

OUR FOUNDERS

Center for Women in Church and Society-Founded 1982 Women's Center--from a Cardboard Box to a House of Its Own

By the late Sr. Margaret Ellen Gallatin

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Portions of the original article appear here



Even if there were no sign designating the two-story house on the OLL University campus as the Center for Women, visitors would quickly conclude what goes on there. Attractively arranged posters about women's contributions to history, art, literature, drama, business..., brochures and flyers about the Center itself and coming events in both the Center and the city; magazines focusing on women's interests and concerns--all these are conspicuous in the foyer and living room.

A special asset is a fully equipped kitchen. In the beginning, the house, called Elliott House, was built to serve as a live-in laboratory for college girls who majored in home economics. The second floor now houses offices and a room of resource materials on women's issues.

Center for Women, first just a dream

The idea for the Center for Women was conceived a few years before it was officially established in 1982. Sr. Kathryn Keefe, who was on the OLLU faculty, relates those "humble beginnings." Around 1975 or 1976, she said, she and other interested people began to talk over coffee about how wonderful it would be for the University, first established as a women's college, to set up some kind of creative program that would focus on the influence and contributions of women, a program that would give women a better image of themselves. The Sisters of Divine Providence had always been committed to the education of women. What better place than OLL for a women's center!



The brainstorming was continued at meetings with key women in the city, including Maria Berriozabal, now on the city council. Enthusiasm was high, and interest began to grow; so did Sister Kathryn's "cardboard box," a file of women-related materials, the Center's first "resource file." Then in 1978 Sister Kathryn accepted a position in the El Paso diocese. She left her cardboard box with Dr. Al Griffith, Academic Dean, who was very interested in the Center.

Sister Maria Carolina Flores began at OLLU in 1978 and Sister Margit Nagy in 1979. Both were very interested in women's studies; Sister Margit, because of her study of Japanese history and Japanese women in particular; and Sister Maria Carolina, because of her interest in Hispanic women. Their interest, of course, extended to all women.

These two Sisters, after having assessed the need for women's studies and the possibility of networking with other group in order not to duplicate efforts being made, proposed to Dr. Griffith that a Center for Women be established at the University. It would be the only church-related program in the city for women. Dr. Griffith took the proposal to Sister Elizabeth Anne Sueltenfuss who was happy to support it; after all, one of the goals she set when she first became OLL president was to establish such a program. Dr. Griffith turned over the "cardboard box file." Sister Flores and Nagy organized the Center, which was housed in the Intercultural Studies program on the fourth floor of the Science Building until it moved to Elliott House in 1987. Its full title is Center for Women in Church and Society.

When Sister Margaret McManus joined the faculty at OLLU in the fall of 1984, she became Associate Director of the Center with Sister Maria Carolina. Sister Margit was spending that year in Japan doing more research on Japanese women. Sister Margaret brought another dimension to women's studies: feminist spirituality which she had focused on in her work for a master's in Systematic Theology at Berkeley's Franciscan School of Theology.

CDP's, OLLU begin co-sponsorship

In 1987, the Congregation of Divine Providence and OLLU began a collaborative sponsorship of the Center for Women. The Congregation would provide the director, and OLLU would provide space, a staff position, and an operating budget. Sister Jane Ann Slater was the General Council liaison to the Center. Sister Jane Shafer became the director and Irene Bosquez became the full-time program coordinator. Sister Maria Carolina continued as a volunteer in addition to her teaching duties. Sister Nagy was affiliated with the Center until 1987, when she became the Director of the Intercultural Studies Institute (the successor of the Intercultural Studies and Research Institute). She has continued since as a volunteer and informal advisor to the Center. Sister Wanda Holt worked as a volunteer. Sister Margaret McManus returned to Berkeley where she was director of the Center for Women and Religion at the Graduate Theological Union.



The Congregation's strong support of the Center grew out of a 1981 Chapter mandate (and reaffirmed at the 1987 chapter) "to promote and encourage the expanded participation of all people, especially of girls and women, in ecclesiastical and civic life." The goals of the Center mesh with the 1987 CDP Mission

Statement, with a strong focus on empowerment through education and an appreciation of what women have done.

Center puts emphasis on Hispanic Women

“OLLU is the only college or university in town that has a women’s center with full support,” Sister Jane said. OLLU is also one of the few places that educate a large number of Hispanics. Putting a great deal of emphasis on Hispanic Women is a deliberate decision. “This emphasis,” Sister Jane said, “is in keeping with our CDP goals of working with minorities. We are geographically located by choice- we started here and will stay here- on the West Side, which has a large Hispanic population. No other women’s program in San Antonio--nor anywhere else in the nation as far as we can determine--focuses so strongly on Hispanic women.”

Many events—films, lectures, prayer services, panel presentations, and co-sponsorship of special vents—are offered to the San Antonio community. In addition to programs, the Center also provides a place where women’s groups can meet to talk, to share ideas, to plan...Hispanic women have said “This is one place where we feel welcome and the Anglo women don’t feel they have to plan our agenda for us.” Some students like to study there.

Center achieves a higher profile

The programs, a place of its own, the dedication and commitment of its staff, and the continued support of both OLLU and the Sisters of Divine Providence have helped to bring about a higher profile for the Center for Women—it is becoming better known in the city. Women from other universities say, “You’re lucky to have something like that.” Or, “We’re told we can have the programs but we don’t have any space.”

The Center continues to work on ways of being more effective and hopes to “promote integration of research on women in program and curriculum development at OLLU and other civic and church related institution,” one of its goals. Sister Kathryn is happy about the fulfillment of those early dreams. “It is wonderful,” she said, “to see that early brainstorming and the work of others along the way have resulted in an established program for women.” From a cardboard box to a house of its own!