

## Building a solid foundation: Keeping her vision alive

A few years after the mid-1960s riots in downtown Rochester, several Sisters of Mercy moved down to the inner city and opened an after-school Center at 512 Joseph Avenue for the neighborhood children. They played with the children, between 100 and 120 kids attending on an average day, and became friends with their families. The Sisters had taught grade school, so they knew what young children need.

The older girls met and learned to sew in the house across the street, where the Sisters lived. And Sister Patricia Jane Flynn, RSM, got the older boys—she had been one of eleven children growing up, and knew that she could handle them. She started working with them in the basement of the Center.

Her plan was simple: “My main thrust is to teach them to get along with each other,” Sister Pat said. “To teach them punctuality and responsibility. To teach them to meet the world of work.”<sup>1</sup>

“Sister Pat Flynn was very good-hearted and very much into social justice,” recalls Sister Kathleen Kolmer, who lived with Sister Pat for over 20 years. “And she was always straight-forward and blunt.”

“I never go to meetings,” Sister Pat later confessed, “and I never write reports for anybody. If I go to a meeting, to just support a group of people, I will go for one hour and I get up and leave.”<sup>2</sup>

One night when she was attending a neighborhood



*Jerry Ingraham, Sister Pat and Rodney Williams, circa 1971.*

meeting, someone from Kodak got up and said that they wanted to do something for the men in the area. “I have 25 terrific teenage boys,” Sister Pat replied. “Why don’t you do something for me?” But then her hour was up and she got up and left.

The next day she was summoned to Kodak and told to get a building, get her act together, and come back. So she hit the streets. Harry Rockowitz and his mother let Sister Pat have the large brick warehouse section of their former toy store at 417 Joseph Ave., rent-free.<sup>3</sup> Sears gave her \$4,000 worth of equipment. She heard that five local merchants had money left over after rehabilitating some buildings that had been destroyed in the riots, and soon she had enough money to pay for insurance.

Sister Pat went back to Kodak. “We had the building, the insurance, and everything. They wrote me up for six months. They would give me two carpenters, twice a week on company time and all my lumber. It’s now 21 years and they’re still doing it.”

She was feisty and tough, qualities that enabled Sister Pat to lay a solid foundation for her woodworking program. Today, nearly 50 years later, it continues as The Woodshop of St. Michael.



*Rudy Crumpler, Sister Pat and another student go over plans.*

Sister Pat had no background in carpentry, but learned the basics from Jack and Frank, the Kodak men who helped her run the program. Kenny Terrance, Mori Petrin and Art Fraser also became mainstays at the Woodshop.

Sister Pat had to move the shop several times during the 40 years that she managed the program, but she never paid rent.

After she became proficient in carpentry, she taught it at the Monroe County Jail one morning a week for 12 years. When she was no longer able to continue because of overcrowded conditions, she began teaching prisoners in the forensic unit at the Rochester Psychiatric Center.

News of Sister Pat and the Woodshop spread through word of mouth and the local media. She received awards for her work from the city of Rochester, the Catholic Youth Organization, Action for a Better Community, the Rochester Psychiatric Center, and Neighbor Works.

Once when all the hand tools

from the shop were stolen, some Wal-Mart employees from the Greece, NY store held a raffle to raise money to replace them. The Wal-Mart Foundation matched their efforts, and afterwards a short paragraph about Sister Pat was included in a national Sunday newspaper ad.<sup>4</sup>

The ad quoted a sentiment that Sister Pat often expressed: “It’s only because so many people have good hearts that I’m able to help others. And I get the credit. That bothers me sometimes.”

Family outreach followed naturally from Sister Pat’s contacts at the Woodshop, and she spent many hours working with the families of her students. “They look for me in trouble or need,” she said.<sup>5</sup> She was often able to help them financially.

Parents appreciated that Sister kept their children in line. One of her boys who came home from



*Sister Pat with two students*

military basic training told her that the drill sergeants weren’t nearly as tough as she was.<sup>6</sup>

