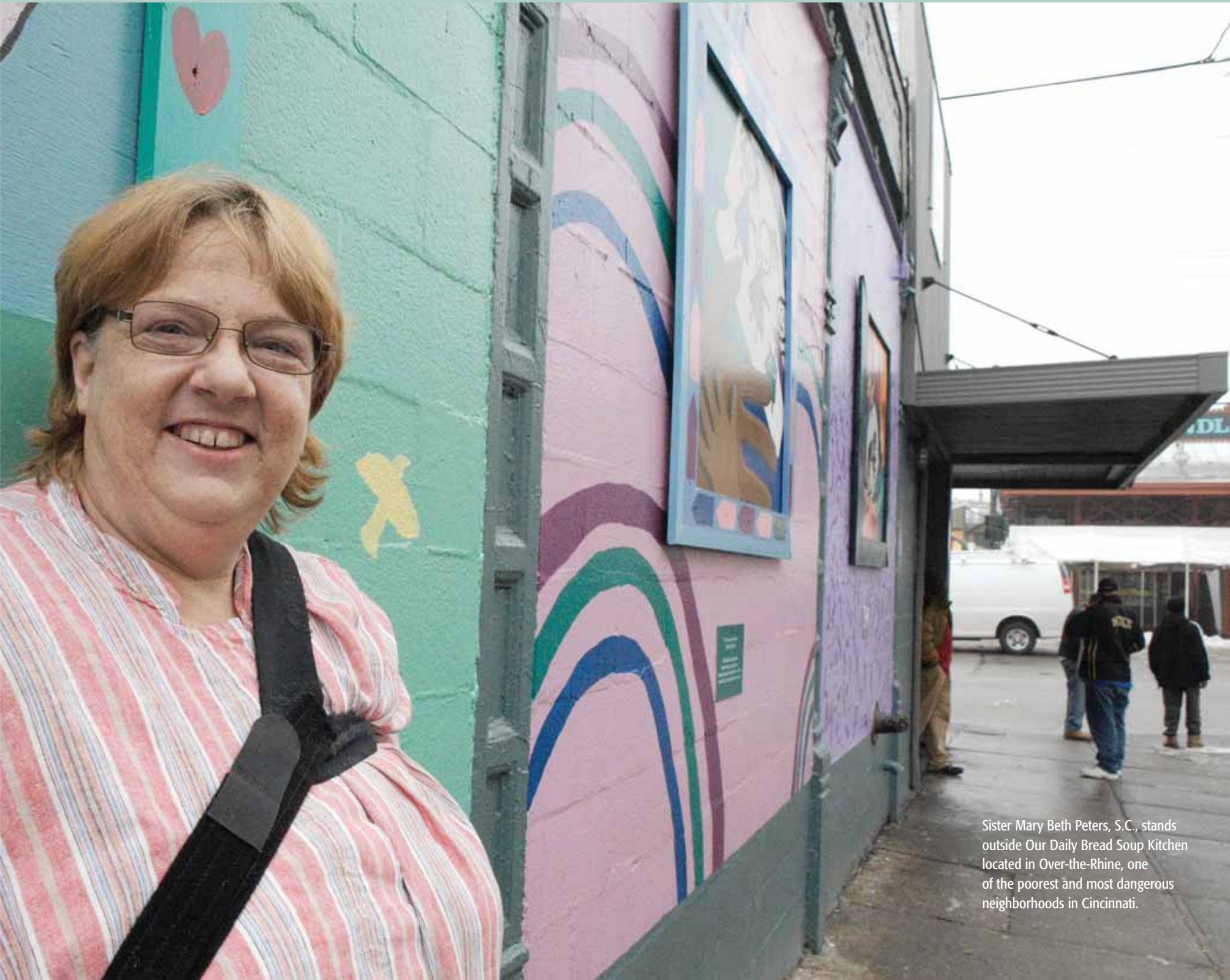


MARY BETH PETERS

A Heart for the Poor

Truckers around the country know her by her C.B. name, “Twisted Sister.” The poorest of Cincinnati know her as Sister Mary Beth. ■ BY CHRISTINE M. GROTE



Sister Mary Beth Peters, S.C., stands outside Our Daily Bread Soup Kitchen located in Over-the-Rhine, one of the poorest and most dangerous neighborhoods in Cincinnati.

SISTER MARY BETH PETERS, S.C., director of Our Daily Bread Soup Kitchen and Hospitality Shelter, emerges from her office, arms loaded with posters and pamphlets. She navigates around the people huddled at tables and works her way across the crowded room.

She stops at a table where a regular guest named Ted is talking to another man, leans over and says, “Don’t believe a word he says.”

Ted banters back a reply. They both laugh, and she turns and walks out the door on her way to speak to volunteers at a local high school.

