

‘Widow talk’ has its own language

I recently interviewed Linda Andrews, a Maine woman who just published a book on grieving titled “Please Bring Soup to Comfort Me While I Grieve.” It’s a wonderful and totally honest look at spousal loss and grieving.

She and I talked for nearly two hours. Some of what we discussed was on the record for a story I wrote for Bangor Daily News on her book, and some was just widow to widow.

The more compelling part for me was the widow-to-widow sharing. We spoke in a language unique to widowhood. I marveled at how much we shared regarding our “widow” feelings, yet how differently we have dealt with them. She has been widowed for four and a half years; I have been widowed for five.

Even today, we both feel insecure and lack self-confidence and have a difficult time with family gatherings or anything in which we would have been part of a group of couples if our husbands hadn’t died. We also both marveled how every action we undertake is a big deal and takes on a life of its own, how we hardly dream anymore when we sleep, how we don’t recognize ourselves when we look in a mirror, how we have felt raw and broken and how widowhood has given us a new level of sensitivity to the world.

We share many other things, too.

We both chose to stay in the old farmhouses we had shared with our husbands, who both were named Jim. I gutted the living room and redid it to more of a den atmosphere. She is overhauling her bedroom. But we both needed to make something that carried our own stamp; a place we could go and give a sigh of relief from the memories and painful jabs bombarding us all of the time.

Neither of us has a solid plan for the future. I was going to retire or semi-retire at age 55 so that Jim and I could have some years together with a more casual schedule. Linda and her Jim had a plan too. But now neither Linda nor I have any idea what our retirement or post-retirement plans are.

We both feel driven to work because it’s the one thing we do that feels “normal.”

She is an educator and a registered nurse. I am an editor and writer. We were those things before our husbands died. We stayed those things when they

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JULIE HARRIS



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The Mandala Farm in Orland.

A larger mission

Ousted from her order, ‘Sister Lucy’ found a way to support Mainers in need

BY MEG HASKELL
BDN STAFF

ORLAND — The H.O.M.E. craft cooperative and shelter community has occupied its prominent hilltop campus just north of Bucksport on Route 1 since it was founded in 1970. It’s easy to drive right past without stopping, despite the battered letterboard sign at the corner of Schoolhouse Road inviting a visit to the craft shop, open from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., seven days per week, all year.

But the H.O.M.E. campus — the apt acronym stands for the more proletariat Homeworkers Organized for More Employment — is way more than a crafts outlet; it’s more like a medieval village.

The 23-acre site includes crafting workshops for leather, pottery, weaving, stained glass, quilting and woodworking, to be sure. There also is short-term shelter housing for about 15 indigent men, women and families and low-cost permanent housing for a few older adults who have nowhere else to live because of mild developmental disabilities or other conditions. There’s a busy sawmill and shingle mill, an auto repair shop, a bustling soup kitchen, a food pantry, a licensed day care center and an administrative office.

Together, the campus employs a total of about 40 workers, some from outside the H.O.M.E. village and some from within, including shelter clients. There’s a small chapel, too, where nondenominational services are held each Sun-



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Lucy Poulin founded the H.O.M.E. co-op in Orland in 1970.

day and where Alcoholics Anonymous holds a regular Monday meeting.

“Basically, there are three reasons people come to us,” said Lucy Poulin, the former Carmelite nun who founded the grassroots organization 46 years ago and, at 75, still serves as its director. “They need a place to live, they want to make the world a better place, or they want to take the Gospels seriously.”

For Poulin — still fondly called “Sister Lucy” by those who have known her longest — taking the Gospels seriously includes honoring the literal intention of the Second Commandment.

“If you truly love your neighbor as yourself,” she said, “you don’t put them in a shelter at night and throw them out on the street in the morning. Everything you have, you want for them as well.”

For her, that means providing not only a bed and meal, but a community with relationships, responsibilities, meaningful work, security and a future.

“Social isolation crushes people,” Poulin said. “Community makes them whole.”

A hands-on ministry

Poulin grew up poor on a farm in Fairfield Center, one of 11 children raised by her widowed mother. Taking on many of the chores and projects of farm life from a young age, she developed a strong work ethic and a deep sense of each person’s contributions to the family’s well-being.

At 26, she joined a small community of Carmelite sisters based in New Hampshire. A few years later, eager to return to her home state, she was reassigned to a Carmelite community in Bucksport and found herself working closely with local families struggling to make ends meet.

