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Sr. Sarah Byon and Sr. Jeanne-d’Arc-Marie of St. Bernard’s Residence. Click through this photo gallery for a tour of a convent like no other in the city.
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PEOPLE

What it’s like to be a nun in Toronto in 2014

They’ve got iPhones. Their house of worship has a salon and bowling alley. They’ll even welcome in Jewish residents. Meet the sisters of St. Bernard’s, Toronto’s coolest convent.

BY: KIM HUGHES

If you want a potent example of people truly married to the job, forget Bay Street bigwigs and take a look at Toronto’s contemporary urban nuns. Not only do they work at something that actually matters, they are unexpectedly cool. And they have a far greater impact on city life than you might suspect.

Witness a typical day at St. Bernard’s Residence.

Despite its placid façade, St. Bernard’s—which sits halfway between Bathurst and Dufferin on a ho-hum stretch of Finch Avenue West—is a beehive, functioning simultaneously as a convent, retirement residence, novitiate for nuns in training, cemetery and, appropriately for the GTA, a snapshot of harmonious multiculturalism.

Nuns drawn from Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Americas—some wearing traditional veils and habits, some not—work onsite and in the broader community. One sister is a high-school teacher. Another volunteers each week at York University reading scripture and praying with students.

Hanging with the convivial sisters at St. Bernard’s is a little like riding the TTC; overheard snippets of chit-chat reveal accents of every imaginable stripe. While many of the nuns are older, a handful of novitiates currently in residence are younger than average. Sr. Teresa Jose Manhica from Mozambique is 22; her South Korean cohort Sr. Sarah Maria Lee is 30-something.

Drive past St. Bernard’s—which you may well have done without knowing it—and you’ll think, “Meh... another vaguely commercial complex.” Walk around St. Bernard’s and you’ll think, “real-estate gold!” Appraise St. Bernard’s as a potential home for Grandma and you’ll think, “This is where she belongs.”

It's no coincidence that three female retiree residents are a century-plus and a male fourth hits 100 this spring. The care here is crazy-good. Yet the real story of St. Bernard's is the aforementioned personnel. The place is operated by the Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood, a small but global order of about 1,000 souls working with society's poorest and most marginalized in some spectacularly dodgy corners of the planet. And, as it turns out, in North York.



Sr. Ursula Mdadane

Founded in South Africa in 1885 by Abbot Francis Pfanner, an Austrian Trappist, the Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood—who are, as the name suggests, both nuns and missionaries—are fairly progressive for an order tied to Rome.

A brochure soliciting potential new members asks, “Are you a Roman Catholic with a sense of humour? Are you open to personal growth in faith and prayer? Do you have good physical and mental health? Is God calling you to be a Missionary Sister of the Precious Blood? Check us out on the web!”

This is not to suggest the sisters take their faith lightly. Rather, they just seem eager to connect it

with the wider world. Indeed, another brochure describes their primary task as “to evangelize among those people with whom the Church has not yet taken root or is not yet viable without being aided.”

And it’s not just about preaching. Over the years, sisters here and abroad have worked hands-on in everything from early childhood education to healthcare services to care for the elderly, AIDS patients, and the mentally and physically handicapped. The nuns who train at St. Bernard’s do so in part to improve their English and become “incultured” to the ascetic nun lifestyle, so as to better serve globally when they complete their vows.

Here in Toronto, the Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood are inextricably tied to the vast and immaculately landscaped property of St. Bernard’s, which is itself a sterling example of our city’s peculiar patchwork history.

Before the sisters purchased the 19-acre estate and its sprawling series of interconnected buildings for \$150,000 (plus \$27,000 for a mishmash of furnishings) in 1954, St. Bernard’s—then called Shadow Brooke Farm or Shadow Brooke Estate—already boasted multiple exciting histories.

It served as a residence to an English ex-pat and wildly entrepreneurial businessman (Frederic Nicholls, a running mate of Casa Loma founder Sir Henry Mill Pellatt), a summer home to a retired American stockbroker (the fabulously named Hamilton Bender Wills), and a rehab centre for alcoholics run by one Dr. Gordon Bell.

