

Newsday

Llife

The sisters' garden

IN BRENTWOOD,
A MINISTRY OF LOVE
FOR COMMUNITY
AND THE EARTH **E2**

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The Sisters of St. Joseph's 212-acre campus in Brentwood is a sustainable model that leases to organic growers, including Thera Farms, above. ■ Video: [newsday.com/LiLife](https://www.newsday.com/LiLife)

Oasis in the suburbs

The mission of the Sisters of St. Joseph is sustainability — and sharing

ON THE COVER. Garden Ministry manager Heather Ganz-Bolkas, left, and Sister Mary Lou Buser work in the garden Buser started in 1987.

BY LIZA N. BURBY
Special to Newsday

On a sunny June morning, birds dart in and out of meadows filled with wild bergamot, switch grass and mountain mint. Their song is joined by the buzz of bumblebees as butterflies flit among honeysuckle that release a sweet scent. Nearby, children and their parents pick plump strawberries, while shoppers select produce at the farmstand. Yards away, neighbors take free eggs gathered from dozens of resident chickens while four goats scamper on a wooden play structure.

What could describe an idyllic setting on the East End is instead taking place on a sprawling 212-acre campus tucked into the hamlet of Brentwood, one of the most densely populated and developed communities in Suffolk County. It's the site of the Sisters of St. Joseph, a community of about 100 members that for much of its 127-year history lived in a secluded monastic-like enclosure where the ministries that took place were mostly unknown to the neigh-

borhood. The current president, Sister Tesa Fitzgerald, said in recent years there's been a concerted effort to change that.

Today, there's a hum of activity on the campus, with 2,000 people working, visiting and living on the grounds. And everywhere there are natural pathways to invite visitors to walk the grounds, which are open daily to the community.

"We have a magnificent campus here," said Fitzgerald, 77. "It's important we network



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Sister Karen Burke coordinates the order's land initiatives. She said that the sisters hope their environmental efforts will inspire others.

assists incarcerated women and mothers.

Wanda Ortiz-Rivera, assistant superintendent of secondary education and bilingual K-12 programs for the Brentwood school district, said the district of over 18,000 students has been partnering with the sisters for more than 25 years.

"Their efforts in supporting our pre-K programs, adult ESL education and farm-to-table initiatives have transformed lives and empowered families that come from all parts of the world," she said. "The refugee families they house come to our schools. They could do a lot of things with that beautiful space, but they want to provide to our institutions and organizations that are going to help the community."

A retreat center in Hampton Bays, St. Joseph Villa, is also used for initiatives including a partnership with six Indigenous women from the Shinnecock Nation who are kelp farmers, plus a teaching garden and beehives to help people learn about honeybees, composting and soil propagation.

These ministries are part of the sisters' history of supporting education, spirituality, health care and justice. A key focus since 2015 has also been environmental justice.

FORMER AUSTRAL HOTEL

The Sisters of St. Joseph originated in Le Puy-en-Velay, France, and when the order came to the United States, it started in the St. Louis area in 1836. Around 1856 the sisters were sent to Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and then expanded in 1860 to Flushing, Queens. In 1896, the mother superior, Mother Mary Louis, was looking for a place where the sisters could go for retreat, study and reflection. The Robert W. Pearsall estate in Brentwood, which had become the 125-room Austral Hotel in 1888, was on the market. The sisters purchased the property and called it Brentwood in the Pines, after the area's 350 acres of pine trees, which were touted for their healing effects.

Today the property, at 1725 Brentwood Rd., is designated

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The "sharing table," where neighbors are welcome to take and donate food, is a longstanding tradition for the Sisters of St. Joseph.

and don't live in silos. One of our maxims is to be attentive to the dear neighbor. Well, the dear neighbor is outside these gates, so you have to invite people in."

And the sisters have a lot to show them.

ACRES ON INNOVATION

Sister Karen Burke, coordinator of the order's land initiatives, said the sisters want others to feel empowered to do what they have: create a sustainable model that in this case

includes 28 acres of leased organic farms, eight acres of native meadow prairie, 45 acres of woodland, several honey-producing beehives, two alternative wastewater treatment systems, a four-acre ground-mounted solar array, and EV charging stations.

At the center is the motherhouse — the main office — home to many of the sisters and a few refugee families from Ukraine and Afghanistan. The campus also includes the sisters' Sacred Heart Chapel,

Eastern Suffolk BOCES, and the Maria Regina Residence 188-bed nursing home.

