

# FRANCISCAN

VOLUME 1.2 • SUMMER 2011

# Spirit



## The Life of a Franciscan Sister

### Phases of the Journey

A PUBLICATION OF THE SISTERS OF ST. FRANCIS OF THE NEUMANN COMMUNITIES

# The Life of a

Sister Eileen Burns visits with Kevin Noyola and Catherine Keller, parishioners at St. Joseph of the Holy Family Parish.

The phases of the life journey of a Sister of St. Francis can be summed up in these three words: formation, ministry, prayer. Yet these are not three separate entities. Instead, all are fundamental in the life of a Sister of St. Francis.

When a woman begins her journey as a sister, the focus is on formation. Her time is spent learning what it means to be a Franciscan, developing a prayer life and understanding the vows. Although initial formation may be completed once a sister professes her perpetual vows, on-going formation continues throughout her life.

## Sister Eileen Burns: Bringing the Heart of God to the Heart of Harlem

*Ministry is an integral part of our life. Our ministry flows from prayer and our life together. By our Franciscan commitment to living the Gospel, we accept the invitation to give witness by our lives and our work, to the redemptive power and presence of God in this world.*

CONSTITUTIONS OF THE SISTERS OF ST. FRANCIS  
OF THE NEUMANN COMMUNITIES

# Franciscan Sister Phases of the Journey

As her journey continues, a sister combines her God-given gifts and talents with the knowledge acquired through education and her life in community. Through her life she ministers with and for God's people.

Prayer is central in a sister's life. Rooted in prayer, a sister has the foundation for her commitment to God, her sisters in community and her service in ministry. As a sister moves into retirement years, the opportunity for more prayer time increases, and as a result prayer becomes her ministry. Requests for prayers are abundant and the needs are great. Sisters in our "power-houses of prayer" continuously place these needs before our God.

Formation, ministry and prayer are all part of the life of a sister. The stories of Sisters Amy Williams, Eileen Burns and Bernice Eib, each in a different phase of her life journey, are examples of the more than 500 sisters who strive to be women of faith, women of hope, women of vision.

What is it that gets you out of bed in the morning? For Sister Eileen Burns "it's an opportunity to make the kingdom of God real." This is the essence of Sister Eileen's ministry at St. Joseph of the Holy Family Parish in the heart of New York City's Harlem neighborhood.

Her days, and even nights, are full. Yet she says, "I have so many blessings each day. I feel beloved by God and God's people."

Inspired by her fierce devotion to the poor, Sister Eileen embarked on a 32-year commitment to inner New York City. As pastoral associate, she says, "Evangelizing is a big part of my work." She does this in many ways by being a warm presence in the most challenging of circumstances. "She has brought a real Franciscan joy to her work at St. Joseph of the Holy Family," says Father Philip Kelly, pastor at St. Joseph of the Holy Family.

On any day, you may find her comforting a person dying of AIDS or wounded by a gunshot, helping the homeless who have been evicted, searching with others for alternative solutions to poverty and ministering to undocumented immigrants.

*continued on page 4*

Sister Eileen’s credibility comes from the fact that she has a deep love for God’s people. “It’s important to see Christ in every person,” she says with conviction. “It’s all about relationships.”

For Sister Eileen a typical day of ministry is anything but typical. During one recent day she received a phone call from a psychiatric social worker referring her to a parishioner who needed social services. She then gave a listening ear to a woman coming from a court hearing where she tried to get child support from her estranged husband. Next, a grandmother requested to have her granddaughter baptized. Later, an African man from Cameroon, who won his country’s lottery to come to America with his wife, sought Sister Eileen’s comforting presence as he faced serious surgery along with the struggle of being unable to care for his children who remained in Cameroon. Given such a day, Sister Eileen says, “It’s the Scripture that strengthens my faith and gives me the courage to continue.”

Across the street from the church is the General Grant House, a public housing project where 10,000 low-income families reside. Many residents know Sister Eileen and her welcoming smile. “I get my strength and courage from the stories of those I serve and serve with,” says Sister Eileen. “My problems are so small in comparison.”

Sister Eileen also directs the parish religious education program where she trains catechists, and does so with extremely limited materials. Recently, she received a grant from the

400 Mill Street Ministry Fund and was able to purchase a complete series of books for the kindergarten through eighth grade religious education classes. The 400 Mill Street Ministry Fund is money set aside from the transfer of sponsorship of Mount St. Mary’s Hospital and Long-term Care Facility in Niagara Falls, N.Y. The fund was established in the 1990s by the Sisters of St. Francis of the original Williamsville, N.Y. congregation for the support of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Neumann Communities’ ministries among the poor.

At times, Sister Eileen’s days can seem endless. “It’s a challenge to balance my commitment to the sisters and my ministry and being sure I have enough time to pray and to be with God and to regain my energy.”

Along with her ministry responsibilities, Sister Eileen is the congregation’s director of Franciscan Associates in the East Coast Region. “They (associates) are a great source of inspiration to me.” She is also completing studies from the Mastery Foundation School of Leadership, an international and interdenominational faith-based training forum for leaders.

With the strength of her faith and passion for her ministry she says, “I’m driven by Francis and Clare, their idealism, yet realism. I believe I can change the world.”



▲ Sister Eileen Burns participates in the parish’s first communion celebration.