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## Mary of mercy

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It's a Friday night video shoot at the storied Kaufman Astoria Studios in Queens, and cavernous Soundstage E is rockin'.

Inside a tunnel of billowing white silk and flashing blue lights, Jon Bon Jovi lets loose on "Superman Tonight," the Jersey boy's paean to everyday heroes.

Off to the side, Bon Jovi's longtime lead guitarist, Richie Sambora, watches on a monitor with two extras from Philadelphia. Back in the day, he tells the women, shoots like this were an excuse for blow-your-mind bacchanalia. "It was a lot more fun then," he laments.

"But Richie, think of how far you've come," one offers cheerily. "It's Friday night and here you are, hanging out with a nun."

Sambora answers Sister Mary Scullion with a howl.

When he went looking for real-life heroes for his latest music video, Bon Jovi recruited a fireman, a soldier, a doctor, a couple who quit their jobs to teach troubled youths, a man who gave his kidney to a stranger, and a teen who cut off her hair for a cancer patient.

He also summoned two women he calls "my Batman and Robin," with whom he has walked some of Philadelphia's saddest streets. In the five years they've been his friends, he has given them more than \$1 million.

And now a shot at MTV.

On this December evening, Sister Mary and Joan Dawson McConnon have shown up in black sweatshirts with the logo of Project HOME, the nonprofit they founded. For their seconds-long star turn, they hold a small blackboard, reading, "We dedicate our lives to the homeless."

And Bon Jovi sings:

*Who's going to save you*

*When the stars fall from your sky?*

*And who's going to pull you in*

*When the tide gets too high?*

### **Sister of the streets**

There was a time when Sister Mary Scullion had to shout so Philadelphia's homeless could be heard.

In 1978, at age 25, she began working at a Center City women's shelter run by her order, the Sisters of Mercy, every night taking food, blankets, and an offer of lodging to those living on the streets.

She was a smile, a kind face, and, before long, a loud voice - a persistent gadfly in a plaid skirt, loafers, a Peppermint Patty haircut, and a mantle of moral outrage, racking up arrests through the 1990s for leading homeless demonstrators into City Council chambers, setting up protest encampments at 30th Street Station, and haranguing Mayor Ed Rendell outside his office for a week.

"Sister Mary Scullion is Philadelphia's Joan of Arc," he later wisecracked, "because so many people want to burn her at the stake."

That was many decibels ago.

Today, Washington policymakers, big-city mayors, and governors (yes, Rendell) seek her counsel. Philanthropists write seven-figure checks, and celebrities fete her. Little wonder that when Time magazine put out its 2009 list of the 100 most influential people on Earth, the 56-year-old sister was in the company of Obama and Oprah.

"There are people in the world who you draw energy from, like a lightbulb in a room," said Shaun Donovan, secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. "She's one of them."

Sister Mary is hardly the only selfless steward of the streets, but hers is the work Donovan looks to for affirmation. In June, he expects to roll out the first national plan to end homelessness, and increase HUD funding 10 percent, or \$190 million, to just over \$2 billion for 2011.

"This is a good investment. It saves money and helps human beings," Donovan said. He has seen the proof in Philadelphia, in the deeds of Sister Mary, more "than anywhere else in the country."

Donovan has known her about a year, an introduction made by Bon Jovi. The do-good rocker took her on a train to Washington, where the HUD secretary was so struck by the irrepressible sister that he came to North Philadelphia in November to see some of Project HOME's biggest successes.

Trailing an entourage including Mayor Nutter, Sen. Arlen Specter, and Rep. Chaka Fattah, Donovan toured four buildings that house and educate people rescued from shelters and streets - a \$20 million investment, and only a fraction of Project HOME's efforts.

When Sister Mary and Joan McConnon started the nonprofit 21 years ago, they had nothing but their own rock-solid resolve and a volcanic mountain of NIMBY animosity. Now they have an annual budget of about \$13 million (more than half from private supporters), a staff of 200, and 459 filled housing units.

They also have certitude, the muscle in Sister Mary's words: "We know what works."

So here's what Washington ought to be doing, she in essence told Donovan. There is enormous expense, and no solution, in "managing" homelessness for the short term, in providing shelters, emergency services, and other temporary aid. HUD must look beyond the fiscal year, underwrite affordable-housing and job-training projects, and speed up a government funding process so fragmented and ponderous that "it's like waiting for Godot," she said.

