

*Sisters of Social Service*

*Rooted in the social teachings of the Church, we are sent to be pioneers*



Celebrating nearly 90 years of working with and supporting people on the margins of our world through social services and advocacy



Sister Catherine (left) and Sister Claire (right) visiting Wellspring in January, 2016  
Sister Catherine founded Wellspring with Sister Claire in 1987.



TALES FROM THE HEART OF WELLSPRING Stories collected and shared at Wellspring Women's Center

## SISTER CATHERINE

Sister Catherine founded Wellspring with Sister Claire in 1987.

Sr. Catherine Connell, SSS – She served as Executive Director of the Center until 2001. She had to leave Wellspring when she incurred neuropathy and lymphedema after she battled breast cancer – making it difficult for her to walk up and down the Center's steep staircase.

At 76 years old, Sister Catherine lives in Encino, California and her presence is still felt inside the Center and in the photographs that she took at Wellspring that are captured with her artful and loving eye. Children's eyes melt as they are gazing at her through the camera lens.

### What does Oak Park mean to you?

“It is a memory,” Sister Catherine said. “It’s a place where we have been able to help with the change and to help the people and to be with them and not to separate ourselves out.”



Guests line up to come to Wellspring in Oak Park in 1991.



A child at Wellspring.

Sister Catherine joined the Sisters of Social Service a year after she graduated High School in Muscatine, Iowa.

“I went for one semester of junior college and I entered [the community of the Sisters of Social Service] on Feb. 1<sup>st</sup> 1959,” she said. “I had been going with a fellow. We were pretty close and the relationship was important. He was willing to become Catholic in order for us to get married, but I felt that I had to try this first. I wrote to the Priest who was in charge of the Diocese’s Paper and I said that I was interested in joining a religious community that did social work and wore plain clothes. I asked that he not put my name in the paper and then he wrote me and told me about the Sisters of Social Service. I wrote to Sister Frederica [the founder of the Los Angeles Branch of the Sisters of Social Service] and in about three letters, I got the okay. I had never seen the community of the Sisters of Social Service and I couldn’t afford to visit so I just had to take a leap of faith in joining. I had a huge send off at the airport – my mom, my dad and my family. I couldn’t be straight with my boyfriend. I told him that I was going to UCLA for college. I didn’t tell him that I was joining the convent. The day after I left, my high school picture was in the paper with the heading: ‘Will Enter Convent.’”

**Did you ever question your decision to join the community?**

“It was a stress,” Sister Catherine said. “It was a major stress to make that kind of change – moving from Iowa to California, but it was the right thing. The fascinating thing is that I saw that old boyfriend a few years ago. His wife died and he called me to say, ‘Can I come by and see you while I’m here in Sacramento?’ I was a little apprehensive, but he was still as wonderful and kind as he was when I dated him.”

The Community of the Sisters of Social Service sent Sister Catherine to Washington DC to get her Masters in Social Work at Catholic University.

“I did not want to do education and I did not want to do nursing, but I wanted to help people and I’ll always remember, to get to my school in Muscatine, Iowa, we had to go up this dell,” she said. “It could be snowy, muddy and a mess. I remember one time, I saw a woman coming down the dell. She fell. She was very poor and her clothes were dirty and at that time, I thought ‘There are people who need help in other ways than just nursing or education. So that’s what drew me to want to do social work.’”

**What is your proudest accomplishment as a Sister of Social Service?**

“Well, I was certainly proud with Claire’s help that I was able to found Wellspring Women’s Center,” she said. “We just moved in faith as to what was to be. One of the most beautiful things is that Claire and I never felt like we had any competition or rivalry. We were open to one another. There were just so many things that were possible.”



The Center’s original storefront.

At Wellspring, Sister Catherine developed a close friendship with a young, Mien girl named Maye. Her parents were farmers who did not speak any English. Sister Catherine would talk to Maye for 10 minutes each night to strengthen her English. Now thirty-eight years old, Maye works in 9 countries as an expert on providing disaster relief to countries in the developing world. She credits Sister Catherine for teaching her about leadership.

“I remember when she was in high school I said that she couldn’t realize her full potential in the public high school here so I got \$500 from Wellspring Women’s Center and went out to Loretto High School,” Sister Catherine said. “I told them, ‘This is all I have, put her through.’” And they did. So we have seen a lot of incredible successes that people have had because they have come here and it worked either through volunteers, Claire or myself. They were impacted by having someone teach them to look at their own potential.”

Sister Catherine and Sister Claire were able to be present in their guests’ lives as they journeyed through life.



“I had the privilege in working with some of the women to be invited to attend the birth of their babies,” Sister Catherine said. “That was a profound gift to be able to present as a baby comes out and for them, it was also a feeling of security – that they had someone that they knew with them in case that something went wrong.”

While they worked at Wellspring, Sister Catherine and Sister Claire lived together in a small home in Oak Park and shared a German shepherd named Schroeder.

A mother and her child at Wellspring.

“It was a nice little two bedroom and bath,” said Sister Claire. “Right up the street and the dog at the center of the carpet because we went out and left him. He would drag Catherine through the neighborhood and he went to obedience school two or three times. We bought him a little mortar board to wear for graduation and he ate it.”

With a gentle demeanor, Sister Catherine is a passionate, but unassuming activist and advocate.

“I was arrested twice and went to jail twice,” she said. “Once was because I went to Aerojet and told people that they were making components for bombs. I was arrested and went to jail on Friday and was there until Monday. The next time was when we went to McClellan Air Force Base and blocked the gates.

I spent 9 days in jail. It was very revealing because you saw how the women were treated and some of our guests were in jail when I got there. They had bunkbeds and I said that I wanted to sleep on the bottom and our guests made the bed for me. One of the police officers asked me if he could put me in another room. I said, 'No, I'm not any different from any of these people. We have to see the presence of God in one another. To me that is critically important because if we look down at a person and write them off, we are not doing what Jesus told us to do. We should love one another.'

When Wellspring moved to the Historic Oak Park Firehouse Sister Catherine and Sister Claire had to defend the move in front of the City Council.

"I wanted them to know that all the work that we were doing for Wellspring was for people who really needed it," Sister Catherine said. "In the morning at Wellspring, we told all of the guests, 'We want all of you mothers to bring your kids to this meeting.' It was incredible and they came and they filled the whole room with the kids sitting on the floor. I said, 'If they say no to us, they are going to have to look into the eyes of these children and mothers and see who they are saying no to.' We got it passed."



Volunteers hard at work  
renovating the Historic Firehouse

"Wellspring has given me such a broader experience of the gifts that God has given me and how I have to be responsible with them," Sister Catherine said. "I can't just hold onto them, but being able to share God's gifts with other people is like communicating the Gospel in terms of how we can love one another."



Sister Catherine greeting the children of Wellspring.

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