

Beginnings

The story of Rossbrook House is one of radical amazement, deep suffering and exuberant hope.

In September 1970, Sister Gerry, my best friend, asked me to go for a cup of coffee at Robins Donuts. Such conversations have the power to shape and change history. The coffee must have been laced because when we left, we were higher than kites, envisioning ourselves returning to the Sisters of the Holy Names roots in the North End, where our congregation had first settled in the 1870's.

Three months later, we were living on Lorne Avenue in North Point Douglas in a tiny, dilapidated side-by-side. Our sole purpose was to live among the people, to stay awake and see what would unfold, what would be asked of us. The one thing that we were clear on was that we didn't want to add to the atrocities done to Indigenous peoples in the past. Our safeguard was the words of a respected Elder: *"If you have come here to help me then go home. But if you have come here because your future is tied up with mine, then let's work together."*

In 1974, we moved to 588 Ross Avenue. Every evening, teenagers who were expelled from school and had records a mile long flocked into our home. Listening to them we realized they had long ceased to dream, and were turning to alcohol, drugs and gangs for answers and solutions, respite and refuge. These youth became our leaders. They were adamant. What they wanted more than anything was to have a safe place to be during the evenings and on weekends.

One day Gerry came home at lunchtime from work and found a youth sleeping on the back porch. He had nowhere else to go. That afternoon she called Legal Aid and quit her job. She was determined to find a permanent space for the youth to hang out. Not long after, Gerry, myself, and the youth marched down to City Hall, clearly made our case and were given an old church building at the corner of Ross and Sherbrook which became Rossbrook House.

In 1982, Sister Gerry asked me to go for another cup of coffee. This time our conversation had a whole different energy. She revealed to me that she had cancer and that she had an estimated two years to live. Gerry didn't want to die but she admitted she felt a certain relief. For some time, she had realized that Rossbrook House needed a different kind of leadership if the youth were to rise, lead and take their legitimate place in the community. At the same time, she couldn't walk away. They would have felt abandoned and that she could not and would not do. Now the way was clear.

The following year in October 1983 Gerry received the Order of Canada at Rossbrook House. She refused to go to Ottawa for the ceremony because she felt that the medal rightly belonged to the youth. That day she addressed the crowd, **"Rossbrook House stands for just one thing, one thing only, "No child who does not want to be alone should ever have to be."** This statement, which has defined Rossbrook House for fifty years, has its roots in Sister Mac's own veins. She too, along with many of the youth, had experienced the visceral pain of being a child

and being left alone. Her own mother suffered with substance misuse and so she was very often left to fend for herself.

Four months later, Gerry died at the age of 45. The funeral was televised on the National news with Peter Mansbridge. The Rossbrook House youth were her proud pall bearers, and they looked so smart in their rented tuxedos. The procession had a police escort. Two officers stood at every red light, on the way to the cemetery saluting and honouring Sister Mac for who she was and for all that she had done in the inner city in such a short time. As one principal said, "She was the conscience of the inner city".

"Happy are those who dream dreams and who are willing to pay the price to make them come true." Dag Hammarskjold. Happy should we all be!

--Sister Lesley Sacouman, SNJM