Pristine documents and photographs chronicling the site’s past are meticulously housed in an impenetrable fireproof vault onsite, which doubtless came in handy in October 1954 when Hurricane Hazel slammed the property.

Until 1999, St. Bernard’s ran as a government-funded short-term care facility, re-emerging in 2002 as the independently run, non-profit retirement residence it is today.

Check the crazy/amazing interior, which boasts a full-sized chapel (built in what was once a library), an industrial-sized kitchen, gargantuan baroque-looking furniture, a beauty salon for resident use, a single-lane bowling alley (!), and enough bedrooms, bathrooms, and living spaces to house 35 retiree residents, 15 to 20 nuns, and a bustling roster of visitors, support staff, and volunteers.

Add in a couple of budgies and more grandfather clocks, TVs, and stuffed toys than you can shake a rosary at, and St. Bernard’s emerges as the least institutional institution imaginable, drawing its distinctively homey feel from all of the above but, especially, from people like former nurse Sr. Mary Clare, whose smile is so disarmingly warm that it could melt polar ice.

Modern nuns may teach, lecture, fire off emails from Gmail accounts, rely on iPhones, and crack jokes, but one Hollywood-nurtured stereotype holds true: They are really, really sweet. And completely void of pretense.

“St. Bernard’s is our home as religious women—it’s where we gather to pray together, eat together, and share our lives and ministries,” offers Sr. Ursula Mdadane, a Zulu originally from South Africa who has lived at the convent since 2009 and describes her first glimpse of Toronto—with its casually intermingled black, yellow, and white faces—as “an awesome experience.”

“I really thought I was in heaven,” she smiles at the memory. Similarly, Sr. Ursula says, “St. Bernard’s is also a place that does not pay attention to colour or race or nationality. We are all children of one Father, and we speak a common language of love.”



Sr. Bernadette Stone, with dietary supervisor Sarah Haughton

The inclusionary aspect of St. Bernard's is the axis on which it spins. While faith is the engine driving the sisters, their work has measurable real-world bearing, most visible in the engaged-looking residents wandering around the facility and tossing tennis balls to resident pooch Danny Boy.

That the sisters have successfully operated a non-profit, non-government-funded, highly regulated, care-based business in Toronto since 2002 solely through donor support and resident fees (which are negotiable, by the way) demonstrates a savvy—though they claim divine providence—that cannot be underestimated.

The gently charismatic, Barrie, ON-born Sr. Bernadette Stone is a perfect example of why modern nuns are so dang admirable even though they reflexively deflect all praise.

As she guides a visitor through the convent's labyrinthine passages on a brisk March morning, reciting factoids like an encyclopedic tour guide while her smartphone chimes ceaselessly, Sr. Bernadette emanates ebullience and calm strength.

That's fitting for a 67-year-old who has beat cancer twice and served extensively in Africa, and who cites working with drug addicts in Kentucky as a career highlight.

As St. Bernard's chief administrator for the past two years, Sr. Bernadette—who followed her calling into the sisterhood at age 18—is the go-to when proverbial fires large and small need to be extinguished. You have a question about site logistics, electricians, resident needs, kitchen, or laundry schedules? She has the answer.

"I am not so much running this place as it is running me," Sr. Bernadette laughs over a communal lunch of homemade soup, sandwiches and coleslaw, served at noon sharp in a dining room that used to be a ballroom complete with bandstand. "But because I have been around the longest [off and on since 1965], I can fill in a lot of empty spaces.

"We rely on divine providence," she says of St. Bernard's approach to funding. "No one should be turned away. We trust that some of our benefactors will supply the missing dollars. And God has never failed us."

Neither God nor his Earthbound fans of the sisters' work. Take the son of much-loved former resident Hilda May Arshinoff, coincidentally a Jew who spent her last six months at St. Bernard's before requiring hospital care and passing away in 2012.

So impressed was Ms. Arshinoff's son with the care the Catholic nuns gave his mom that he made a large donation that launched the Tree of Hope, an outsized wall plaque in the otherwise modest lobby where families can commemorate loved ones by buying and engraving "stones" (\$5,000) and "leaves" (\$250).

Most St. Bernard's residents are Christian, and Mass happens daily, but the home takes all comers, providing they retain basic mobility.