The campus also houses the CSJ Learning Connection for Adult Education Inc., which the sisters founded in 1998 with the Brentwood school district. It provides English language classes to over 260 women a year, with health care and domestic violence awareness support as well. In March 2022, the sisters helped found the Long Island Immigration Clinic to help asylum seekers.



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The grounds are open daily to the public, and they include features such as a labyrinth and a woodland trail called the Cosmic Walk.

There's also a separate refugee resettlement program that provides housing and hospitality.

The sisters ran a high school, the Academy of St. Joseph, until 2009. Since then, they've leased buildings to other educational programs, like the Shepherd's Gate Universal Pre-K, which has about 300 children, and the MDQ Academy, a Muslim school. There are also nonprofit programs like New HOUR for Women and Children, which

'Leaders in conservation'

COVER STORY from E3

on the National Register of Historic Places. Currently, 65 sisters live in the motherhouse and about 35 reside in other buildings along Brentwood Road. The sisters range in age from 42 to a few centenarians.

All of their endeavors support their beliefs about inclusivity.

"We always talk about uniting all in God's love. It's about all different faith traditions, certainly people of different sexual orientation, ethnic groups, cultural groups. And that's a big part of our message, nobody being excluded," said Burke, 63. "We're hoping that we can unite all people in love of God and neighbor and seeing nature as part of our neighbor, too."

SHIFT IN 2015

She's referencing the environmental ministry that has been a large focus of the sisters' mission since 2015. Until the 1960s, there was an active farm on the grounds, but most of the land fell fallow. Burke said foundational work was in progress with the sisters' Earth Matters committee to find ways to care for the property in an environmentally sustainable way.

What resulted was a land ethic statement — the sisters' plan for their grounds — based on their charism, or spiritual gifts, and their awareness of their responsibility for the health of Earth and, in particular, for the Long Island bioregion. There are nine commitments, including to be well-informed in modern sciences that will enrich their beliefs and perspectives. They also agreed to research options such as land trusts, easements, deed restrictions and the transfer or selling of development rights in order to determine the best way to preserve their land.

But they realized in order to bring the statement to fruition they needed expert help. The sisters partnered with the nonprofit Peconic Land Trust, whose mission is to protect Long Island's working farms and natural lands. They discussed their goals with Kimberly Quarty, director of conservation planning, and Dan Heston, director of agricultural



Children make their way to the Thera Farms fields to pick berries. The campus includes 28 acres leased to organic farmers.



The order's Honey House is part of its Garden Ministry, through which the sisters teach community members to grow food.

programs, who quickly realized the sisters were planning to put a solar array — ground-mounted solar panels — on prime soil. The Trust helped them rethink the location of the panels, then developed a concept plan for setting up 3,192 solar panels, which now generate approximately 70% of the electricity for the campus. It also sited expansion for wastewater management and identified areas for preservation.

"The sisters were really interested in what's the best use for their land," said Quarty, 54. "When we first met with them they were just mowing many acres of lawn. We talked about getting into agricultural production so it could be productive and more sustainable."

The Trust identified approximately 28 acres for farmland preservation and recommended selling development



In 1896, the Sisters of St. Joseph purchased the former Austral Hotel, which later became their motherhouse.

rights to Suffolk County under their Farmland Protection Program. However, Heston, 54, said they first had to prove they had farm leases, and that meant getting the land ready. They put in two wells, electricity and an irrigation system and prepped all the fields.

Meanwhile, Teddy Bolkas, 47, who grew up on a family farm in Ronkonkoma, was looking for available land to lease in western Suffolk. He

contacted the Trust and in August 2016 determined he could lease 20 acres. The other eight acres are leased by nonprofits like Island Harvest Food Bank and S.T.R.O.N.G. Youth, and small-scale farmers like The Red Fox Farms and Napolitano Family Farm.

Bolkas runs Thera Farms, where he accepts SNAP and WIC benefits and offers community-supported agriculture shares. In addition to vegeta-



Amanda Furcall, the director of environmental sustainability, said the sisters' work is a model for others.

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In May, the sisters held a fun run on campus to build community and raise funds for their work. A Zumba event that day drew Lakilah Gregory, center, and her daughter Mackenzie Gregory of Dix Hills.

bles, there are strawberries, blueberries and sugar snap peas for picking, as well as cutting flower gardens. And he grows what Brentwood's largely Hispanic community asks for, like radishes and cucumbers.

