

Volunteer Spotlight - Sr. Pat Nagle & Sr. Sharon Joyer

Horticultural Activity Facilitators at Lambert House

Nine colorful beans are displayed on a page that Sr. Sharon slides towards me across the table. The cattle bean looks just like you would imagine – cream with black and brown spots. I can't conceive of cooking and eating something so beautiful. That feeling of awe in the natural world that it inspires in me is the feeling Srs Sharon and Pat have committed their lives to cultivating, and they have found a unique niche for doing so with the elders at Lambert House.

“Scarlet Runner has beautiful beans,” Sr. Sharon glows, “and beautiful flowers for hummingbirds. Nature teaches us that it's all about reciprocity. We give and receive our whole life long. Each one does their part.

Sr. Pat, a Sister of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, and Sr. Sharon, a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur, met in the late 1980's in a graduate program for Consciousness Studies at John F Kennedy in Pleasanton, CA. They worked together during the 90's at a multi-cultural, multi-generational community garden project in Oakland, which was started by middle-aged and elderly community members and expanded to include the children who would hang on the fence to watch. When the Pastoral Letter on Caring for Creation in the Columbia River Watershed came out in 2001, they discerned individually with their communities, that their project had become fully sustainable and it was time for them to make a move to Portland.

They came to Lambert House last September at the end of the growing season, so they have worked with the elderly participants to put the beds to sleep, practice songs to sing during spring planting, and sprout seeds in-doors. This process roots those slipping into dementia in natural cycles, and gets them excited about what is coming next. They also lead input sessions to keep the memory of the garden alive, and create opportunities to receive and acknowledge input from our elders.

“In life, we show up and are willing to be ourselves with love, compassion, and respect in a world that can be devoid of that for frail elderly,” shares Sr. Pat. “As a culture we are beginning to create life-giving, inclusive, loving communities of respect.” They have done this through facilitating a



number of special projects, such as a multi-cultural celebration of how each tradition expresses light during the season of darkness. Many elders commented “we have so much in common.”

Another enjoyable project was apple tasting in the Fall Season.

“Folks got so animated savoring the flavor of each apple,” Sr. Sharon recalls of the tasting. “It is such a sensory experience to see, touch, smell, and taste. It was clear which ones were their favorites.” The group chose words to describe what they were experiencing and posted a collective list, which included contributions from those who were usually silent.

Today, they are sharing the importance of growing and saving seeds from heirloom plants, which bees need to drink nectar and spread pollen. These plants play a vital role in a healthy food chain by holding the integrity of where our food came from and ensuring its future production.

“We showed the elders different heirloom beans, telling stories about where they came from and how they have been a part of our history.” Sr. Pat points to the page before me. “This one was carried along the Trail of Tears.”

“The Sisters are so compassionate,” shares Crissy Kibbons-Lindahl, Lambert House Volunteer Coordinator. “When they come into the room, they greet each person in such a meaningful and caring way. They develop new activities that find ways to incorporate and honor each client individually.”

The Sisters have made a powerful impact on both the program staff and the participants, but there is so much support that’s needed. The activities they lead often trigger memories, like the woman who began sharing during the apple tasting about her father’s farm in France. Having additional volunteers there to give personal attention to the stories that arise is vital. A meaningful connection is all about timing, and being present without offering solutions or questioning accuracy.

“What I value most about being here,” shares Sr. Pat, “is the opportunity to be a presence and learn from elders – be a part of a team providing life-giving experiences and opportunities for growth. This is a place of loving receptivity.” What stands out for Sr. Sharon re-enforces the belief that in true communities of healing, everyone gives and receives.

“We led a New Year’s reflection with the whole community on what we were grateful for in 2013, and two of the staff said the best thing about their year was finding Lambert House.”

I leave the center, wondering about the future of VOA’s intergenerational Seed-to-Table program, and how it might flourish with the Sisters’ experience and vision for starting seed sharing. My overwhelming sense is one of grounded lightness and gratitude, having been touched by the powerful, gentle presence Sr. Sharon and Pat share with our elders and everyone open to a joyful exchange. And perhaps a twinge of hunger for some heirloom beans!

Thank you, Srs Pat & Sharon, for sharing your sincerity, warmth, and commitment to organic reciprocity!

Nancy Loso, Volunteer Services Manager