Sr. Bernadette acknowledges that, to some degree, St. Bernard's is fighting a war of perception on two fronts: that retirement homes are invariably drab, sad places, and that the Catholic Church is out of touch with times.

Visiting the place, you see that the sisters are doing precisely what nuns are supposed to be doing: serving for the community with good-natured, selfless aplomb. And yes, humour. Plus, the sisters' unvarnished honesty is weirdly refreshing.

To wit: When I thank 78-year-old Sr. Annette Buschgerd—St. Bernard's resident historian who grew up in Germany during WWII—for telling me I look younger than my age, she replies flatly, "It is not a compliment. It is only the truth."

Well, touché. But seriously. How do lay persons react when Sr. Bernadette, sans traditional garb, tells them she's a nun? "People are inquisitive, or very glad to see you. In Africa, there is a certain amount of respect. In Kentucky, there was a certain amount of disrespect. People literally didn't know what a sister was.

"They could not believe I had never married, or didn't smoke! It took us a while to be accepted but, in the end, we had the best relationship.


"Nuns today tend to be a bit older when they join. They have had some life experience. When I was younger, the choices for women were more limited to teacher, or nurse. There weren't as many technical things that you could do. But [being a nun] was then and remains now a calling.

"You couldn't survive community life if it wasn't," Sr. Bernadette observes. "You need flexibility, an ability to go with the flow. For me, I felt that God just loved me so much and I wanted everyone to know that love. That's still my driving force."



TAGS *Catholicism, Religion, St. Bernard's Residence*

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Latest 

Shelley Wright

St. Bernard's, sounds like a truly remarkable place to live! I enjoyed reading this article immensely and it reminds me of the charming stories my mom, Jean Wright (Living in British Columbia) told me of her travels to Honduras with her favourite nuns, who looked much younger than their years and had a wonderful sense of humour, even in the face of adversity in troubled times and places. Through my mom, I have learned that nuns have a special gift of life and love. I hope that some day, when the time is right, my mom may also have the opportunity to live in such a caring community. God bless.

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3:53 pm on March 19, 2014

 Reply  Report

Kelly

Thank you for such a wonderful article that truly depicts life at St. Bernard's. My husband and I were looking for a retirement residence for my mother-in-law a few years ago. We looked at a few places that were unfortunately cold and clinical but when I walked into St. Bernard's, I knew in my heart that this was the place for her! It has been a couple of years, and my Mother-in-law couldn't be happier and neither can we....it gives us such peace of mind to know that she in a homey environment and is so loved and cared for by the staff and Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood at St. Bernard's. The Sisters truly are special people! God Bless!

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1:58 pm on March 18, 2014

 Reply  Report

Jonathan

I've visited St. Bernard's a couple of times last year through a work colleague and met the amazing people who work and stay there. Sis. Bernadette even invited me and some church friends to minister to the residents through some songs and music we rendered. I had my whole family involved too. It was an incredible experience and even more incredible to see the heart-warming service they provide there. When faith becomes evident in action it is truly a sight to behold! Thanks for taking the time to do this well-written article to such deserving people!

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11:50 am on March 18, 2014

 Reply  Report

Bernadette

Amazing article. It is a delight to read. Thanks Kim. May God Bless you and Toronto.

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7:40 pm on March 16, 2014

 Reply  Report

Monica

Informative and delightful article! So much interesting information in one read. What a picture you paint of faith alive in our city. Thank you Kim.

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10:18 pm on March 14, 2014

 Reply  Report

Neil

Great story Kim. Thanks for this inside look at the wonderful work of the St. Bernard's Convent community. They are truly strengthening our city! So much detail and tidbits about their lives.

A truly great read!

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11:31 am on March 14, 2014

 Reply  Report

Kate Hudson

I love it – have known these Sisters for years, and every word you say is true – may God continue to bless them, and I thank them for the inspiration they were to my dear husband (now in heaven) and myself – an experience I will never forget. They are truly a great blessing.

 10  0

8:37 pm on March 12, 2014

 Reply  Report

Sister Theresa Ann, cps

Love the pictures and the write up.

 3  0

2:15 am on March 13, 2014

 Report