The sisters' garden

IN BRENTWOOD, A MINISTRY OF LOVE FOR COMMUNITY AND THE EARTH E2

act2 | Quilters celebrate 40 years of beauty and warmth INSIDE
On a sunny June morning, birds dart in and out of meadows filled with wild bergamot, switch grass and mountain mint. Their song is joined by the buzz of bumblebees as butterflies flit among honeysuckle that release a sweet scent. Nearby, children and their parents pick plump strawberries, while shoppers select produce at the farmstand. Yards away, neighbors take free eggs gathered from dozens of resident chickens while four goats scamper on a wooden play structure.

The mission of the Sisters of St. Joseph is sustainability — and sharing. What could describe an idyllic setting on the East End is instead taking place on a sprawling 212-acre campus tucked into the hamlet of Brentwood, one of the most densely populated and developed communities in Suffolk County. It's the site of the Sisters of St. Joseph, a community of about 100 members that for much of its 127-year history lived in a secluded monastic-like enclosure where the ministries that took place were mostly unknown to the neighborhood. The current president, Sister Tesa Fitzgerald, said in recent years there's been a concerted effort to change that.

Today, there's a hum of activity on the campus, with 2,000 people working, visiting and living on the grounds. And everywhere there are natural pathways to invite visitors to walk the grounds, which are open daily to the community.

“We have a magnificent campus here,” said Fitzgerald, 77. “It’s important we network...
and don’t live in silos. One of our maxims is to be attentive to the dear neighbor. Well, the dear neighbor is outside these gates, so you have to invite people in.”

And the sisters have a lot to show them.

ACRES ON INNOVATION
Sister Karen Burke, coordinator of the order’s land initiatives, said the sisters want others to feel empowered to do what they have: create a sustainable model that in this case includes 28 acres of leased organic farms, eight acres of native meadow prairie, 45 acres of woodland, several honey-producing beehives, two alternative wastewater treatment systems, a four-acre ground-mounted solar array, and EV charging stations.

At the center is the motherhouse — the main office — home to many of the sisters and a few refugee families from Ukraine and Afghanistan. The campus also includes the sisters’ Sacred Heart Chapel, Eastern Suffolk BOCES, and the Maria Regina Residence 188-bed nursing home.

The campus also houses the CSJ Learning Connection for Adult Education Inc., which the sisters founded in 1998 with the Brentwood school district. It provides English language classes to over 260 women a year, with health care and domestic violence awareness support as well. In March 2022, the sisters helped found the Long Island Immigration Clinic to help asylum seekers. There’s also a separate refugee resettlement program that assists incarcerated women and mothers.

Wanda Ortiz-Rivera, assistant superintendent of secondary education and bilingual K-12 programs for the Brentwood school district, said the district of over 18,000 students has been partnering with the sisters for more than 25 years. “Their efforts in supporting our pre-K programs, adult ESL education and farm-to-table initiatives have transformed lives and empowered families that come from all parts of the world,” she said. “The refugee families they house come to our schools. They could do a lot of things with that beautiful space, but they want to provide to our institutions and organizations that are going to help the community.”

A retreat center in Hampton Bays, St. Joseph Villa, is also used for initiatives including a partnership with six Indigenous women from the Shinnecock Nation who are kelp farmers, plus a teaching garden and beehives to help people learn about honeybees, composting and soil propagation.

These ministries are part of the sisters’ history of supporting education, spirituality, health care and justice. A key focus since 2015 has also been environmental justice.

FORMER AUSTRAL HOTEL
The Sisters of St. Joseph originated in Le Puy-en-Velay, France, and when the order came to the United States, it started in the St. Louis area in 1836. Around 1856 the sisters were sent to Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and then expanded in 1860 to Flushing, Queens. In 1896, the mother superior, Mother Mary Louis, was looking for a place where the sisters could go for retreat, study and reflection. The Robert W. Pearse estate in Brentwood, which had become the 125-room Austral Hotel in 1888, was on the market. The sisters purchased the property and called it Brentwood in the Pines, after the area’s 350 acres of pine trees, which were touted for their healing effects.

Today the property, at 1725 Brentwood Rd., is designated
Children make their way to the Thera Farms fields to pick berries. The campus includes 28 acres leased to organic farmers.

The order’s Honey House is part of its Garden Ministry, through which the sisters teach community members to grow food.

In 1896, the Sisters of St. Joseph purchased the former Astral Hotel, which later became their motherhouse.

‘Leaders in conservation’

on the National Register of Historic Places. Currently, 65 sisters live in the motherhouse and about 35 reside in other buildings along Brentwood Road. The sisters range in age from 42 to a few centenarians.

All of their endeavors support their beliefs about inclusivity.

“We always talk about uniting all in God’s love. It’s about all different faith traditions, certainly people of different sexual orientation, ethnic groups, cultural groups. And that’s a big part of our message — nobody being excluded,” said Burke, 63. “We’re hoping that we can unite all people in love of God and neighbor and seeing nature as part of our neighbor, too.”

