



Sisters' legacy of compassionate care lives on at Bonnyville Health Centre

When Father Joseph Lapointe from Bonnyville saw a need for a hospital and school in Bonnyville, he put out a call to the Sisters of Charity of Notre Dame d'Evron, known for serving in education, health and social welfare.

This call was answered when six Sisters arrived in October of 1919, armed with their motto "Major Est Caritas," (Charity Above All). With the help of a contractor, the Sisters converted a former church and rectory to fit eight patient beds (St. Louis Hospital), a school, and their own home, and began accepting patients just a month and a day after they arrived. Six months later, the first operation was performed in the hospital, and eight months later, the first baby was born.

Bonnyville grew, as did the need for a larger facility. In 1929, a new hospital was built to accommodate the growing population. The Sisters would always care for those in need—even with a new hospital, they found themselves over capacity—with beds enough for 24 patients, they would fit as many as 36.

The Sisters always strove to make sure the growing community had impeccable health care—by 1977, they worked with ambulance services, completed medical and nursing audits, and began coronary care, Meals on Wheels, and student work experience programs.

In 1986, the St. Louis Hospital and another area hospital, the Duclos Hospital, combined into a new facility, the Bonnyville Health Centre.

The Sisters were present in the Bonnyville Health Centre until 2015, when the last two officially retired. One of which was Sister Mary Ellen O'Neill, who had been there for 31 years, to the day.

Sister Mary Ellen has played many roles at the facility. She has been the Director of Nursing, a board member, a volunteer and active on various committees.

Her presence in Bonnyville was a first-hand example of the legacy of care the founding Sisters began. Now that she has retired, she is proud to see this legacy continue.

As a nursing student in Vegreville in 1953, Sister Mary Ellen was taught to care for people's emotional and spiritual needs as well as their physical needs. She explains she was led gently by the Sisters of Charity of Notre Dame d'Evron to understand she was doing the work of Christ on earth.

"Deep down, if you have a call to care for people, you will help them in whatever situation they are in, out of love," says Sister Mary Ellen. "I think that when people come into the healthcare centre today, they are cared for as whole people."

She explains that when she left Bonnyville Health Centre, she had a feeling of completion, and was ready to pass the torch to staff giving this compassionate care.

"We have left Bonnyville Health Centre in the hands of God, because he talks to the hearts of people, and it is from the hearts of people that the action comes," says Sister Mary Ellen.

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– Sister Mary Ellen O'Neill



Sisters of Charity of
Notre Dame d'Evron