



Quad-City Labyrinth Project



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Rural retreat caters to soul

Deirdre Cox Baker | Friday, October 03, 2003 Quad City Times

WHEATLAND, Iowa. Shifting blades of tall prairie grass bend in the wind, spread over acres of land in rural Clinton County to surround a retreat designed to soothe the soul.

The Sisters of Humility, New Horizons of Faith Inc. and a congregation of supporters are proudly opening Our Lady of the Prairie Retreat this weekend, culminating with an open house Sunday. The public is invited to the grounds south of Wheatland, Iowa, from 2-4 p.m. Bishop William Franklin of the Diocese of Davenport will bless the property during a ceremony this afternoon.

The retreat was the vision of the late Rev. Vincent Fabula, who built part of the structure before he died of a brain tumor. His project has been completed by the Congregation of the Humility of Mary in what the sisters say is a logical evolution of their heritage, which dates to 1854.

Sister Joann Kuebrich has worked with the adult education arm of the mission since the late 1970s, when the Sisters of Humility operated Ottumwa (Iowa) Heights Junior College. After that institution was sold to become Indian Hills Community College, the sisters took the theology and religious education curriculum to other areas in the Diocese of Davenport.

Working with Fabula, a Trappist monk who was associated with the New Melleray Abbey in Peosta, Iowa, the sisters decided their work with adults should expand to rural eastern Iowa.

"We'd like to have a place to go, to probe deeper in the spirit and have a place for reflection," Sister Kuebrich said of those early discussions. Many of the sisters fondly remembered retreats associated with the Motherhouse in Ottumwa.

Fabula was a brilliant, talented man who taught at the Ottumwa college and was involved in adult education. He teamed with the sisters to find an appropriate retreat location. After viewing 47 different properties in rural areas, the 210-acre Dierickx house, barn and outbuildings were purchased in 1990.

"He wanted the place to be the attraction, not a person to be an attractor," Sister Jude Fitzpatrick said of the beautiful grounds.

The land includes trees, water and a ravine all bordered by the Wapsipinicon River. Fabula and a team of helpers renovated the original home to include a chapel, library, three bedrooms and meeting rooms. They built a pond and also planted and nurtured the acres of prairie grass.

That part of the retreat was almost opened in the late 1990s, but the monk became mortally ill. He was nursed by the Sisters of Humility for 18 months.

Fabula's order at New Melleray Abbey sold the retreat to the Sisters in 1999, and they built and improved the property to its current state.

The \$500,000 Prairie Heights addition adjoins the Victorian House, which is filled with refinished antiques. A long white porch unites the structures.

The Prairie Heights area includes a gathering space with a fireplace, breakfast nook, kitchen, eight guest rooms with four baths and many windows to view the stunning outdoor scenery.



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The sisters also constructed a labyrinth and added The Way of Cross. The latter was donated by the former Marycrest College in Davenport, with which the sisters also were affiliated. Trails were cut through the prairie to provide nature walks, and there is a screened gazebo in the front yard.

"We have done a lot to make this a place of prayer and reflection," Sister Kuebrich said.

Contractor Keith Meyer of Walcott, Iowa, spent a year on the property, building the addition and rehabbing the barn, which is now used for storage.

"These people have been so pleasant to work with," he said. "It's been a fun, fun project."

Sister Jude, the president of the Congregation of the Humility of Mary, said the past year has been filled with happiness. "From the beginning, we have been blessed with fantastic people who bent over backwards to make this project a reality," she added.

Although the sisters are Catholic, the retreat is for adults of any faith who need a place for solace.

"Our experience and Father Vincent's tell us that one of the greatest unmet needs of all people is their desire for prayer and spirituality. Responding to this need at the retreat will be a wonderful opportunity," Sister Jude wrote after the sisters bought the property in 1999.

Those visions join together, starting now.

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