

Kindness in The City

There is nun better

High-tech sister brings computers to needy families.

By **Marisa Lagos** | Staff Writer

Published on **Thursday, December 2, 2004**

URL: http://www.examiner.com/article/index.cfm/i/120204n_kindness

Every afternoon, kids such as Tracy Wheeler, 9, and Arianne Aman, 11, attend Mercy Housing's after-school program. While there, they do everything from homework to Web surfing to producing video projects -- and all because of a nun.

She may be the least usual suspect, but Sister Patsy Harney -- head of residential services for Mercy Housing in California -- is known to those close to her as a the guru of technology.

Mercy Housing is a national nonprofit that provides affordable housing to formerly homeless and low-income families. It also offers services meant to help strengthen the communities surrounding these homes.

Six years ago, this high-tech nun started a project to install computer laboratories in Mercy Housing's 91 California properties for low-income and formerly homeless families. Twenty-five of those houses are in San Francisco, and seven of The City's facilities now have computer labs.

"The age is here," explained Harney, who has been a nun in the Sisters of Mercy order for 40 years. "This was motivated by the fact that we work with disadvantaged communities. Without access to technology, they only become further disenfranchised from the economic mainstream."

Harney, a smiling woman with a gray bob, started the program with a \$500,000 grant from the state Department of Education and a handful of computers donated by AOL.

Now, residents use the facilities for everything from doing homework to writing resumes. Elderly residents come to meet socially and work on family trees and history, while others learn how to file their taxes online.

Tracy and Arianne also come to play educational games and learn how to use the Internet for research.

Arianne recently helped film, produce, direct and edit a short film focusing on neighborhood exploration in SoMa. Though shy, Arianne opened up for the film, which she also starred in. Recently, the downtown Apple Store agreed to screen the project, along with another film made by kids at one of Mercy's Visitacion Valley homes.

Mike Moran, residential services coordinator for Mercy Housing's three SoMa properties, said the video project was a great example of how the technology both encourages the kids to educate themselves while leveling the playing field.

"By having access to these computers, they're already a step above their parents, moving in the right direction," he said. "It's a step towards ending that cycle [of poverty]."

Harney said she never saw herself becoming the guru of technology for Mercy Housing, but she has welcomed the opportunity to help both her clients and the people in the neighborhoods they serve.

Arianne and Tracy, for example, do not live in Mercy Housing but are hooked up to their services through other programs their families are enrolled in.

"The idea is to leverage the services to the residents and the community ... we want our buildings to become a catalyst to improve the neighborhoods," Harney said.

To donate time, money or technology to Mercy Housing's Harney Bay Area Youth, call 415-355-7132 and ask for Tonja or e-mail Harney at pharney@mercyhousing.org.