

Sr. Edna Lonergan, O.S.F.

She began with a dream—and her wisdom, determination and compassion have made it a reality. Sr. Edna Lonergan started with an adult day care in 1983, in the basement of the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi Convent. At that time, many of her staff were single moms. So when their children were off from school, she'd lose her staff. She solved the problem by encouraging employees to bring their children to work as needed. She soon noticed the positive effect the presence of children had on adults. Thus began the desire to create a place that embraced all ages and abilities under one roof in an interactive, intergenerational setting. Thirty-seven years later, that dream is as real as the faces of the children and adults who arrive daily at St. Ann Center for Intergenerational Care to take part in its day services programs.

The 52,000-square-foot Stein Campus, located at 2801 E. Morgan Avenue on the border of Milwaukee and the City of St. Francis, is a home-away-from-home during the day for 90 children and 130 frail older adults and adults with disabilities from Monday through Friday, from 6 am to 6 pm.

It is a place where people, regardless of age or abilities, can enjoy one another's company as they share quality day services. The center brings children, elderly and people with disabilities together under one roof for a unique interactive approach that includes *body, mind and spirit*: social activities, art and music therapies, meals and snacks, nurses on duty, whirlpool bathing, a warm water wheelchair accessible swimming pool, hair and nail care and outpatient rehabilitation. The center is usually not a quiet place, but teeming with people and activity. It is place of vitality and growth, where children and adults learn from and heal one another.

On April 5, 2006, the dream expanded with a groundbreaking ceremony to launch a new overnight respite center which added 10,000 sq. ft. to the main facility. Completed in May of 2007, it accommodates nine clients from one night to three weeks while their caregivers enjoy a much-needed break. A feasibility study revealed that some caregivers had never had a vacation. Others expressed the need to make business trips without anxiety concerning their loved ones while they are away.

“It is the hope of St. Ann Center for Intergenerational Care to create a whole new social model of community-based care,” said Sr. Edna. “A new social order for the entire nation: one that provides a non-institutional lifestyle of service, choice, compassion and dignity to people of all ages and abilities.” Sr. Edna not only dreams about replicating her intergenerational model, she has successfully done it.

The fruit of five years of painstaking planning, community networking and fundraising is a \$28 million facility that replicates the original St. Ann Center-Stein Campus. The new facility, the Bucyrus Campus, which opened in September 2015, is located on Milwaukee's near north side, 2450 W. North Ave., one of the most distressed and underserved communities in Wisconsin. Since its construction, the Bucyrus Campus has been a major catalyst for economic development, bringing an annual financial return of \$4.6 million to the neighborhood and close to 200 family-supporting jobs.

Under Sr. Edna's supervision, the Bucyrus Campus now serves a total of 300 adults and children and has launched a much-needed Early Head Start program for preschoolers. She also established a full-service community medical clinic at the center as well as the only dental clinic in the state that exclusively serves people with severe disabilities that prevent them from receiving treatment elsewhere. Aiming to make the Bucyrus Campus a hub of positive community activity, Sr. Edna

made sure its blueprint included: a swimming pool (addressing the high rate of drowning among African American children), a state-of-the-art dementia care unit, an overnight respite and the 250-capacity Indaba Band Shell, providing a stage to local performers, a site for community celebrations and a family-friendly, handicap-accessible entertainment venue.

Sr. Edna Lonergan was born in Braintree, Massachusetts. In 1960, she moved to Milwaukee to become a member of the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi. She is trained as an occupational therapist, a licensed practical nurse, a massage therapist and has a master's degree in aging from Northern Texas State University. Beginning with her service in the convent's infirmary, her entire career has been dedicated to wellness and helping older adults avoid premature institutionalization. She believes that nursing homes are not the answer for many of our community's older people regardless of their dementia. Their need is to remain at home for as long as possible, to be included in choices regarding their own care and have access to the wellness programs that keep them healthy and active for as long as possible.

As founder and president of St. Ann Center, a fully autonomous organization open to all regardless of faith, culture or ability to pay, Sr. Edna has been a tireless, articulate advocate on behalf of day services for children and frail older adults. She has served as chair of the Milwaukee County Commission on Aging for seven years. The community-based center she founded provides a working model of an intergenerational concept that is a less costly and more effective solution to a national and global issue.

In 2017, Sr. Edna and St. Ann Center co-hosted an Intergenerational Conference, bringing 300 professionals in the intergenerational field from 12 nations to Milwaukee. She also led the Shared-Site Replication Summit, giving 50 participants a guide to creating an all-ages day care, following St. Ann Center's model.

In 2018, Sr. Edna was invited to explain her model of intergenerational care in Tainan, Taiwan, at the International Conference: Three Generations Under One Roof. "I'd love to see intergenerational programs on every corner," she said with an enthusiasm that knows no bounds. She traveled to China in the summer of 2019 as part of a Wisconsin trade delegation, to share the intergenerational model with the people of Wuhan.

In 2019, Sr. Edna was recognized as a winner of the prestigious AARP Purpose Prize, the only national award that celebrates people 50-plus who are using their life experience to create positive social change.