

mission in action

But Wait, There's More!

The bustling
Last Stop Shop
supports sisters
in retirement

BY MICHAEL O'LOUGHLIN



It's easy to miss if you aren't looking for it. But it's there, nestled between St. Joseph Center and Sacred Heart Center in Milwaukee. The two-story brick building, once the sisters' laundry facility, now goes by the moniker, "The Last Stop Shop—Neighborhood Ministry."

Nothing about its outward appearance can prepare first-time visitors for what they'll find inside this treasure box.

The Last Stop Shop has been the focus of Sister Geraldine Dahlan's ministry for nearly a decade. She previously ran an odds 'n' ends shop in Sacred Heart Center on a part-time basis, then offered her wares in the campus garage during the summers before moving into the empty laundry building in 2005. Affectionately known as "Sister Geri's Place," the shop has grown by leaps and bounds, and now offers a huge assortment of goods.

"Our ministry here is to make furni-

ture and clothing available to people who need them," Sister Geri said. "We have anything that people wear, starting with baby things and going all the way up to 3X and 4X sizes for men and women."

It's hard to argue with that description. One entire room on the first floor is filled with racks and boxes of clothes, while another is home to furniture and accessories of every kind and vintage: from rocking chairs and children's play sets to lamps, clocks, and mirrors.

The great room is a potpourri of books, tools, cards, dishware and silverware, religious items, homemade candy, silverware, and posters. You name it and it's probably here in greater quantities than you'd expect, in good condition, and at very reasonable prices.

Upon request, Sister Geri will accompany visitors to the second floor via an old-fashioned mechanical elevator. Upstairs are sprawling rooms filled with beautiful, high-quality furniture: dining tables and chairs to recliners to complete bedroom sets. It's little wonder that Sister Geri's

Place has become a destination of choice for college graduates just starting out in their first place.

"They get a job and an apartment, and then they come here for everything they need," Sister Geri said. "They're thrilled—like kids in a toy store."

A Head for Business

How did a sister who spent much of her career as a homemaker at convents in Wisconsin and Illinois find this niche, buying and selling merchandise on this scale?

"My whole family was in business," Sister explained. "Every one of my brothers and sisters had three, four, five businesses at one time. My father was a stockbroker and we were born in business. We just automatically worked. My father was born and raised on the boulevard. We lived right by Whitnall Park, so we were spoiled rotten. I was very fortunate, but I didn't realize that as a kid."

Her family's knack for business has helped Sister Geri find customers and suppliers.

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SISTER THUY TRAN PHOTOS

Sister Geri Dahlman enjoys visiting with The Last Stop Shop's customers. All revenue from sales supports the retired School Sisters of St. Francis.

It's not the profit motive that inspires Sister, though: All the revenue, after covering Sister's utilities and other business expenses, goes to support the retired sisters of her community. She refuses to talk about the dollar amount. "It's not about the money; it's about the mission," she said. But Sister Helen Butzler, Treasurer of the United States Province, said that the money raised through the shop is enough to provide for all the living expenses of three retired sisters each year.

"Sister Geri is a treasure," said Provincial Coordinator Sister Carol Rigali. "Her selfless generosity of spirit directly impacts the income of the sisters' retirement fund." Provincial Sister Deborah Fumagalli added, "Sister Geri exhibits many Franciscan values, especially care for the earth through her dedicated and creative approach to repurpose, reuse, and recycle so many useful items."

"Sister Geri and her small team of volunteers—members of the community and lay people—work hard to please their customers. Sister makes sure they all find what they are looking for at a price that won't be beat anywhere else in town.

"Everyone is welcome here, and we have something for everybody!" said The Last Stop Shop's purveyor. Her loyal customers couldn't agree more.✚

"One of my brothers had a golf course with a bar, another was in the antique business and had a restaurant, so we were a longtime Milwaukee business family. Those friendships connected me to the Franklin Library, for example. I used to donate books at the end of the season to their library book sale. In return, just a few days ago they sent over all their old video-cassettes for free."

Sister has also made connections with the Amish community in the Midwest. Some of the more unique and sought-after items she sells include Amish quilts and candy, including melt-in-your-mouth peanut brittle.

Supporting Retired Sisters

Relying almost entirely on word of mouth, the Last Stop Shop has grown to become a successful enterprise that even offers hard-to-find items on eBay. College students, vintage collectors, bargain hunters, and families on a budget all seek out Sister Geri's Place for great deals at a great price.

The Last Stop Shop is open Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday from 9:30 a.m.-3:00 p.m. If you'd like to join Sister Geri in supporting the retired School Sisters of St. Francis, call the International Office of Mission Advancement at 414-384-3334.