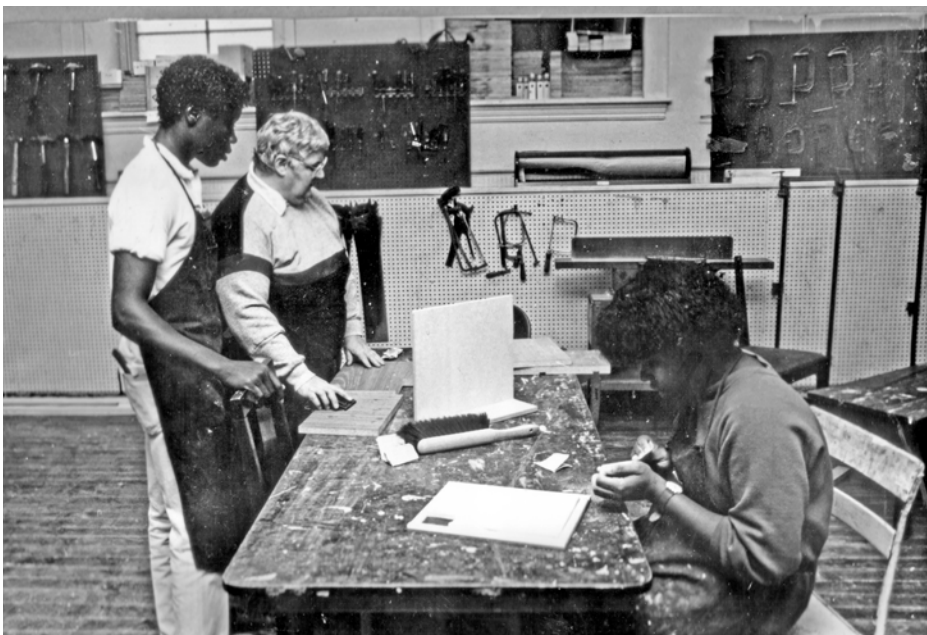
Before she retired due to health issues in 2007, Sister Pat trained Sister Virginia (Ginny) Taylor to take over the operation of the shop. As director, Sister Ginny maintained the goals of teaching the students respect, cooperation, and pride in their work. The Woodshop had made its first successful transition.

### *Caption for cover photo:*

Back row, from left: Herman Rumbolin, unknown, Matt Crumpler, Sister Pat, Johnny Waylie, Noley Morris, Richie Green, Ray Coleman, David Mack. Middle row: Jerry Ingraham, unknown. Bottom row: Larry Ingraham, Vinnie Crumpler, Sammy Williams, Peter Cooper. (Spellings approximate.)

### *Notes:*

1. Sr. Pat Flynn, in “Carpentry—a lesson in the work ethic,” by DeDe Murphy, *Democrat and Chronicle* (Rochester, NY), Jan. 20, 1979, p. 14.
2. Sister Pat Flynn, 1988, Sisters of Mercy archives, Rochester, NY.
3. Bill Beeney, “Harry Rockowitz was a fellow ...,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, Sept. 25, 1968, p. 22.
4. “A Helping Hand” in Wal-Mart ad, *Reno (Nevada) Gazette-Journal*, Oct. 31, 1993, p. 143.
5. Sister Pat Flynn, archives.
6. “Helping Hand.”



*Sister Pat planning out a job with one of her students.*



## One student's memories of Sister Pat: Keeping her vision alive



*Joe Mack's younger brother Barrett (left) and other students with Sister Pat.*

"I was afraid of her before I even met her," said Joe Mack, a Woodshop student in the 1970s. "My brothers said she was strict."

Joe's older brothers were in Sister Pat's after-school program, making wooden cabinets, tables, and puzzles, all from scratch.

"My brothers even made soap box derby cars," Joe said. "I wanted to do things like that, too, so I kept bugging her, even though I wasn't really old enough to be in the program. One of my brothers was giving her a hard time so she hesitated, but finally, before I was 12 years old, she let me in."

"I was just a little guy, making \$10 every two weeks!" After squandering a few paychecks, Joe started saving, and later he was buying all of his own clothes, which helped his parents a lot.

"During the summers when we went all day, Sister taught us Math and Reading in the mornings, and then we got to make picture frames, toys, and furniture. Our mentors from Kodak, Jack and Frank, would make the

more complicated items, and we would sand and paint them."

Joe remembers like it was yesterday. "The first girl in the program was Terry Johnson, and she was hired through ABC (Action for a Better Community)." After that the ABC started paying the Woodshop students' wages.

"There was a lesson to everything that Sister Pat taught us, even though we didn't realize it at the time. During our lunch breaks in the summer she would say, 'What are you guys doing? Are you looking for work?' We'd say no, but she would tell us anyway: 'Come to my house and pull weeds. I'll give you a penny for every weed you pull.' She was teaching us how to make money.

"She had no problem confronting issues," Joe said. "We learned that from her, too, to face our own problems head on.

"I got a job at Kodak in 1978, during my last year of high school, working the evening shift. Sister Pat helped other students get Kodak jobs, too, and after we

finished school, some of us stayed on full time. We raised families working those jobs." Joe worked at Kodak for 35 years.

"Sister taught us the importance of being on time. If we were late, she docked our pay, no doubt about it. After a certain number of late arrivals, we'd get suspended for a while, to give us a chance to think about it. Then we could come back. ... Later, when I was working at Kodak, I would go in 30 minutes early and hang out in the locker room, just in case."

Joe often drove Sister Pat's van to the post office or to the Pepsi Cola factory on Nash Street to pick up bottles of cola for homeless shelters and churches. He picked up donations of Christmas gifts for families in need. "Sister Pat always told us that it was important that you sow seeds, and that if you give, it will come back to you. She really believed that, and I do, too."

