

Story of the Senior Citizens Program

Gert Town Resource Center

Enrolled as a student in the Social Work classes of Sidney Barthelemy and John Filwiler in the fall of 1974, she dreamed of a project that would benefit Gert Town and specifically the elderly. Sister Patricia Downs, S.B.S., or Sr. Pat as she was affectionately called, was encouraged by both these Xavier instructors to do her field project for both her courses by establishing a Gert Town center with a program for the elderly as its first project. Before any site was found or building made available, she and Sr. Valerie Riggs, S.B.S., discussed the possibility of using the building where the Audubon Arts Center had just started at 7000 Edinburgh Street across from Danneel School No. 2. Sr. Pat contacted George Gates III, Director of the New Orleans Council on Aging, to obtain his advice and approval. With this obtained she opened the lunch program for the elderly, called Food and Friends by the Council on Aging, in the fall of 1974. Soon Mrs. Augustine Harris was hired as the foods coordinator by Domino caterers which was contracted by the Council on Aging. Sr. Pat was off to a good start.

With the availability of the building at 7000 Edinburgh Sr. Pat called for planning meetings to set up the Resource Center which would be the umbrella organization for the senior program and other services. Many meetings were held at the Audubon Arts Center in the evening all through the fall of 1974 and into 1975. Councilman Frank Friedler was in frequent attendance. The minutes of these meetings as well as the Gert Town Newsletter reveal an impressive list of attendees. When in 1975 a building located around the corner at 3425 Audubon Court was purchased and renovated by Mrs. Virginia Welch, one half of the building became available to Sr. Pat as the first office of her Resource Center. Attendance at meetings grew significantly with this acquisition, thanks to Mrs. Welch. Some of the attendees at meetings were as follows:

Ms. Shirley Ross, Division of Family Services
Mr. George Gates, New Orleans Council on Aging
Mr. Frank Friedler, Councilman for District "A"
Ms. Paula Wilthew, CHNO Satellite Clinic
Mr. Gary Willis, School Social Work Services
Senator Sidney Barthelemy, Urbinvolve, Xavier University
Sr. Carla, New Orleans Training Center, Broadmoor area
Sr. Mary Jordan, New Orleans Training Center
Ms. Mercedes Madere, City Welfare Department
Ms. Gertrude Robinson, N.O. Health Department
Mr. Harold Brown, administrator, Food and Friends program, Resource Center
Mr. Leroy Jassell, Boy Scouts, New Orleans Area Council
Mrs. Wayette Cohen, Council of Jewish Women
Mrs. Flo Schornstein, Office of Frank Friedler
Ms. Elaine Johnson, Family Services
Mr. Kalicus Bridges, Orleans Parish School Board
Mr. John Fulwiler, Social Work program, Xavier University
Sr. Valerie Riggs, Audubon Arts Center director
Sr. Patricia Downs, Gert Town Resource Center coordinator
Mr. Hank McNeil, Committee on Alcoholism
Mrs. Greta Jackson, Gert Town Resource Center
Mrs. Gwendolyn Martin, Gert Town Resource Center
Ms. Helen Malveaux, Gert Town Resource Center
Mrs. Augustine Harris, Domino Caterers, Council on Aging
Mr. Duncan Waters, District Superintendent, Orleans Parish School Board
Mr. Thomas Glover
Mrs. Carolyn Ford
Rev. Allen
Mr. Terrance Duverney
Mr. Floyd Washington
And many others who did not sign the meeting rosters

Topics discussed at these meetings were almost as numerous as the persons participating. Foremost were issues concerning the Senior Citizens lunch program Food and Friends, school buses, family rearing, drug education, G.E.D. program, Crisis Center, vocational training, Dixie Cement walls. In one way or another of these issues were dealt with by opening new programs at the Resource Center such as G.E.D., Crisis Center, Vocational training, family rearing. Dixie Cement built its walls, due to Sr. Pat's letters, phone calls, visits! With this growth in referrals and programs the Food and Friends program was placed under the direction of Mr. Harold Brown, although it still remained under the general umbrella of the Resource Center at 3425 Audubon Court. Additional services at 3425 were provided in youth counseling and family counseling, the latter being under the LA. Division of Family Security and the Family Service Society. Sr. Pat remained directly responsible for the entire operation but enlisted numerous program directors and assistants, some paid, some volunteer.

The other half of 3425 Audubon Court, named "Sesame House" by Mrs. Virginia Welch, had been equipped as a Center for children for homework and tutoring with Xavier students' involvement. At the end of May, 1975, this program closed, and the Resource ^{Center} started moving into this half of the building with their youth counseling activities. At this point the Resource Center began to be called the Gert Town Resource Center. Mrs. Welch donated the entire building to Xavier University in 1976 and at this point the Gert Town Resource Center came under the jurisdiction of the University with Sr. Pat as the coordinator responsible to Xavier.

In 1977 the Senior Citizens lunch program, Food and Friends, moved into 3425 Audubon Court into the area vacated by the children's program, Sesame House. Thus the entire Gert Town Resource Center activities at last came under the same roof. Sr. Pat moved in 1977 into another ministry in another state, and Mrs.

Berline Scott became the new coordinator. Sr. Pat visited whenever she returned to the city and saw new growth each time. The biggest feature of this growth was support from Associated Catholic Charities and United Way, and of course Xavier University continue its share. No one can question Sr. Pat's part in this growth or deny that her name deserves top credit.

By 1980 the building at 3425 Audubon Court was considered too small for all its programs and so the Gert Town Resource Center moved most of its programs to a new location, 7220 Earhart Boulevard. The Senior Citizens continued to receive their services at the old building, 3425 Audubon Court, until April, 1985, when the structure was considered in such poor condition that it had to be vacated. The Senior Citizens moved back again to the Audubon Arts Center at 7000 Edinburgh Street, their old home grounds. All through 1985 to 1989 the Xavier property at 3425 Audubon Court underwent many feasibility studies until it was finally demolished in 1989 and a new building constructed.

In the meantime, in October, 1988, the Senior Citizens lunch Program moved to 7220 Earhart to receive their services there. They are eagerly awaiting the day when they can move again!! - but this time to their very own, spanking new quarters!! It will still be owned by Xavier University but operated by Gert Town Resource Center in behalf of the Senior Citizens. The Resource Center has been sensitive to their needs by providing every kind of service for seniors in the several rooms of the new Senior Center. Sr. Pat should be here to welcome them.

This brief report was compiled from the many minutes and agendas of the Gert Town Resource Center and Newsletters. The many gaps are due to lost or mislaid minutes.

Sr. Valerie Riggs, S.B.S.
September, 1989