

## *Celebrating 20 Years A Conversation with Sr. Patricia Wolf, RSM*



*Sr. Patricia Wolf, RSM*

In our 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary year, Marian Woods Executive Director, Sr. Aileen Donovan, and Development Coordinator, Carolyn Sedotti, met with Sr. Patricia Wolf, RSM, whose early vision led to the founding of Marian Woods, a collaborative effort among five religious communities to provide assisted and supported living for their elder Sisters.

In 1994, Sr. Patricia was serving as the President of the Sisters of Mercy, Regional Community of New York. Faced with the reality that the Mt. Mercy Motherhouse in Dobbs Ferry, New York was no longer suited to the varied and changing needs of the aging Sisters in residence, Sr. Patricia began the difficult process of searching for alternatives.

“We had to move our entire infirmary: those who needed supported living, those who required some assistance, those who were totally independent as well as our administrative offices. It was a difficult period.”

Marian Woods resident, Sr. Maureen Hally, RSM and Sr. Denise Wilke, RSM played significant roles in coordinating the moving of the Sisters during this time. Sisters requiring nursing care went to a number of local nursing homes, and the top floor at Sacred Heart in Yonkers was rented to house Sisters requiring less care. Still in need of administrative space, the Sisters were then invited by Bishop Sheridan to view the former home of the late Henry Gaisman, who willed the property to the Archdiocese of New York. The property was a good fit for the Sisters’ needs and soon after, they occupied the space, which they later named Coolock House.

The scenic stretch of land surrounding Coolock House, which was also owned by the Archdiocese, helped to inspire Sr. Patricia’s vision of a home that could someday benefit elder Mercy Sisters as well as women religious of other communities. “Inspired by the Holy Spirit, I saw this as an opportunity to fulfill a need of the Sisters of Mercy, but also to go beyond Mercy. Having the property would serve as a further opportunity.”

With a clear idea of what was needed for assisted and supported living within the Mercy community, Sr. Patricia wrote to 20 Congregations of women religious inviting them to a meeting to discuss the needs in their own communities. Through these conversations, similar interests and needs were revealed. After the group met initially, they were polled again to gauge their interest in continuing this process. forming the limited partnership that became Marian Woods, Inc.—the Franciscan Sisters of Peace, the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, the Sisters of St. Dominic, Blauvelt, the Society of the Holy Child Jesus and the Sisters of Mercy, New York Regional Community (now part of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas).

The Marian Woods Board of Directors was formed, and a grant was received from the National Religious Retirement Office (NRRO) to underwrite a feasibility study which identified immediate and long-term needs. The study also confirmed that communities did not have the resources to provide this level of care on their own, and a collaborative effort was the only practical way to accomplish this.

Purchasing the land from the Archdiocese of New York was the next step in the process, and on July 29, 1999, the Board of Directors acquired an 11.2-acre tract of land in Hartsdale, New York.



*An early photo of the Marian Woods main entrance on the NW corner of the property*



*Celebrating the Chapel Dedication Mass on October 21, 2001- The Most Rev. Robert A. Brucato, DD (l) and Rev. Senan Taylor, OFM Cap (r)*



*Leadership team members, Sr. Mary Pius Keane, OSS (l) with Marian Woods Resident, Sr. Maureen Hally, RSM (r) at the Chapel Dedication*

This land was part of the Gaisman Estate, where the Sisters of Mercy had established their convent and administrative space several years earlier.

A construction loan, guaranteed by the five congregations was obtained, and a capital campaign, chaired by author Mary Higgins Clark followed with over \$2.5 million in gifts received.

Marian Woods resident and Archivist, Sr. Ellen Marie Robarge, RSM was Sr. Patricia's secretary at the time, and she recalls the building of Marian Woods. "Each day I would look out of the windows of our offices in Coolock House to check the progress of the construction crews."

In the spirit of collaboration, committees of Sisters were formed with members from all of the five Congregations. They would make decisions on every aspect of life at Marian Woods. These committees included Finance, Property, Sacred Space, Naming and Environment. "There were so many who served on committees: Sisters Barbara Werner, OP; Helen Wacker, FSP; Justine Marcucci, FSP; Mary Pius Keane, OSS; Jeanne Ronzani, SHCJ, and Margaret Brackett, RSM," recalls Sr. Patricia.

Marian Woods Chapel, which was funded by the Ladies of Charity was conceived of carefully, and with much consideration of the Sisters' needs. "So many aspects of our religious life are supported by a sacred space. When our Motherhouse closed, we knew the feeling of being without a place where we could gather for important occasions. So, the decision was made early on that there would be a real chapel at Marian Woods that would be a place of worship, while being comfortable for the people in it."

To support this vision, a liturgical architect, who was also a priest was hired. Fr. Richard S. Vosko brought scripture, liturgy, theology and mythology into his design. The theme of creation was selected by the Sacred Space Committee. The five founding communities are honored by the etchings on the Chapel atrium windows.

The Naming Committee made the decision to adopt the name Marian Woods in honor of Mary, the Blessed Mother. The underlying spirituality of Marian Woods which is foundational, was stressed in everything, including an emphasis on nature. Five trees, planted on campus, represented the five founding Congregations.

The Marian Woods Prayer, which is said daily at Mass is reflective of the spirit of all the founding Congregations. This sense of unity at Marian Woods exists today and is deeply rooted in prayer life. "During the planning process, Sisters prayed the

Rosary each Wednesday, in each of the founding Congregations. Every community had a voice, and praying at the same time was such a unique and powerful event."

When asked how she kept on the path of establishing this home, Sr. Patricia says, "At each point of decision, there was always another affirmation, so I never questioned whether it was to be."



*Early Congregational Leader and current Board Chair of Marian Woods, Sr. Helen Wacker, FSP at the Chapel Dedication Mass*