



IAAS Walks of Life 2012 Sister Kathleen Kilbane

Thousands of high school dropouts and homeless men and women were able to improve their lives through the patience and dedication of Sister Kathleen Kilbane, whose steadfast goal throughout her life has been to help the poor and uneducated.

Sister Kathleen spent a lifetime in social ministry. She became director of the West Side Catholic Center shortly after it opened its doors to help the homeless and needy and later founded Seeds of Literacy to assist high school dropouts earn their diplomas.

She was one of three children of Michael and Gertrude Kilbane. Her father grew up in Achill on Ireland's western coast and arrived in America in 1925. Her mother's parents, Farrell and Catherine Gallagher, also came from Achill.

Sister Kathleen entered the Congregation of St. Joseph from St. Clement Parish in Lakewood in 1952 after graduating from St. Joseph Academy. She received her bachelor's degree in education from St. John College and a master's degree from Cleveland State University.

Her early years in the convent were spent in teaching at the grade school level, first at Annunciation, then at St. Angela Merici, St. Aloysius, St. Mary in Berea and St. Colman schools.

When 18 churches in the Central West Deanery of Catholic parishes joined together in 1977 to witness "Christ's concern for the poor through concrete efforts of direct social and spiritual services," the West Side Catholic Center came into existence, and Sister Kathleen soon stepped in as director.

The initial Center, a small storefront near St. Ignatius High School, offered clothing and snacks to the elderly and homeless and referrals to those seeking help. Within five years, another building was acquired at West 32nd Street and Lorain Ave. to house the expanding programs the center offered, including a Women's Shelter. Sister Kathleen credits "a lot of Irish tradesmen and craftsmen" for their generous support in renovating the building, a former bowling alley and bar that was six times larger than the original center.

She started the Seeds of Literacy in 1997 as a project the Sisters of St. Joseph could pursue to mark the order's 125th anniversary. In the following years, the literacy program helped thousands of men and women obtain a high school diploma or its equivalent.

In the year 2000, the West Side Catholic Center honored Sister Kathleen with its "Dorothy Day Humanitarian Award" for her work with the disadvantaged. Presenting the award, the selection committee noted her legacy:

"Through her example and leadership, Sister Kathleen is responsible for the Center as we know it today. She sees God in the poor and disenfranchised and created a sense of family with our clients. She loves them all."

Irish American Archives Society
P.O. Box 91756
Cleveland, Ohio 44101-3756