The politicians in tow urged Donovan to listen up. "Mr. Secretary, you're never going to get rid of her," Fattah said, not totally in jest. "Use her as an example for other cities."

But Sister Mary, a distance runner, had beaten him there.

"There are so many cities across the country where her presence has been felt, directly or indirectly," said Rob Hess, who heads homeless services in New York City and held a similar post in Philadelphia four years ago.

In the week before Donovan's visit, Sister Mary was in Houston and Columbus, Ohio, talking to city officials about "supportive housing" that provides not only a roof but day-to-day guidance for fragile lives. In a few days, she'd receive British visitors curious about her nonprofit's workings.

In between, she had a sit-down with staff about teen programs at Project HOME's \$9 million education center. There was a strategy session on raising \$4 million for operations and capital projects, and a meeting with her 30 trustees, among whom are the formerly homeless and the fabulously wealthy, with such last names as Honickman (soft-drink bottling) and Middleton (cigars, Phillies).

"Mary can chat with queens, she can chat with a janitor, and they both get the same person," said trustee Lynne Honickman, whose family has given several million dollars.

During the last dozen years, Sister Mary has become legendary for her ability to bend the will not only of people with wads of money, but also those with political currency.

Her moxie began paying off in 1998 when the City of Philadelphia funded long-term housing for the homeless for the first time, to the tune of \$6 million. Within three years, the Center City street population dived from more than 800 to fewer than 200.

Many ups and downs later, it stands about 250, with an additional 2,500 men, women, and children in shelters.

"It took us a while to get to where we are with homelessness, and it's going to take a sustained, longtime effort" to conquer it, Sister Mary said. "You can't wave a magic wand and everyone recovers today."

But that campaign, necessarily waged in the aeries of government and private philanthropy, has had a price.

The woman who used to storm the streets nightly now gets out only twice a month. Twice a month, some friends lament, to do what she does best - calming the addled soul who's barefoot in January, convincing the drunken man huddled in a stairwell that she can help.

That's the Sister Mary whom Stephen Gold met in 1983. An advocacy lawyer, he had sued Gov. Richard Thornburgh for tightening public-assistance rules in the state. Who better to testify about homelessness than Sister Mary, who "knew everyone on the streets"?

Gold asked her to wear her habit on the stand, for obvious effect. "She told me, 'I don't have any idea where it is,' " he recalled. "She couldn't find it."

But it takes more than broken-in jeans and T-shirts to connect on the streets. Her ability to move through the same plane as the forsaken is "her amazing strength, which cannot be replicated," Gold said. "My only criticism of her is that she doesn't go out on the street every night."

Only a month ago, the civic weight on her shoulders increased. Nutter named her to the Board of Ethics, a time-consuming job in which she, three lawyers, and a pastor are to keep city politicians honest.

Sister Mary is not a curious choice, according to Dennis Culhane, a University of Pennsylvania professor and expert on homelessness. "I don't think anyone in this town," he said, "has the moral authority that she has."

Which is not to imply she's perfect, "not by a long shot," Gold said. "Mary is not sweet, because she's driven. If she believes in something, she will do absolutely everything to fight to get it."

On occasion, he mentioned, she curses.

God knows, when need be.

### **Classroom without walls**

Roman Catholic nuns take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Sisters of Mercy have a fourth: to care for the poor, sick, and uneducated.

That mission goes back to Catherine McAuley of Dublin, who founded the order in 1831 after using her inheritance to shelter homeless women and girls.

McAuley was a bridge to redemptive acts, leading those who had the wherewithal to help into the world of those who needed help. Hers is the model Sister Mary emulates.

She lives among once-homeless families, in a one-bedroom apartment in a Project HOME building in North Philadelphia. Her furnishings are Ikea. One of her neighbors was a crack addict.

"I've been doing this work for more than 30 years, and I've been radically changed," she said. People who have nothing "have taught me so much about life and grace, about faith and compassion."

Truth is, she had a head start.

Mary Kathryn Scullion grew up near Oxford Circle in Northeast Philadelphia, the elder of two daughters of Irish immigrants.

Her mother, Sheila, juggled two jobs. She was a waitress at the Irishman's Cafe and a nurse's aide at Friends Hospital, a psychiatric center.

"People would often say that when my mother was on duty, people didn't need to take their meds," Sister Mary recalled. "She had such a good way with people."

Her father, Joseph, was a Council clerk with "a great capacity for believing in us as kids and telling us we could do anything."