When she’s not out doing advocacy work, Sister Mary Beth can be found in her office where the door is always open. She’s wearing faded blue jeans with a light knit shirt under a cardigan sweater and weathered clogs on her feet. Her light reddish-blond hair is cropped short. Freckles are sprinkled over her face and across her hands. Her light eyes are friendly and sincere.

“There’s a warmth about her,” says Barb Schneider, board member and volunteer at Our Daily Bread.

Kathy Ray, the kitchen manager, says that since Sister Mary Beth has come to Our Daily Bread, they’ve added a lot more programming for the guests, such as a legal-aid clinic and free manicures.

“She just adds so much energy,” Ray says. “The biggest part of her focus is to give more.”

Using Humor as Remedy

Sister Mary Bookser, S.C., who has known Sister Mary Beth since she first entered the Sisters of Charity in 1984, describes her as having “a heart for the poor and those in need.” Sister Mary

adds, “She’s got a great sense of humor and an infectious laugh.” Sister Mary Beth can laugh *with* people, explains Schneider.

Joseph, an employee at Our Daily Bread, is both mentally disabled and mentally ill. His speech is difficult and sometimes nearly impossible to understand.

Barb Schneider says that Sister Mary Beth always says to him, “Joseph, I finally understood what you’re saying.” Then they all laugh. “She’s always trying to bring out the best in people,” Schneider says.

Sister Mary Beth has been a social worker since her college years in the mid-1980s. After graduating from Cincinnati’s McAuley High School in 1978, she attended the now-closed Edgecliff College in her hometown. She earned a bachelor of arts in social work. She admits she was not a good student.

“If I did make it to class, I had my cigarette and coffee with me, or my Diet Coke,” she says. “I struggled as an undergrad. I had a very good time struggling. I was grateful I got out of there alive—barely.”

While at Edgecliff, she worked full-time at St. Joseph’s Orphanage, founded by the Sisters of Charity and now run by the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. The job required her to spend the nights there every other week.

Although the kids were “pretty damaged by the time they came to us,” she emphasizes that they were not bad kids. As a supervisor, Mary Beth frequently would not go to sleep until 2 or 3 a.m., rising only a few hours later. She kept a monitor in the room to wake her if kids had issues during the night.

“You always had to be on guard. The

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Sister Mary Beth devotes her life to aiding and advocating for the visitors of Our Daily Bread. She is a dear friend and confidant to many.

kids did so many bizarre things," she says.

Sister Mary Beth learned an important lesson at this "first gig" as a social worker: "Humor will get you through almost anything."

One of a Kind

While she made her first vows with the Sisters of Charity in 1986, and final vows in 1991, joining the religious community has not discouraged Sister Mary Beth's basic nature. She is outspoken, especially about justice and the poor. She finds humor in most situations and says what's on her mind, often using an expletive or two.

When she was a novice with the Sisters of Charity, occasionally someone would see her smoking a cigarette. They would gasp and ask, "You're a nun? What order?"

"Notre Dame," she'd say jokingly.

After working at several different jobs, including serving as an assistant director for St. Raphael's Social Ser-

vice Center in Hamilton, Ohio, Sister Mary Beth decided to return to school. She got her master's degree in social work from Northern Kentucky University (NKU) where she earned a 4.0, which was "a big improvement from the undergraduate grade," she says.

During this time, Sister Mary Beth did an internship with the Ohio Hunger Task Force in Columbus. She traveled all over Ohio and helped set up school lunch or breakfast programs. Because she was on the road so much, and because cell phones were not yet widely affordable, Sister Mary Beth had a citizens band (C.B.) radio in her car.

When truckers started talking about political issues, Sister Mary Beth often joined in. She took advantage of what could be called her "C.B. ministry" to educate the truckers about hunger. "They thought I was a nut," she says.

"What's your handle?" a trucker asked her one day.

"I don't have one," she said. "My

nephews always called me 'Twisted Sister,' after the '80s heavy metal band."

The name stuck and, as she was driving, she would hear the truckers hollering over the C.B., "Twisted Sister, are you out there?"

Triumph and Tragedy

After graduating from NKU, Sister Mary Beth wanted to work someplace small, where she would be able to interact one-on-one with people, as she had at St. Raphael's. She had two offers: a homeless shelter for adults in Columbus, Ohio, which was a big organization, or a shelter for homeless pregnant teenagers in Florida.

While she was trying to make a final decision, Sister Mary Beth went out for Chinese food one night, opened up her fortune cookie and read, "You are moving to a land of sunshine."

"There you go," she says. "That's called discernment via fortune cookie."

Sister Mary Beth took the job as housing director for the teen shelter in



PHOTO BY ERIN HEITSCH

Cocoa does more than fetch Sister Mary Beth's newspapers. She's also a working dog, accompanying her owner to area hospitals to spread cheer.

