

Sister Kathleen, a visionary, to step down as leader of Dominican Literacy Center



Sister Kathleen Ryan, who soon will step down as director of the Dominican Literacy Center in Aurora, stands next to tutor Kathy Geraci as she helps one of the nearly 160 immigrant women the program is serving. Denise Crosby/Beacon-News

It's interesting to note how many successful visionaries began their ventures in garages or basements: Martha Stewart. Jeff Bezos. Bill Gates. Steve Jobs. Walt Disney. Under Armour's Kevin Plank. Sister Kathleen Ryan.

While that last name might not be as well known as the millionaires and billionaires on the short list, if you are measuring success in lives that have been impacted, this beloved Aurora nun, who started the Dominican Literacy Center in the basement of an Aurora Catholic church over three decades ago, deserves her place in history.

And when she steps down as the nonprofit's executive director on June 30, Ryan does so knowing "things are going well."

Financially, the center has "been able to pay its bills, add some improvements to the building and still have some savings," she told me earlier this week, also noting a strong staff, experienced tutors and an up-to-date curriculum everyone seems to enjoy.

"All I have to do is clean out my files," Ryan said with a smile. "The timing is a God thing ... I am ready for someone else to take the lead."

Which means the search is now on for that special person who can fill the shoes of this 77-year-old visionary, who, after watching a Charles Kuralt show in 1993 about a women's literacy center in Bridgeport, Connecticut, that was started by the Sisters of Mercy, decided this was the mission she wanted to pursue.

While she "loved what I saw," instead of targeting women as a whole, however, Ryan wanted to focus on an even more vulnerable population — immigrant women. And so, after confirming with local church leaders, teachers and social workers just how great the need was in Aurora, Ryan spent long hours researching potential donors before sending out about 50 letters to those she thought might be interested.

Three responded — The Conrad Hilton Fund for Sisters, Central Province of the Priests and Brothers and The Raskob Foundation — providing a total of \$20,000 in seed money that helped open the Dominican Literacy Center in the fall 1993 with a card table and two chairs in the basement of St. Nicholas Church in Aurora.

Ryan actually started that first class a whole year earlier than planned after St. Nick secretary Bertha Manzo, who was connecting her with the Hispanic community, announced four women were at the church ready to learn, and who was Sister Ryan to turn them away?

Very quickly her day program added night sessions, thanks to a handful of fellow Dominican sisters who stepped in to help, along with Cathy Snow who became the center's first lay volunteer. A year later, when the program moved from the church basement to its present building, the old convent next to St.

Teresa on Vermont Street in Aurora, there were 18 women on a waiting list and a community of people who “stepped up right away” to help paint the building, do repairs and find furniture, recalled Ryan.

Since then the center, which now includes a staff of four, has served over 3,000 students with the help of 800 volunteers.

There are 140 tutors working with 157 students. And while those numbers are not yet as high as they were before COVID, “we are getting there,” said Ryan, noting the need for more volunteers to keep up with the growing demand of an immigrant population in Aurora now including people from all parts of the world.

“What keeps me coming back are the students,” said Kathy Geraci, a five-year volunteer from Naperville, who insists she learns as much from the immigrant women as they do from her. “(Sister Ryan) has modeled for us not just compassion but strength and courage to keep going even when we get frustrated.”

What makes this program so unique — in October it received one of the Library of Congress’ prestigious Literacy Awards — is that students do not just learn how to read, write and speak the English language, they form strong bonds with their individual tutors that “help them know how to be in the United States, how to be a mother, a worker, a single person or single parent,” Ryan said. “How to navigate the schools, government and the health care system.”

As an example, she refers to a current student, a young single mother of three who was just diagnosed with lymphoma.

“I would have a hard time figuring things out as an American citizen. Imagine what she is dealing with,” said Ryan, vowing “we will do all we can to help her.”

As much as “we are a learning community,” she added, “we also foster a sense of community that helps and supports each other ... to see each woman as the person she is.”

And who will Ryan be after turning over the reins of her nationally recognized program?

One thing she won’t be, the 77-year-old Dominican sister assured me, is a retiree. After taking a year-long sabbatical, which will include a 10-day retreat in Tucson, Arizona, and “finally learning how to become fluent in Spanish,” she will “see where the journey takes me.”

Alison Brzezinski, who has been the center's volunteer coordinator for 10 years, is of course going to miss Ryan. "But she deserves this," she said of the leader's decision to step down.

"In her 30 years Sister Kathleen has made this a phenomenal place" because of "her love for the immigrant population," insisted Brzezinski. "She has given so much more than the English language ... she saw the need for friendship, support ... she saw all of it."

Geraci agreed, noting that even though a new leader will likely bring in his or her own ideas, the mission will remain constant.

And that brings Ryan peace of heart.

"When I see these groups go in and out every day, I think, oh, my gosh, where would I be without them, the students and tutors," said Ryan, then quickly adding she has never felt deep anxiety over the future of the center, including who will take over in June.

"This is a faith-driven place ... we are in good hands. God's hands," she declared. "I know we will find someone who will come forward. They always do." dcrosby @tribpub.com