Mary was a popular, happy child, and no worry to her parents. She went to St. Martin of Tours parish school and Little Flower Catholic High School for Girls. She was not athletic, preferring math. She held a seat on the student council, tutored parochial students in North Philadelphia, and volunteered at John F. Kennedy Hospital.

She counted the nuns at school as friends and, in her senior year, told her parents that she wished to enter the convent. Wait, they urged. But at 19, after a year as a math major at Temple University, she joined the Sisters of Mercy.

As a novice, she finished her degree at St. Joseph's College, then taught seventh-grade math for two years. But the classroom couldn't hold her.

In 1978, she went to work for Mercy Hospice, a women's shelter that the Sisters opened above the Ugly Pub at 12th and Sansom Streets.

She spent every night among the lost women of Center City. Most were older and mentally ill, fending for themselves as state hospitals were downsized and ultimately closed. Sister Mary knew each by name.

Being with them "was the most profound experience I ever had of God," she said. "There's no pretense. It's true. It's real. Maybe in times of great suffering, it's easier to connect with people. . . . Maybe I'm more aware of God's grace in that situation."

Before long, Sister Mary went to her superiors with a request. The order required its members to make a one-week retreat each year, but she did not want to sit in the motherhouse.

She wanted to spend it on the streets.

The older nuns knew enough to step aside. "Whatever she's learned," said Sister Kathleen Schneider, 84, her supervisor at the hospice, "she's learned from the people, from being with them."

For seven nights, Sister Mary slept wherever she could - on a park bench near Penn's Landing, in a doorway by a Wendy's. With other homeless women, she passed the days at the Free Library or Reading Terminal Market, places with public restrooms.

"It was the hardest thing I ever did," she said of the constant moving, the search for food, a bathroom, a surface to rest her head. Tired, dirty, hungry, she returned "sick as a dog, really depleted."

But what she gained was a sense of urgency and a pained understanding of the indignity of homelessness.

Think of the man reeking of urine, slumped on a bench in Suburban Station. To Sister Mary, he was a test of faith.

*When I was hungry, did you feed me? When I was sick, did you care for me?*

She wanted the answer always to be yes, by never bearing witness to suffering without doing everything she could to stop it.

"I care deeply about people," she said.

That is her greatest strength, and her greatest weakness, she allowed. "It doesn't let you rest."

### **A kindred spirit**

Sister Mary had been working with the homeless for a decade when those she met on her nightly rounds asked if she knew the other young woman doing the same.

Like her, Joan McConnon was impatient with the city's inaction. "I just couldn't fathom people sleeping in doorways or lying on grates," McConnon said. "I couldn't tolerate it. People were dying."

At night, McConnon went around Center City and 30th Street Station, offering sandwiches and help. By day, when not in class as a graduate business student at Drexel University, she volunteered in the Mercy Hospice kitchen.

"I'd come in and complain about the system," she said.

One day, Sister Mary poked her head in the kitchen to introduce herself. They've been working together ever since.

The two persuaded the city to let them run a temporary winter shelter for 50 men at the Marian Anderson Recreation Center in South Philadelphia. Operating on small grants and donations, they went out every night in a borrowed van, picked men off the streets, and took them to the rec center, where cots were set up in a locker room.

In the winter of 1989, the women had visitors, Emily Riley and Josephine Mandeville, the adult daughters of philanthropist and industrialist John Connelly.

"The Sisters of Mercy told us, 'There's a wonderful young nun who's working with the poor and homeless. But she's a little unorthodox,' " Riley recalled.

She and Mandeville were impressed with the makeshift shelter. They left behind a gift box of Stutz chocolates - and a check for \$100,000.

Sister Mary and McConnon used it as seed money for Project HOME, short for Housing, Opportunities for Employment, Medical Care, and Education.

Today, they are its yin and yang.

McConnon, 50, is married to a seventh-grade teacher, Mark McConnon; has three children; lives in Delaware County; and spends weekends as a soccer-swimming-baseball mom.

An accountant who wrote her master's thesis on low-income housing tax credits, she's the one who lines up the money to bring Project HOME ideas to life, constructing Rube Goldberg-style financing strategies out of tax credits, government housing grants, and private gifts.

When Project HOME needs a face, McConnon willingly yields the floor to her more charismatic friend, but "without Joan's back-of-the-shop leadership," said Lynne Honickman, "I don't know if there would be a Project HOME as we know it today."

