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O B I T U A R Y

**Sister Elizabeth Nickels, OP**

*(S. Therese Marie)*

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From 1958 until her retirement, Sister Betty Nickels served the Bushwick/Williamsburg community, attempting to “break the cycle” of poverty and of homelessness. As an elementary school teacher and principal in Bushwick/Williamsburg schools from 1958 through 1978, Sister Betty was keenly aware of so many youths “suffering in silence”. Working with and through the system, she creatively changed the lives of many, in spite of that system.

From 1978 to 1998, Sister Betty administered a long-term residential program for more than 450 homeless girls. She also directed a community resource center in the same building.

From youth and block association activities, to taking over an abandoned building from drug users, to the actual creation and administration of the residence and resource center, Sister Betty worked in grass roots service with the community. Sponsored by an active and involved community-based Board of Directors, the residence was a beautiful home, and the resource center was a beautiful oasis - models to be replicated. Living in the residence with the young women, Sister Betty facilitated all the needed services from cooking to cajoling, to admonishing, to educating,



“Blessed is the one who considers the poor!  
In the day of trouble the Lord delivers him.”

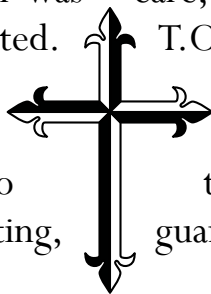
- *Psalm 41:1*

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and to supervising. All the while, she was developing the physical property and the programs. The “teacher” was always at work. The girls’ lives changed and stabilized, giving testimony to the philosophy that a permanent change in the life of just one girl has the long-term ramification of affecting 100 others in her lifetime. Having “broken the cycle” and having set herself on a success-oriented path, the young woman, her offspring, and their children should never be part of the “system”. The cost of 450 young women in this private residence over the years averaged one million dollars compared to eighty million in publicly funded programs.

Sister Betty believed that it should not hurt to be a child, that all things are possible for those willing to try, and that anything is possible with creative thinking when resources are lacking. More than anything, she believed that “God helps those who help themselves.”

Sister Betty’s organization, T.O.P.S. FOR YOU, has been a phenomenal center of activity for homeless services, for nursery care, and for licensed family daycare homes. T.O.P.S. stands for Time, Opportunity, Peace, and Service. There was no sign on the door, only the numbers “366”, yet the doorbell rang all day with parents and guardians who had questions about schools,



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teachers, health, and their children's futures. There were also those who needed help with public assistance, housing, abusive situations, or adolescent teen issues. The topics varied as often as the doorbell rang; the expectation was always the same – "Sister Betty will be able to help." The response was always the same: "Should we not have the solution, we'll find someone in Bushwick who does."

Sister Betty's experience and expertise have served many collaboratives in the Bushwick community in assessing, instigating, assisting, facilitating, and evaluating the needs of the community and possible responses. Such efforts were evidenced in the Bushwick Resource Coalition, the Adolescent Services Advisory Council, the North Brooklyn Coalition, the Bushwick Child Care Network, and many committees. Through concerted efforts of these collaboratives, the lives of Bushwick families were positively impacted.

Loving enough to create for, and to demand from, is a difficult thing to do. Not only were the T.O.P.S. programs created for youth and for the community, but also they were created by and with the Bushwick community.

Sister Betty felt gratitude to her Dominican sisters who introduced her to North Brooklyn and whose inspiration provided incentive.

She is survived by her two sisters, two brothers, many nieces, nephews, and foster children. She is grateful to her family for absorbing "her kids" into their families.

The wake and funeral for our Sister Betty will take place in St. Albert Chapel on Thursday, February 29, 2024. Visitation will be at 9:45 AM with a Prayer Service at 10:15 AM followed by the Mass of Christian Burial and Interment in St. Dominic Cemetery on the Motherhouse grounds.

To hear Sister Betty Nickels describe her ministry, click [here](#).

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