

Sr. Mary Rose McGeady, head of Covenant House for 13 years, dies

Catholic News Service | Sep. 13, 2012

ALBANY, N.Y. -- Sr. Mary Rose McGeady, who took over Covenant House for homeless youth after its founder was accused of financial and sexual improprieties, died of respiratory failure in Albany Sept. 13 at the age of 84.

Arrangements for her funeral Mass in Albany and a memorial service in New York City were incomplete.

A member of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, McGeady served as president of Covenant House from 1990 until her retirement in 2003, doubling the number of homeless young people served by the international network annually.

Covenant House was at its lowest point when she took over, because of accusations against its founder, Franciscan Fr. Bruce Ritter, who later left the Franciscan order and died in 1999.

"Father Ritter had done a wonderful job of creating Covenant House, and then he was disgraced," she said in a 2004 interview with *The Evangelist*, Albany diocesan newspaper. "But the place was still there. (The work) he had started still needed to be done. I looked upon myself as a healer. I said, 'God, if you want this place to go on, you do it.'"

Then-New York Gov. Mario Cuomo said she was appointed, "We confidently predict that not many years from now, we will all look back at the moment of Covenant House's greatest pain and see that it was also a moment of birth of a new, stronger, even more effective instrument of goodness. I believe this will happen because of their superb new leader, Sister Mary Rose McGeady."

Kevin Ryan, the current head of Covenant House, who was among those present at her bedside when she died, called McGeady "the Mother Teresa of street children" and "a holy tornado of determination and compassion."

"She had a huge soft spot for kids, but she was no one's fool," Ryan said. "Come hell or high water, she was determined to clean up Covenant House. From ashes, really, she pulled Covenant House forward and saved hundreds of thousands of kids."

During her tenure, Covenant House expanded its reach dramatically, with new crisis shelters, street outreach and long-term residential programs for homeless youth in Canada, the United States and Nicaragua. Covenant House now reaches more than 57,000 children and youth in six countries each year.

Born June 28, 1928, in Hazelton, Pa., McGeady worked with children for more than 40 years before joining Covenant House.

Among the posts she held were executive director of the Nazareth Child Care Center for Homeless Children in Boston, executive director of the Astor Home for Children in Rhinebeck, N.Y., and associate director of Catholic Charities for the Diocese of Brooklyn.

She said in the 2004 interview that transitions were never easy for her.

"I would get word that I was transferred, and I cried my eyes out," she said. "I thought this was terrible. And yet, every time I was transferred, I would move into a new position where I learned more about what I was supposed to do and be."

McGeady said one of the "great blessings God has given me on this earth" was watching children "survive, prosper and grow."

"There is no greater joy than to see a kid come in homeless, cold, hungry, dirty and then that same kid a few weeks later -- cleaned up, smiling and hopeful," she said. "I believe that is what Covenant House is all about ... one child and one miracle at a time."

Ryan said McGeady "lived and died every day with the successes and failures of our kids ... and she saw God in the tired faces of the kids who walked through the open doors of Covenant House."

She is survived by her sister Catherine Pendleton and eight nephews.

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