Joe served on the Woodshop's Advisory Board for many years. "I gained so much from my years with Sister Pat," he says, "that I always want to be a part of the Woodshop."



*Jerry Ingraham's soap box derby car.*

When Sister Ginny retired from the Woodshop in 2010, also due to health reasons, the program went dormant for a few years because the Sisters of Mercy did not have anyone to replace her.

During this hiatus, a group of individuals, including two Sisters of Mercy and Father Bob Werth, began to meet in hopes of reviving the program. They worked out the legal and logistical details, and the Woodshop began operating again on its summer schedule in July 2013.

The new director is James Smith, who worked for Fr. Bob at St. Frances Xavier Cabrini parish as a youth minister and maintenance employee for eleven years. James has become a father figure to students at the Woodshop.

He understands his students at a very deep level because he grew up in poverty himself in Providence, RI. James was one of eight children whose mother washed and folded the aprons and towels of a local butcher in return for the meat that he couldn't sell. "We'd get big



*James Smith conducts a mock job interview with a student as others look on.*

bags of chicken necks, backs and wings," James said. "In those days, the chicken wings were just thrown away!" James and his older brothers would also go downtown to the fishing docks where they could take the fish that had been passed over by the wholesale seafood dealers. He quickly learned how to tell whether a fish was fresh or not: if its eyes are clear, the fish is fresh; if not, don't eat it.

James teaches the students basic budgeting techniques, how to become leaders at school, how to fill out a job application and interview for a job, and other "life skills." These are an integral part of the program.

"This summer we lost some of our

best students to jobs," James said. "We hate to see them go, but at the same time we're so happy that they're working. That's what we're all about."

During the school year, students receive a hot, nutritious meal every day, and during the summer they get box lunches. The meals are provided by the Freshwise division of Foodlink.

Some of the Woodshop's output is sold at Christmas sales at several churches around the diocese and at a craft fair at Casa Larga in Fairport, NY. This is the second year that students are making wooden Christmas ornaments to be sold through St. Louis parish to benefit the only pediatric hospital in Haiti.

Students also make picture frames, refinish and repair furniture, and work on custom projects for clients. The variety of projects makes the Woodshop a busy, happy place!



*Savannah and Calvin sand Christmas ornaments.*





*Mentors Mark and Deacon Dave help Derwin with his cutting board project.*

Mentors are the heart and soul of the Woodshop program. Many are retirees who want to “give back.” They worked as engineers, carpenters, school-teachers, and even policemen.

The mentors help students to develop new skills. Interaction with the mentors is one of the most valuable things that the Woodshop offers to its teens.

Mentors embrace the Woodshop’s Mission Statement directives to “accompany young men and women as they learn a trade, enhance their sense of self-worth, master a good work ethic, and demonstrate mutual care for one another.” They work with James to tweak strategies and follow student progress.

For almost three years following the revival of the Woodshop, the Church of the Assumption in Fairport, NY graciously included it as one of its ministries. This allowed the Woodshop to operate with 501(c)3 status while it got back on solid footing. Third party

donations were (and still are) necessary to maintain operations, however.

Last summer, now ready to stand on its own, the Woodshop became an independent non-profit 501(c)3 corporation. The legacy of Sister Pat and the mission continues under the new legal name of The Woodshop of St. Michael, Inc.

Its 6,000-square-foot space in the basement of 691 St. Paul Street has served the Woodshop well since Sister Pat secured the

location in the early 2000s. She told the owner of the building at that time that she wouldn’t be able to pay any rent, but promised to “pray very hard” for him. Today the building also houses the Dept. of Social Services for Monroe County.

“We are blessed in so many ways,” said Sister Jackie Reichart, RSM, a member of the Woodshop’s Advisory Board. “The Woodshop of St. Michael sits on a solid foundation that Sister Patty Jane built over 40 years, working with urban teens. Sister Ginny continued the tradition and kept the original vision alive.

“But the future is what’s happening now. Under the wonderful leadership of James Smith and with the cooperation of so many dedicated volunteer mentors, we want to insure that the Woodshop will continue for many years to come. That’s why we’ve initiated the Sister Pat Flynn Legacy Project. Won’t you help us with this important work?”



*Chassidy and Angelique learn the properties of wood from mentor Pat Clune.*



Sister Pat Flynn and her boys  
circa 1970

Sister  
Pat Flynn,  
RSM

Keeping  
her vision  
alive

For student  
names, see p. 2



St. Michael's Woodshop  
691 St. Paul St.  
Rochester, NY 14605

*"Building from the Inside Out"*

## **Mission Statement**

*St. Michael's Woodshop  
is a ministry that offers  
life skills to urban youth  
through the art of  
woodworking.*

*Tutors and mentors  
are committed to  
accompanying young men  
and women as they  
learn a trade, enhance their  
sense of self-worth,  
master a good work ethic,  
and demonstrate mutual  
care for one another.*

The Woodshop of St. Michael, Inc.  
is a non-profit, 501(c)3 corporation.