From the get-go, Sister Mary and McConnon faced resistance.

They wanted to create permanent housing - apartments, single rooms in communal settings, group residences - in Center City and environs. But time and again, they came up against neighbors loath to have street people, especially those with mental illnesses and addictions, living next door.

The biggest showdown began in 1990 when they borrowed \$50,000 from the Sisters of Mercy to renovate a casket factory into a residence for homeless women at 1515 Fairmount Ave., in a gentrifying neighborhood.

The community had enough halfway houses and shelters, the neighbors argued. Mayor Rendell sided with them. The city withheld permits. Project HOME sued in federal court, and won.

Rendell ignored the decision. Dumb move.

In April 1994, Sister Mary led 100 demonstrators - wearing placards with the names of homeless people who had died on the streets - in a weeklong siege of chanting, singing, and praying outside Rendell's City Hall office. Two dozen were hauled away, the nun among them.

The city appealed the federal ruling. Again, Project HOME won. Rendell had to hand over the permits.

"I loved that," Sister Mary admitted not long ago.

That battle was decisive, said Gold, the lawyer who argued the case. By publicly taking on Rendell, Sister Mary put the city on notice that Project HOME was "ready to be good neighbors," Gold said, "but we're going to be here whether you like it or not."

He added: "This is a politician. If Mary wants something, she's going to get it."

Up-and-coming neighborhoods weren't the only places to yank in the welcome mat.

In 1992, Sister Mary and McConnon needed space for a men's residence and set their sights on a vacant convent at St. Elizabeth's Church at 23d and Berks in North Philadelphia. A fire had damaged the church; the rectory and parish school were open, but not for long.

Already battling drugs, crime, and blight in the area, neighbors objected.

Helen Brown, who cleaned houses in Society Hill, had lived across from the rectory on 23d Street since the 1960s. To Sister Mary she said: "Are you crazy? You bring your man-shelter here and then you leave, leaving us with more problems."

So Sister Mary invited Brown to go for a ride. They visited three Project HOME residences. Three times she took her out for ice cream.

Yes, some of the men would be recovering alcoholics, Sister Mary admitted. Yes, some would have mental problems.

But to begin getting better, they needed to come in from the streets.

They needed homes.

To prove her commitment, Sister Mary moved with another Project HOME staffer into the shuttered convent, with no heat, a leaky roof, and boarded-up windows.

The neighbors began to believe, to "see her as a woman of her word," said Brown, now 69 and a community organizer for Project HOME.

Within a year, the convent was reinvented as the St. Elizabeth men's residence for 24 recovering alcoholics and addicts, half of them veterans. They live in private rooms, share meals, and work with staff on their recoveries.

The rectory has been converted into Project HOME offices and a free health clinic for neighbors. The footprint of the church, razed in 1995, is a lush lawn with flowers, shrubs, and a big gazebo.

A block away is the \$9 million Honickman Learning Center and Comcast Technology Labs, substantially funded by the family whose name is on it and by the Roberts cable clan. Six years old, it houses a nondenominational school run by Germantown Academy for 60 neighborhood children in kindergarten through fourth grade, as well as after-school and adult classes.

Next door, Project HOME has built the Rowan Homes, twin brick apartment buildings for 39 homeless families.

St. Elizabeth's neighborhood greets Sister Mary as if she were a small-town mayor. In the brush of her hello on a sunny day, you feel she's genuinely happy to see you.

"Hi, Shirley!"

Shirley works for a residence for formerly homeless women on Judson Street.

"Hey, Sebastian!"

Sebastian sits on the step of a big house on nearby Diamond Street, a communal residence for once-homeless men in recovery.

"How you doin', Ron!"

Ron used to be homeless but now works two jobs: as a driver for Manna, a food-delivery service for ill shut-ins, and a support staffer for Project HOME. He just bought a renovated brick house on 23d Street for \$70,000, a price kept low by federal and state grants and a Bon Jovi donation.

Now when Project HOME launches an effort, there are no protests from neighbors, no mayoral face-offs. More likely, there are strawberries, and laudatory speeches by important people.

At the latest groundbreaking in July, the berries were chocolate-covered, compliments of the five-star Loews Hotel. The VIPs were Bon Jovi and Cardinal Justin Rigali. The locale was Center City, the heart of homelessness.