SHIFT IN 2015

She’s referencing the environmental ministry that has been a large focus of the sisters’ mission since 2015. Until the 1960s, there was an active farm on the grounds, but most of the land fell fallow. Burke said foundational work was in progress with the sisters’ Earth Matters committee to find ways to care for the property in an environmentally sustainable way.

What resulted was a land ethic statement — the sisters’ plan for their grounds — based on their charism, or spiritual gifts, and their awareness of their responsibility for the health of Earth and, in particular, for the Long Island bioregion. There are nine commitments, including to be well-informed in modern sciences that will enrich their beliefs and perspectives. They also agreed to research options such as land trusts, easements, deed restrictions and the transfer or selling of development rights in order to determine the best way to preserve their land.

But they realized in order to bring the statement to fruition they needed expert help. The sisters partnered with the nonprofit Peconic Land Trust, whose mission is to protect Long Island’s working farms and natural lands. They discussed their goals with Kimberly Quarly, director of conservation planning, and Dan Heston, director of agricultural programs, who quickly realized the sisters were planning to put a solar array — ground-mounted solar panels — on prime soil. The Trust helped them rethink the location of the panels, then developed a concept plan for setting up 3,192 solar panels, which now generate approximately 70% of the electricity for the campus. It also sited expansion for wastewater management and identified areas for preservation.

“The sisters were really interested in what’s the best use for their land,” said Quarly, 54. “When we first met with them they were just mowing many acres of lawn. We talked about getting into agricultural production so it could be productive and more sustainable.”

The Trust identified approximately 28 acres for farmland preservation and recommended selling development rights to Suffolk County under their Farmland Protection Program. However, Heston, 54, said they first had to prove they had farm leases, and that meant getting the land ready. They put in two wells, electricity and an irrigation system and prepped all the fields. Meanwhile, Teddy Bolkas, 47, who grew up on a family farm in Ronkonkoma, was looking for available land to lease in western Suffolk. He contacted the Trust and in August 2016 determined he could lease 20 acres. The other eight acres are leased by nonprofits like Island Harvest Food Bank and S.T.R.O.N.G. Youth, and small-scale farmers like The Red Fox Farms and Napolitano Family Farm.

Bolkas runs Thera Farms, where he accepts SNAP and WIC benefits and offers community-supported agriculture shares. In addition to vegeta-
other underutilized lawn area, they planted an eight-acre meadow of grasses and flowers that mimics the endangered Hempstead Plains. And the walls and privets that used to separate them from the community have been replaced with native shrubs like inkberry holly.

“The Sisters of St. Joseph are very cognizant that they will not be here forever and want to ensure a legacy. They’re trying to think of everything,” Quarry said. “We should recognize them for really being one of the leaders in conservation.”

But all of this work requires people on site who have a deep knowledge of daily maintenance. In December 2019, the sisters hired a land ecologist, Amanda Furcall. Since then, she’s been leading the efforts to do restoration, native gardening and organic farming. Furcall, 32, now the director of environmental sustainability, said the sisters’ work can be a model for other denominations.

“Aside from the government, religious institutions own the most land in this country. From a conservation perspective, the environmental movement needs religious organizations on board and understanding what the tools are for them to care for their land,” she said.

SHARING THE BOUNTY

Another aspect of the sisters’ work is sharing best practices with the community through their organic gardens. In 1987, Sister Mary Lou Buser, now 88, started a small organic patch to grow vegetables. She’d put a table out for the community to take what they wanted for free or a donation, which the sisters designated the “sharing table.” Then someone dropped off chickens. The gardens grew from there to include a chicken coop, goats and rabbits. Eventually, the sisters designated these gardens the “sharing table.”

In May, the sisters held a fun run on campus to build community and raise funds for their work. A Zumba event that day drew Lakilah Gregory, center, and her daughter Mackenzie Gregory of Dix Hills.

ENSURING A LEGACY

The Trust also helped the sisters to develop a master plan for the whole property in partnership with Rusty Schmidt, a landscape ecologist with Nelson, Pope & Voorhis, a Melville-based environmental planning company. Currently, the Trust is facilitating the preservation of approximately 43 acres of woodland with the state Department of Environmental Conservation. The Trust is also working to preserve an additional 35 acres of meadow habitat through a conservation easement donation.

Schmidt, 52, who said the sisters’ land ethic statement “is one of the best on Long Island,” has helped them implement a large rain garden that resolved flooding in a parking lot and plant a meadow of pollinator grasses and flowers under the solar array. In another garden, Buser says, there’s always going to be more to do.

In December 2019, the Trust is facilitating the restoration of Buser’s land ethic statement “is one of the best on Long Island,” has helped them implement a large rain garden that resolved flooding in a parking lot and plant a meadow of pollinator grasses and flowers under the solar array. In another garden, Buser says, there’s always going to be more to do.