

St. Agatha Yesteryear

A Brief History of St. Agatha Home

by Nancy Canfield

In January, 1884 five Sisters from St. Joseph Home in NY and four little homeless girls, set up housekeeping in the Little Flower House on the present site of St. Agatha Home. That summer, a small building was erected for a chapel, children's dining room and kitchen. Next, they built a school room, then a dormitory. One year later, there were 185 children residing at St. Agatha and four additional Sisters were added.

Five boys arrived from NY Foundling Hospital in 1889 with the new idea of keeping families at the same facility. St. Joseph's dorm became classrooms and dormitories for the boys. Before long, there were four hundred children in residence. In 1897, the Home celebrated it's first reunion of 75 girls who had left St. Agatha.

In 1898, ground was broken for the present day Administration building with a large chapel, a convent for the Sisters, and larger dining areas for the boys and girls. A boys dorm was built, a twin to the main building, just to the left of it, but it burned down in 1906, and was never replaced. The boys were sent to neighboring homes including St. Dominic's, in Blauvelt, and St. Agnes, in Sparkill. In 1917, a Preventorium was built behind the boys dorm, to house children whose parents had TB, so that they would not contract the disease.

In 1920, the first high school class began, and a vocational school was built up on the hill, where it later became the High School girls cottage. Girls were taught sewing, dressmaking, cooking, while boys learned carpentry, chair caning, and printing. The Hackensack River was diverted to provide a place to swim, and later, commonly called "The Brook." A boys dining room, or refectory, and an assembly hall which is still called "the band room", were built so that families could eat together. In 1923, the Preventorium moved up on the hill by the vocational school, and the vacated building became the boys school. Later it became St. Agnes cottage, for girls.

The population rose and fell according to conditions such as the Depression and WWI and II. With the shortage of Sisters, the high school closed in 1936, and the nearly 100 boys were transferred to a Sparkhill. Beginning in 1938, most of the eighth grade girls were transferred to a convent in NYC and attended neighborhood schools.

During World War II, from 1939 - 1945, Seminarians from St. Joseph's Seminary began to work with the boys. In 1947 they became counselors during the summer. In 1945, the girls went by bus to Pearl River High School. In 1946, an Alumnae Association was formed which still exists. In 1947, Reverend Terence J. Cooke was assigned as chaplain at St. Agatha, and brought many innovations. He went on to become the Archbishop of NY, and a Cardinal.

In 1955, Seton Hall was built for High School boys. St. Agatha received a director for it's expanding social services dept. Loyola and DePaul followed shortly thereafter, to house teens and pre-teens. In 1958, five new cottages were built to accommodate twelve children, each, with a group mother and a counselor, at the top of Duryea Lane. In the 1960's, Hayden Circle was built to house younger boys. The construction of these smaller cottages, in a group home atmosphere, was the fulfillment of a dream that began before the turn of the century, to move away from large scale institutional life, towards the Cottage Plan, and a more homelike atmosphere.

Throughout its existence, St. Agatha has had to evolve, grow, and adapt itself to the changing times. In 1977, St. Agatha merged with the NY Foundling Hospital in order to offer a wider range of services to both facilities. Today, St. Agatha continues to provide care in group homes dispersed throughout NYC, Nanuet, and the neighboring counties, including Westchester. Much of the original Home is still intact. Some buildings, mostly on the north side of Convent Road, have been demolished, and new, Senior Care housing has been built, to respond to the needs of this growing population. Some children who spent their youth on these very grounds, are now applying to spend their remaining years at the only real home some of them ever knew as children.

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St. Agatha Today

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ST. AGATHA HOME: A CARING COMMUNITY

Once a separate children's services agency in Nanuet, New York, St. Agatha Home merged with New York Foundling in 1977 so the resulting larger agency could better serve youth in the New York metropolitan area. Today, St. Agatha Home of the New York Foundling Hospital offers the following services to more than 500 children and developmentally disabled adults per year:

A Home for Youth with Special Needs

Abused or neglected youth whose behavioral, emotional, or developmental needs make a family environment inappropriate for them can receive the structure, care, and support they need at St. Agatha Home Residential Treatment Center.

A Diagnostic Residence for Children in Crisis

Finding the right environment for a child with severe behavioral or emotional problems can be challenging. St. Agatha's Diagnostic Residence works to resolve these situations through medical, psychiatric, psychological, social, and educational assessments, while providing a safe and welcoming temporary home.

Residential Services for Developmentally Disabled People

Adults whose developmental disabilities make full independence untenable find a supportive community environment in St. Agatha's special needs cottages.

A "Turning Point" for Runaway Youth

St. Agatha's Project Turning Point welcomes runaway and homeless teens, and works with them to find the best solution to their crisis. Social workers refer teens to community services and help them resolve conflicts with parents when possible. A six-bed shelter gives teens a safe temporary haven from the streets.

A Shelter for Teens in Need of Supervision

Rockland County adolescents awaiting court review for first arrests for minor offenses can benefit from a specialized St. Agatha group home that provides the necessary structure and supervision in a safe and homelike environment.

Conventional juvenile detention can expose impressionable young people to the destructive influence of more serious offenders. Our alternative intervention avoids this danger and provides an appropriate combination of counseling, supervision, and support. Most youngsters in this successful program take advantage of the opportunity to acknowledge their mistakes and resolve to avoid situations that would lead them back to court.

Children's & Family Services in Southeastern New York State

St. Agatha Home provides a variety of services to low-income families in Ulster County, as well as foster care for children in Rockland, Westchester, Orange, Dutchess, and Ulster Counties who cannot live with their parents.

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