"I told the sisters from the beginning I didn't want to grow food in Brentwood and sell it in Manhattan. I want to support the neighborhood that supports me," Bolkas said.

ENSURING A LEGACY

The Trust also helped the sisters to develop a master plan for the whole property in partnership with Rusty Schmidt, a landscape ecologist with Nelson, Pope & Voorhis, a Melville-based environmental planning company. Currently the Trust is facilitating the preservation of approximately 43 acres of woodland with the state Department of Environmental Conservation. The

Trust is also working to preserve an additional 35 acres of meadow habitat through a conservation easement donation.

Schmidt, 52, who said the sisters' land ethic statement "is one of the best on Long Island," has helped them implement a large rain garden that resolved flooding in a parking lot and plant a meadow of pollinator grasses and flowers under the solar array. In an-

other underutilized lawn area, they planted an eight-acre meadow of grasses and flowers that mimics the endangered Hempstead Plains. And the walls and privets that used to separate them from the community have been replaced with native shrubs like inkberry holly.

"The Sisters of St. Joseph are very cognizant that they will not be here forever and want to ensure a legacy. They're trying to think of everything," Quarty said. "We should recognize them for really being one of the leaders in conservation."

But all of this work requires people on site who have a deep knowledge of daily maintenance. In December 2019, the sisters hired a land ecologist, Amanda Furcall. Since then, she's been leading the efforts to do restoration, native gardening and organic farming. Furcall, 32, now the director of environmental sustainability, said the sisters' work can be a model for other denominations.

"Aside from the government, religious institutions own the most land in this country. From a conservation perspective, the environmental movement needs religious organizations on board and understanding what the tools are for them to care for their land," she said.

SHARING THE BOUNTY

Another aspect of the sisters' work is sharing best practices with the community through their organic gardens. In 1987, Sister Mary Lou Buser, now 88, started a small organic patch to grow vegetables. She'd put a table out for the community to take what they wanted for free or a donation, which the sisters designated the "sharing table." Then someone dropped off chickens. The gardens grew from there to include a chicken coop, goats and rabbits. Eventually they called it the Garden Ministry, through which they teach community members to garden.

Since 2016, the Garden Ministry manager has been Heather Ganz-Bolkas, 38, who was a sister for six years. Ganz-Bolkas, who married Teddy in 2018, said she loved what Buser was doing and had a vision "to keep it growing, broaden it and deepen it."

The ministry now has about 20 garden beds.

And the sharing table model continues. Last year the sisters grew enough vegetables to provide approximately 2,500 meals to the community and

collected 7,000 eggs. Additionally, there are two dozen 4-by-15-foot community garden beds for local families who aren't able to plant at their homes.

Cathleen Ruiz, 52, who said she walked past the grounds every day of her childhood and never knew what it was, visited for the first time three years ago. Since then, the Brentwood resident has been volunteering in the Garden Ministry with her family and has her own plot to grow organic herbs and vegetables. Ruiz, who teaches at a Christian school in Freeport, has been able to offer excess produce to her students as well as bring them to the farm for lessons.

"The garden is a family type of ministry and a nice way for the sisters to give back to the community," she said.

There are other experiences that have been opened to the public as well, like a natural labyrinth and the Cosmic Walk, which is marked by a series of stones placed along a woodland trail that guide visitors through 26 moments in the story of the universe.

Schmidt said the example the sisters have set has attracted the attention of local businesses who are in the process of creating similar easements and ecosystems, as well as other denominations, including the Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock.

"The sisters' 212-acre oasis is in the middle of Brentwood, where everyone's welcome. ... I think the sisters are very generous in helping the community as a whole," Schmidt said.

Even the cemetery, which holds the remains of 1,100 sisters, is sustainable, with native plantings among the gravestones. The sisters also say they must acknowledge that their campus is on occupied Indigenous land, as members of the Secatogue tribe once lived there. To honor Indigenous people, there is an unmarked area in the cemetery.

The sisters, in their land ethic statement, say that a land acknowledgment "reminds us all of the tribes that have been intentionally erased through the genocide committed by the United States government and the displacement of Indigenous people" and that such an acknowledgment is not enough — "it is just a start."

So, too, is their work with environmental justice. As Burke says, there's always going to be more to do.