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# Saying goodbye to Sister Teresita

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Sister Teresita Poulin, a mighty-mite disciple of God and elbow grease who's toiled the past quarter century for Sonoma County's homeless mothers, yearning immigrants, aged poor and many others struggling to lift up their lives, is going home.

To heaven? Heavens, no. Still aglow and on the go at almost 78, Sister Teresita is making ready to bid Sonoma good-bye and return to the historic Iowa convent that launched her as a maker of practical miracles more than 50 years ago.

"In a way it's bittersweet. But it's OK," the diminutive dynamo said of her impending move. Positive impacts of her efforts in Sonoma County will endure at Santa Rosa's Family Support Center homeless shelter, at the Vigil Light low-income senior apartments near the Flamingo Hotel and in the lives of countless clients of Catholic Charities whom she offered to help — if they'd also help themselves.

She's leaving in two weeks to answer a call that she return to Dubuque, Iowa, and to the motherhouse of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVM). That's the 175-year-old order of teaching and activist nuns she joined right out of high school in 1949.

"I know there will be something for me to do when I get back there, probably something new that I haven't done before," she said. "I expect that I'll be there for the rest of my life."

The Massachusetts native entered the BVM order as Winifred Poulin, the daughter of French-Canadian Catholics Amy and Wilfred Poulin. Her father was a New England carpenter who'd point out a family's home to her and say, "See that house? I built it."

"I was always so proud of him that he could say that," she said.

She was about 7 when a cousin who'd entered a convent showed up in her postulant uniform. Young Winifred loved it.

"So my mother made a little habit," she said. Her future was sealed.



CHRISTOPHER CHUNG/THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Sister Teresita Poulin, 77, a longtime stalwart of Catholic Charities and the Demeo House, is returning to the Mount Carmel Sisters of Charity, in Dubuque, Iowa, where her work with the church began nearly 60 years ago.

Her family left New England when she was 16 and settled in San Jose. A nun at her Catholic high school belonged to the Sisters of the BVM and encouraged her to go on to the convent in Iowa.

Winifred decided she would do just that. But she became conflicted when others at the high school in San Jose advocated that instead of traveling to Dubuque she enter an order in nearby Saratoga.

It made for a pivotal moment in her life when she told the BVM sister that she was thinking she might not go to Iowa but rather to the close-by California convent.

She remembers the nun telling her, "Winifred, you go right ahead. We don't want any wishy-washy people in our community."

That instant, the teen knew what she would do. She would go to the convent in Dubuque. And she would not be wishy-washy.

At the Iowa convent, her superiors assigned her the name Sister Teresita. Though her heritage is French, she liked the sound of the Spanish name — and decades later she'd be pleased that it was familiar to the many Latino people she'd work with in Sonoma County.

Besides, the novice nun formerly known as Winifred Poulin was not disappointed to lose the nickname, Winnie the Pooh.

An assignment as a second-grade teacher at a Catholic school in Pasadena began a 25-year, continuously ascending career in education. Sister Teresita taught in inner cities, brought a preschool to life within an abandoned parish in Kansas City, Kan., became a principal and ultimately traveled much of the country to instruct teachers in improved methods of teaching.

She was 52 when the Diocese of Santa Rosa's late Bishop Mark Hurley invited her to come to Sonoma County as the first manager of a project to build 48 low-income senior apartments in a former walnut orchard near the Flamingo Hotel.

That was 1983. Since then, Sister Teresita has initiated or joined myriad efforts, most sponsored by Catholic Charities, to help individuals and families work their way out of poverty and homelessness and to assist Latino immigrants with the citizenship process.

She created a program to seek donations of old mobile homes, restore them and give them to families willing to invest sweat equity and to pitch in on mobile homes rehabilitated for other families.

"We had 38 people who got mobile homes. Most of them are still in them," Sister Teresita said. She believes in miracles and regards the mobile home project as one of many for which she's been a catalyst during the 26-year-old Sonoma County stay that is drawing to a close.

"I don't mean big miracles with a capital 'M', she said. "I mean little miracles, things that change people's lives."

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