

Land of Providence

The Sisters of Providence along the Connecticut River

The Sisters of Providence first came to Holyoke in 1873, with a mission to the hundreds of poor immigrants and mill workers living in the town. Over time, the Sisters developed a number of services focusing on the poor and needy including several hospitals and nursing schools, an orphanage, nursing homes, a residence for working girls and a home for unwed mothers.

In the early 1990s, the Sisters began to deepen their focus on world-wide social issues such as hunger, poverty, racism and pollution. In response to these issues, they developed a vision to base all decisions on their possible impact on women, earth and the poor; to steward carefully resources of the earth; and to make healing the earth a priority.

Developing the Vision

As the “charism” of the Sisters of Providence expanded to consider the health of the planet and all species, a fortuitous opportunity arose. Daniel Ross, executive director of Nuestras Raices (Our Roots), a non-profit grassroots organization that sponsors innovative urban agriculture programs to train migrant and immigrant farmers, approached the Sisters. He inquired about 25 acres of land they owned along the Connecticut River, adjacent to four acres Nuestras Raices was already farming.

Elizabeth Oleksak, Sister of Providence, explained: “Daniel asked if they could lease the land, borrow it, ... or have it.” The Sisters had just been offered a million dollars to sell the property. But their decision for the future of this land would reflect their priorities of caring for the earth.



When Oleksak and Ross spoke at the 2005 Religious Lands Conservancy Conference, they described the innovative approach they were shaping to use the land. In 2006, the Sisters formalized their agreement to allow Nuestras Raices farmers to lease some of the land (for \$1) to expand their cultivation area. Then, to ensure the property remains as it is forever, the Sisters decided to work with the Trustees of Reservations on permanent preservation.

Building Consensus for Preservation

The Sisters’ commitment to consider the health of the planet and all species created a basis for action and led to a new set of relationships and community.

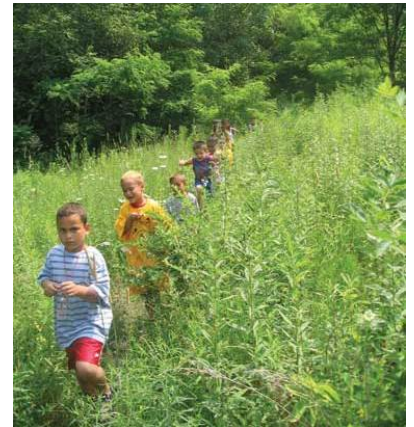
Especially important in reaching consensus to preserve the land:

- The Sisters educated their community by inviting speakers and hosting events such as Religious Lands Conservancy workshops, and discussed their future with like-minded others. The “New Story” (the contemporary scientific understanding about the origin and purpose of the universe by Thomas Berry) created a new understanding of their place in the universe.
- This period of education and discussion developed a consensus among the members of the Sister of Providence Council and Finance Committee.

- The Sisters hired Fr. Al Fritsch to do a land and energy audit for their communities. His recommendation for land along the Connecticut River set the stage for this agreement.
- Nuestras Raices and its leader, Daniel Ross, were known entities to the Sisters; there was a built-in level of trust. Sr Elizabeth began serving on the board of Nuestras, where she gained insight and appreciation for the culture of the Latino community and their love for farming.
- The land wasn't in use, had been ignored. Ross walked the land with the administrative team and showed how it could be used.
- The Sisters see a responsibility to the future. They could envision a legacy of honoring the earth and protecting this land for future generations.

Taking the Final Steps

In 2005 a committee of four was formed to explore possible ways of permanently preserving the land, and to find an appropriate partner. RLC and others suggested opening a conversation with The Trustees of Reservations. The Sisters recognized the same passion for their visions in the Trustees. After many discussions, the agreement to conserve the land was finalized in May of 2009.



This donation allows the Sisters to continue their tradition of service to the Holyoke community, but with the emphasis this time on nurturing a relationship with the earth as well.

A Final Note

At the dedication of the property in September, 2009, Sister Elizabeth Oleksak noted: "This earth, this land will go on forever as the Land of Providence,"

"The Sisters' gift of Land of Providence to The Trustees is really a gift to the whole community," says Trustees' Regional Director Jocelyn Forbush. "The Trustees are looking forward to sharing this beautiful piece of land and all it has to offer with the public and we are especially excited for Nuestras Raices' innovative agricultural programs to continue to thrive on the site."



View of the Connecticut River at dusk from the Land of Providence