

Mount Carmel Bluffs Senior Living Community



BVM phase one of Mount Carmel Bluffs . Contributed photo.

by *Connie Cherba*

One hundred of Dubuque's Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVM) are on the move – into phase one of Mount Carmel Bluffs, a brand new living facility recently completed on the historic BVM campus overlooking the Mississippi River at the southern end of South Grandview Ave.

The sisters' new, 162,000 square-foot facility marks the completion of the first phase of Mount Carmel Bluffs Senior Living Community. The extensive \$90 million project is a shared mission between Dubuque's BVM Sisters and Presbyterian Homes & Services (PHS), a nonprofit, faith-based organization headquartered in St. Paul, MN, and dedicated to providing housing choices, care, and service options for older adults.

The partnership between the BVM sisters and PHS dates back to a meeting in 2015 initiated as a response to the changing demographics of both the BVM population and the number of seniors living in the local community. Currently, 128 BVM sisters live at Mount Carmel, a number that has decreased over the years while the number of seniors in the Dubuque area's general population has increased. As Mount Carmel viewed the changing numbers, they decided to partner with PHS in an effort to create a complex designed to serve both the BVM community and older adults from the community at large.

"Looking down the road a bit we

knew we were going to need help providing health care for our retired sisters," said Sister Teri Hadro, President of the Sisters of Charity, BVM. "Our mission for a large number of years was education – elementary, secondary, and Clarke University was ours at one time. We're not specialists in health care, so we knew we had to make arrangements. We also knew that we needed to start thinking about this property here at Mount Carmel and its future. Knowing that we were going to be providing health care on site, it made sense to look at providers of residential health care in the Midwest to see if we could work something out with them."

The BVM sisters considered fifteen organizations before narrowing the field to three for interviews. None of the finalists were Catholic groups. "We did talk with some Catholic groups," said Sister Teri. "They weren't in the financial position to do any expan-



*Sister Teri Hadro, BVM.
Contributed photo.*

sion at that moment. In the end, we were very impressed with their [PHS's] mission-based way of operating. They have more than 45 campuses for senior living in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa, and they really are focused on the person and the well being of their residents. They value and lift up freedom and that translates into having multiple choices. Freedom is one of the BVM core values. We define it as becoming the best person that you can possibly be, having the freedom to become that person. So our missions kind of aligned as well."

The recently completed phase one living facility constructed to the south of the 1892 Motherhouse cost almost \$40 million. The new facility will primarily house the sisters currently living on the BVM campus, offering 40 enriched living apartments, 21 memory care apartments, and 60 long term care center suites. "We have skilled nursing, memory care, and a section we are calling enriched living," explained Sister Teri. "Iowa has recently created a category called RCF – Residential Care Facility. It's assisted living, but the rules are a little more relaxed so that people can age in place longer than they could in an assisted living facility. The basis for daily life for Catholic sisters is strongly rooted in community, and the RCF will enable us to live in community groups longer."

Designed to complement the historic features of the nineteenth century Motherhouse, the new construction features a combination of modern



Mary Ellen Zimmermann, BVM is the first resident welcomed to Mount Carmel Bluffs. Her moving companion, Mary Ann Zollmann, BVM. Contributed photo.

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amenities along with architectural designs that include turrets and larger windows. While the efforts to match the historic features of the BVM complex are much appreciated, perhaps one of the most appealing amenities of the facility is the amazing view of the Mississippi River which flows in the valley at the bottom of the BVM bluffs.

Moving-in day for the sisters was filled with both anxiety and joy. "Change is hard, and there was some anxiety, and that was particularly true because everyone's been so isolated because of COVID protocols," said Sister Teri. "The sisters didn't even have a chance to get over and see where they were going to be moving before they actually were moved over. Once the sisters got to their new rooms, we heard a lot of really deep appreciation for the view from their window. We have one sister who was so delighted in her room that she said, 'I feel like I'm living in the Taj Mahal.' There's not a bad view from any one of the rooms."

Additional phases of the extensive multi-million dollar project include the construction of 115 senior independent living apartments to the north of the Motherhouse. Plans call for Marian Hall and the Caritas Center to be deconstructed to make room for the new apartments which are expected to be completed for 2023. Deconstruction is more environmentally friendly than demolition and involves recycling building materials. The process is more labor intensive and takes more time, but it does prevent large amounts of debris from going into the landfill.

"The apartments will impact Dubuque in two ways," said Sister Teri. "Mount Carmel has pretty much been exclusively for our sisters. This



Lou Anglin, BVM gives a mini-tour to sisters before they move into Mount Carmel Bluffs senior living community. Photo contributed by BVMs.

will open a facility on the southeast end of town. There are no retirement facilities on this end of town so this will be something new for this area. The second thing is Presbyterian Homes & Services decidedly wants to relate to the Dubuque community. At some of their other sites, they worked with government officials and business groups to determine what the municipality might need." At one PHS site they set up a program similar to meals on wheels. "It may not be meals," Sister Teri said. "It might be some other aspect to fill a need in the community. We don't just want to be the nice retirement facility on the hill. We want to be part of the community."

The final phase of the project will be the renovation of the Motherhouse. "The Motherhouse will function as 'Town Central' of Mount Carmel Bluffs," explained Sister Teri. "It will serve both the care center to the south and the future independent apartments to the north." A cafe and dining

room will open soon. Future plans call for a library, BVM heritage rooms, an atrium, lap pool, and a fitness center. Other amenities may include a sundries shop, barbershop, and "whatever the community decides it needs."

The Roberta Kuhn Center will also continue to be part of the Mount Carmel campus. "About 600 people have participated in the two semesters every year," said Sister Teri. "The intention is to open these facilities, not just Roberta Kuhn, to the public through some kind of membership system."

"Our sisters will be the majority of the residents of Mount Carmel Bluffs for probably the better part of the next decade," said Sister Teri. "Dubuque is pretty much a Catholic town still. So probably there will be a major Catholic influence for quite some time yet. But Mount Carmel Bluffs will be open to persons of all faiths and no faith. We invite everybody to consider Mount Carmel Bluffs as their potential home."