Project HOME and another nonprofit, the Bethesda Project, raised \$23 million from public grants, private equity, and donations to build a 79-unit apartment house behind St. John the Evangelist Church on 13th Street near Market. Five years in the financing and expected to open in December, it will be home to men and women with mental illness or addictions and past lives on the streets.

Next up: a wellness center in North Philadelphia and 165 new units of permanent housing with supportive services.

"It's been an extraordinary year," Sister Mary said, adding, on second thought: "But I've had many extraordinary years."

### **When Mary met Jon**

One of them was 2005.

After five years of telling, the story of how Jon met Mary is popular lore.

Bon Jovi, at the time co-owner of the Philadelphia Soul indoor football team, can remember the winter night:

From his suite at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, he saw a man sleeping on cardboard by City Hall - an image so disturbing that he asked a Philadelphia friend to find him someone not "jaded or corrupted" who could "shine the brightest light on this issue."

His friend took him to 23d and Berks.

It was late in the day when they arrived in a black SUV, without entourage, at Project HOME's hub of operations.

Sister Mary walked Bon Jovi down a stretch of 23d Street pocked with derelict rowhouses. She and McConnon were trying to raise private and public money to convert them to affordable housing.

"How much would it cost?" the rocker asked.

"Thirty-five thousand dollars," Sister Mary answered, quoting the amount of private funding they needed to cover the \$250,000 cost of renovating one house.

"No," he interrupted. "How much would it cost to do the whole block?"

In a breath she replied, "I've been waiting for someone like you."

Bon Jovi donated \$450,000 - the private funding required for 15 houses.

The renovations were finished in the fall of 2006. On the eve of the unveiling, Bon Jovi got a glimpse of the raw will of Sister Mary.

They were meeting with a gaggle of New York publicists and TV producers trying to sell Bon Jovi on a reality show about him, Sister Mary, and another group he supported, Habitat for Humanity.

At Bon Jovi's invitation, former President Bill Clinton would appear at the dedication ceremony for the renovated houses. The group was scripting who would do what.

Sister Mary was liking less and less what she was hearing. Why were the Project HOME residents getting short shrift? Why was McConnon being left off the podium?

Finally she slammed her hand down. "That's not going to happen."

Discussion over.

"My eyes went wide," Bon Jovi told the crowd at Project HOME's 20th anniversary gala in September. "I pulled my hands in for fear of her smacking them with a ruler."

That moment was on Bon Jovi's mind when he wrote of "the one who curses and spits" in his single "We Weren't Born to Follow."

"Every athlete and rebel coach I've ever encountered thinks that line is about them," he said. "It's about Mary."

### **The heroic homeless**

If you want to test Sister Mary's patience, ask about her blossoming celebrity.

About trips on private jets to hobnob with Arnold Schwarzenegger and Michelle Obama. About chatting with Prince Charles, spending a day with Colin Powell, and staying over at Lily Tomlin's.

"Part of the celebrity culture is not healthy," Sister Mary said. "The person who is on the street, who gains the courage to make choices and keeps going - that's my hero."

So the John she talks about has an h in his first name.

John Zaharchuk is 62, alcoholic, and an unabashed flirt with the gift of gab.

She has known him for decades. And for decades she has tried to persuade him to leave the streets for sobriety.

"They found me dead," he tells her. Emphasis on *dead*.

She is visiting him in his room at St. Elizabeth's recovery residence for homeless men. The former convent was upgraded in 2008, thanks in part to a quarter-million-dollar donation from Bon Jovi.

"I was standing in front of Roman Catholic High School, looking at the school, when I fell down and hit my head," Zaharchuk says. "They revived me and took me over to Pennsylvania Hospital. I was there for three weeks."

He rests in an armchair in a tiny third-floor room. Sister Mary sits on the edge of his cot, looking straight at him.

"It's a new day, John."

She doesn't lecture. She doesn't scold.

Zaharchuk had made four attempts at sobriety. Sister Mary thinks nothing of giving him a fifth chance.

"I've been here more times than anyone," he says, laughing.

"You have to make choices that are good for your health," she reminds him.

Sister Mary promises to return in a week. "There's a potluck at Project HOME on Saturday," she says.

"And bingo? I like that. It's fun," he says. "And if I don't have fun, I get loaded."

"That's the addiction, John. It's just trouble. It's just trouble."

For now, he is happy. He sits in the company of a nun who talks of bingo and potluck, living in a room paid for by a rock star, in a community that to him means home.

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