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Sister who led Covenant House dies

by Tom Gallagher

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From *The New York Times*:

Sister Mary Rose McGeedy, the Roman Catholic nun who resuscitated Covenant House, the nation's largest network of shelters for homeless youngsters, in the wake of a sex abuse scandal involving its founder, died Thursday at her order's convent in Albany. She was 84.

The cause was respiratory failure, said Kevin M. Ryan, the current president of Covenant House.

"If there's a more important job in America today than taking care of our troubled young people, I'm certainly not aware of it," Sister Mary Rose said when she was chosen to lead Covenant House in 1990, after the resignation of the Rev. Bruce Ritter.

Father Ritter, who had founded the organization in two cold-water flats on the Lower East Side of Manhattan 22 years earlier, stepped down after several young men, some of them former residents of Covenant House, accused him of sexual abuse. He adamantly denied the accusations. An independent investigation commissioned by the organization found that although none of the sexual allegations could be proved, enough evidence existed, including evidence of financial irregularities, to warrant Father Ritter's dismissal. No criminal charges were brought against him.

By then, with donations nearing \$80 million a year, Covenant House was providing services to 28,000 homeless young people in 11 cities across the country and in Latin America. But within a year of Father Ritter's resignation, donations had fallen to \$42 million, forcing the reduction of services throughout the network. In New York City alone, an outreach center was closed and more than 100 beds in shelters were eliminated (including a floor for youths infected with the virus that causes AIDS), as were two of the three vans that took youngsters off the streets on frigid nights.

By the time Sister Mary Rose retired in 2003, donations had climbed to nearly \$130 million and new shelters had been opened in 11 cities, among them Oakland, Calif.; Anchorage; Vancouver, British Columbia; and Managua, Nicaragua. Under her direction, the organization's hot line (1-800-999-9999) became a 24-hour service. Covenant House now provides service in 26 cities and says it reaches over 50,000 youngsters a year.

Mr. Ryan, who called Sister Mary Rose "the Mother Teresa of street kids," said: "Come hell or high water, she was determined to clean up Covenant House. From ashes, really, she pulled Covenant House forward."

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