Florida, where she experienced one of her greatest successes and two of her greatest heartbreaks.

Her success story involved her work with a girl, Janie, who was struggling with whether to keep her baby. Janie ended up working with her Presbyterian minister to find adoptive parents whom she was allowed to pick out from a group. She agreed not to see the child unless the child wanted to see her after turning 18.

Janie wanted to have a ceremony when she gave the baby away, so the minister put a prayer service together. Janie wrote in a journal every day, got clothing, made blankets, recorded a tape and gave it all to the parents. In turn, the parents gave the baby the name "Jane" as her middle name.

"It was just so beautiful," Sister Mary Beth says. "Janie was such an inspiration and did it with grace and dignity."

Not every case, however, ended so well. Tragically, two girls Sister Mary Beth had cared for over several months at the shelter later died.

The first was a suicide. The young woman had been impregnated by her brother for the second time. She had given both babies up for adoption. Her own birthmother was dead, her father was never home because of his job and her stepmother was a zealot who condemned her and her brother. After the girl left the shelter, she had little to no support. She shot herself soon after.

"And that just killed me," Sister Mary Beth says.

Another girl, who had decided to keep her child, overdosed on the drug Ecstasy, 18 months after she left the program.

Needless to say, it was a very demanding job. "It turned into 24-7," Sister Mary Beth says.

Emotionally bruised and battered, she left there in 1999 and came back to Cincinnati, where she and her aging parents could support each other.

Staying Grounded

The next few years held a series of family crises and personal struggles. Sister

Mary Beth's father was diagnosed with cancer and died a few months later. After his death, she struggled with depression and eventually went to Pennsylvania on a sabbatical program through the Sisters of Charity. When Sister Mary Beth came back to Cincinnati, she taught first grade for a while.

"I don't know why I thought teaching first grade was going to be easier than social work," she says.

But tragedy struck again when a niece was killed in a car collision with a train in 2001. Sister Mary Beth was devastated by the loss. She felt incapable of doing the teaching job well and was uncomfortable, always questioning herself.

"I just broke down again," she says. So she went back to Pennsylvania for eight more months.

Healed and ready to go to work, Sister Mary Beth returned to Cincinnati. She and her dog, Cocoa, a border collie-terrier mix, moved into an apartment with Sister Dee Sizler, S.C., and her cat, Patches.

One Sunday after Mass at St. Joseph's Church in Cincinnati, Sister Dee spoke with Cookie Vogelpohl, founder and development director for Our Daily Bread, who told her they needed an executive director. The rest happened quickly and Sister Mary Beth was hired.

Vogelpohl says that you can teach a lot of things like bookkeeping or writing grants, but one thing you can't teach is respect and concern and love for the poor. With Sister Mary Beth, she says, "It was obvious that concern was there."

Sister Mary Beth thinks the job at Our Daily Bread is "a wonderful fit." The size is right and, even though she does a lot of paperwork, "There's an opportunity to go out and sit down and have a cup of coffee with one of the guys," she says. "The guests that come here, they keep you grounded."

If you go out and ask them how they are today, more often than not you'll get the response, "Blessed," she says. "And there they stand with their little bag full of everything they own on this earth."

This is how the people keep you grounded, Sister Mary Beth believes: One morning she was getting a cup of coffee at a gas station. They were out of creamer in the automatic dispenser so she found herself grumbling because she had to open the little creamer cups.

The guests of Our Daily Bread "would give their right arm for this problem," Sister Mary Beth says. "But they say they're blessed. It's sort of like a backhand from God giving me a little love tap on the cheek, saying 'Wake up!'"

Sister Mary Beth would like others to understand that the people they serve are individuals. Many of them are mentally ill.

"They are real people with real stories," she says. "They're walking a tightrope. For whatever reason, they landed on the wrong side of the fence."

Out There and Loving It

In addition to her work at Our Daily Bread, Sister Mary Beth volunteers at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center one night a week with Cocoa. They visit the psychiatric ward, where young patients walk Cocoa down the halls, do tricks with her and feed her

treats.

They also visit the rehab unit, where Sister Mary Beth lifts Cocoa up onto beds so the kids can pet her. "She's a working dog," Sister Mary Beth says. "She earns her keep."

And so does Sister Mary Beth. Although she's no longer driving the interstates of Ohio on a daily basis, this "Twisted Sister" is still out there. She's out there with her dog, Cocoa, cheering up suffering children. She's out there ministering to the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the mentally ill, the elderly and the fallen.

She's out there. And she's out there laughing. A

For more information on Our Daily Bread, please visit their Web site at www.ourdailybread.us.

Christine M. Grote has a degree in chemical engineering from the University of Dayton, as well as an English degree from the College of Mount St. Joseph in Cincinnati, Ohio. She is married with four children.