In 1970, Poulin established the H.O.M.E. crafts cooperative as a way for local women to market quilts, knitwear and other handcrafted items, purchasing the 23-acre hilltop site for its visibility and the presence of the simple building that would become the crafts store. Almost immediately, she recognized a larger mission to serve the poor of the area with housing, food, medical care and a material sense of community. It would take years for H.O.M.E. to

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Starting the caregiving conversation with family

BY MEG HASKELL
BDN STAFF

It’s not easy caring for an aging parent in your home. Often, it’s just as difficult to be that aging parent, knowing that no matter how real the love is between you, your adult child is shouldering a burden in tending to your advancing needs. It is often a recipe for frustration, resentment and miscommunication on both sides, made worse when families put off conversation and planning until a crisis hits.

“People think, ‘Oh, this is something I don’t have to think about until I’m in my 70s or 80s,’” said Dyan Walsh, director of community and caregiver services at Eastern Area Agency on Aging in Bangor. “But families really need to be starting this conversation sooner.”

Mainers in the Bangor area can kick off that essential conversation on Sunday, April 10, with a free screening of the short documentary “Nine to Ninety” followed by a guided discussion. The half-hour film captures the true story of Joe and Phyllis Sabatini, an el-



COURTESY OF NINE TO NINETY

derly couple in California living with one of their adult daughters, her husband and a 9-year-old granddaughter. When 90-year-old Joe Sabatini’s health takes a turn for the worse, the family must decide how to best meet everyone’s needs. The solution they hit upon is both unsettling and powerful, according to film director Alicia Dwyer of Los Angeles.

“It is a difficult decision they reach,” Dwyer said. “But on the flip side, it shows the power of clear communication, and there is something very inspiring about that.” Dwyer said she undertook the project after

her colleague and friend, film producer Juli Vizza, disclosed the caregiving drama unfolding in her own family. With a record of making small, powerful independent documentaries, Dwyer found funding and decided to shoot the film.

“At first, we assumed the main characters would be Juli’s mother and her aunt,” she said, referring to the two grown sisters located on opposite sides of the country trying to do what’s best for their aging parents. “But within days, her grandparents emerged as the real core of the story.”

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Embracing technology can make us happier

My iPhone sounded off the other morning while I was lingering over the Bangor Daily News, which I still enjoy in print, and a second cup of coffee. It was a new ringtone — a hollow, “doodly” sound I hadn’t heard before. I picked up the phone and saw a photograph of my younger son, Luke, who was contacting me from Singapore, where he has been on assignment for the past week or so.

He wasn’t exactly calling, though; he was using the smartphone application WhatsApp, which connected his phone to mine via the Internet and allowed us to carry on as easy a conversation as if he were sitting across the kitchen table from me. I had downloaded this new app the week before, knowing he would be out of telephone contact during his travels in Asia and that an Internet-based service was the only way I would be able to talk with him. The fact that I understand this distinction, however vaguely, astounds me.

There is nothing like writing about technology to make me feel like a codger, which I really am not. I use basic tools such as the Internet, social media and my cellphone all day long for work and my personal life, which I recognize is not the case for all baby boomers and certainly not for our parents’ generation. But I will admit to a certain, lingering “gee whiz” response to learning about new ways to use these tools, and a degree of enchantment at how they help me keep up with my adult sons and other important people in my life.

I didn’t warm up much to digital technology in the early days, although I recognized its importance enough to take a basic course in programming when I was in nursing school in 1983. Ten years later, I opened an email account through the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, a small commuter campus where I was working toward a bachelor’s degree in English.

I remember summoning the Internet for the first time on a clattery computer keyboard in the university library. By that time, I had begun to use public computers to compose papers for my classes. It was a great advantage to be able to cut and paste and save my work to a floppy disk, although I still missed the snappy little Royal portable electric typewriter that had been my trusty companion since high school.

But I had never dialed up the Internet, that mysterious new man-made force poised, for better or worse, to take over the world. There, in the library’s computer cluster, I watched as the blinking cursor paused and the screen went dark. Then, suddenly, I was connected to my email account. By design, there was a message waiting from my friend Becky, who worked at a college in Maine and was the first person I knew to use email. I opened her message with trepidation and was filled with awe as I understood the implications of this new way to communicate. It was at once personal and impersonal. It offered a blend of deliberation, spontaneity, nuance and control that made it completely different from a telephone call or a letter. I was hooked.

Within a few months, I brought a Packard-Bell computer home from the store, and my then-husband helped me set it up in the closet I used as my home office. Our small sons were entranced with the games they could play, which were included in the machine’s bundled software. I was able to do more of my schoolwork from home, and I developed a robust email correspondence with Becky and a slow-growing list of friends who were tooling over to this new way of staying in touch. Because accessing the Internet required a pricey, long-distance connection to a neighboring phone system, I would compose my sometimes voluminous emails offline and then dial up the connection to send them, eliciting a heady melody of electronic beeps and buzzes that let me know it was working.

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