their reactions.

Sister Marie Gabriel Hungerman, the IHM librarian, was in a group of exactly 15. One nun ventured: "Wouldn't it be neat if we could raise \$150 now?"

"I have ten here," said another.

"So do I."

"Before a minute was up we had \$150," Hungerman says.

Groups regathered in the big auditorium and began to report their reactions. When Hungerman stepped to the mike to speak for her group, she fanned out the fifteen \$10s.

"Here's the first square foot," she said. Cheers and laughter ran through the room. Since then it has become popular for alumnae and others to donate \$150.

### **\$75,000 from Detroit Edison**

Like most construction projects, this is about 20 percent paid for, 80 percent financed. To start with, the community sold a vacation-retreat property it owned in Benton Harbor.

Detroit Edison -- the IHM's former target, now ally -- gave a \$75,000 grant.

"Considering that we've been picketing Fermi for years, I think their giving us money at all is a wonderful thing," says Sister Margaret Chapman, development director.

Now the group hopes to cut the debt to a more manageable level with donations from alumnae, who are everywhere. Beyond social activism, the IHM nuns have been known as educators. Detroit's Marygrove College is the jewel of the system.

Even today, with Catholic schools less common, IHM sisters teach or administer at 17 metro Detroit schools, including Notre Dame and Our Lady Queen of Peace in Harper Woods, St. Angela in Roseville, Bishop Foley High School in Madison Heights, Marian High School in Birmingham, St. Hugo of the Hills in Bloomfield Hills and Star of the Sea in Grosse Pointe.

In Detroit they're at St. Jude, Holy Redeemer, St. Mary of Redford, Loyola, Bishop Borgess and Gesu.

They work other ways in 14 more parishes, including St. Malachy in Sterling Heights, Sacred Heart in Roseville, St. Clare of Montefalco in Grosse Pointe Park, Christ the Good Shepherd in Lincoln Park and Most Holy Trinity in Detroit.

They provide health care or human services at 14 organizations, such as the United Cerebral Palsy Foundation and Children's Hospital of Michigan.

The group hopes the wide swath of people they've touched will help support the renovation.

You may have heard a public service announcement something like this: "Were you educated by an IHM sister? Immaculata, Holy Redeemer and Gesu are among hundreds of schools they served in the Detroit area. Their center will be home to sisters who have worked for others through their entire lives . . ." The announcement gives a toll-free number to call the motherhouse.

As a long-term project, the group is seeking ideas for renovating the large St. Mary Center on the Monroe campus, and possibly developing more of the 280 acres.

At Monroe Plumbing & Heating, Joe Connors has become a convert, environmentally speaking.

"I know for a fact that those nuns do not have infinite financial resources," Connors says. "They made a big financial commitment here to try to curtail their use of non-renewable resources," \$3 million alone for the extra plumbing needed for wetlands recycling.

"I haven't in the past taken greenies very seriously," he says. "I mean, I'm a businessman and sometimes they seem a little off-the-wall to me.

"But the nuns, they put their money where their mouth is."

*For more information on the IHM motherhouse or to donate to the project, leave a message on the renovation hot line at 866-446-2002 anytime.*

*Contact JUDY ROSE at 313-222-6614 or [rose@freepress.com](mailto:rose@freepress.com).*