

Heart's Home

French missionaries bring compassion to residents of their Bronx neighborhood

By JULIANN DeMEO

Five young missionaries from France, all in their 20s and 30s, and two women religious call the rectory at St. Francis of Assisi parish in the Bronx home. They belong to Heart's Home, and their mission is to bring compassion to residents of the neighborhood most in need.

Heart's Home was founded in France in 1990 by Father Thierry de Roucy, the general superior of the Servants of Jesus and Mary, and approved by the Church as a private association of the faithful in 2000. It operates 30 houses in 20 nations. About 160 young people, most in their 20s and 30s, sacrifice a year or two of their life in service to the poor and needy. Some choose to remain longer.

The Bronx house, opened in 2003, is the only one in the United States. The volunteers include three lay consecrated individuals who have taken permanent vows of poverty, chastity and obedience; one man who has taken temporary vows; and a seminarian. Also volunteering are two sisters of the Servants of Jesus and Mary of Compiègne, France.

Together, they visit people in an AIDS residence, two nearby hospitals, a homeless shelter and two nursing homes, as well as neighbors in the area. Sister Blandine Paponaud, S.J.M., and Sister Regine Fohrer, S.J.M., also teach catechism to children on Sunday mornings. The overall mission of Heart's Home is to form friendships and bring compassion to those in the community.

Aude Rey, executive director, told CNY that the Bronx was chosen as a location for a Heart's Home community because, as Mother Teresa said, New York is a place in need of compassion. Heart's Home is a member of the Council of Ecclesial Movements and New Communities in the archdiocese.

"They're a great help in terms of their outreach to people in the community," said Father Michael Sepp, administrator of St. Francis of Assisi who is also pastor of Sacred Heart parish.

"They look after the sick and the people who are alienated and disenfranchised and those disconnected from family and friends," he said.



Gonzague Leroux, who arrived at Heart's Home in the Bronx six months ago, said, "We try to bring hope where there is no hope, love where there is no love, friendship where there is no friendship, with Christ within us and working through us."

Agnes Bureau, another volunteer, told CNY of her experience with an elderly deaf woman living in a nearby nursing home. Communication was difficult because the woman had to read her lips, but with patience, the two became friends. She said that in a visit in 2004 she mentioned the events of 9/11, only to find out that the woman had not yet heard of the tragedy as no one had explained it to her.

The volunteers may not be able to visit with everyone, but they form true friendships with those they can. Sister Blandine said, "We are interested in the person and want to enter into their life."

The volunteers work on their mission in the community each afternoon. Every day they pray morning and evening prayers. They also attend daily Mass and spend an hour in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. In addition, they pray the Rosary while walking the streets of the Bronx.

Leroux explained the importance of prayer for the volunteers and told CNY that when they visit those in need, they give their whole being to the person they are listening to. It is prayer, he said, that fills them back up. "Without (prayer), this spring, this source of love, we wouldn't be able to do anything," he said.

Ms. Rey said, "We work in very small ways, but sometimes it makes a big difference."

PRAYERFUL PRESENCE —

The young adult missionaries from France recite the Rosary as they walk the streets of the Bronx. From the left are Emmanuel Vienne, Severine Dubois, Alexandre Perry-Giraud, Sister Blandine Paponaud, S.J.M., Agnes Bureau and Gonzague Leroux.

Maria R. Bastone