News
News
Religious Life



Retired nuns and Jewish residents attend a morning Mass at The New Jewish Home, Kittay Senior Apartments in the Bronx, New York, Dec. 13, 2024. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)



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At 90-years-old, Sr. Marie Louise Vernimmen might be retired from formal ministry, but her life of service is far from over.

When she retired in 2015, after caring for homeless women and children around the U.S., she moved to the The New Jewish Home, Kittay Senior Apartments*, with fellow Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. The sisters chose to live here after selling their property in the Lower East Side in Manhattan when it became unsustainable to keep it.

"We needed a place where we could also be a presence for the people," Vernimmen told the National Catholic Reporter, smiling, while playing with the two parrots, Belle and Romeo, that she has been taking care of for months.

Here in a diverse community of residents, caregivers and faith traditions, Vernimmen has found a new mission. "Right now, that's my mission — being present to whoever comes in this building, to just be," she said. Her days are filled with small but meaningful activities: welcoming newcomers, volunteering at the sundry shop and singing in the choir.

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"I don't feel 90 years," she said with a hearty laugh. Vernimmen still has energy, although she said she can't walk. For this reason, physical exercise is part of her daily activities. "I don't sit in the chair all day. I need to keep moving."

In the heart of the Bronx in New York City, every morning a group of about 30 retired nuns gather to attend Mass at the nursing home. These sisters, who belong to three different congregations, have freely chosen not to live in their motherhouses and to retire to the Kittay Senior Apartments, a middle-income nursing home for people of all faiths and religious and cultural traditions.

"I believe there is one God, one Creator, one divine presence," Vernimmen said. "That's my belief, and I respect other people's beliefs. Who am I to say your faith is not good? Jesus didn't say that."

This year, since Christmas and Hanukkah overlapped, the home planned a celebration that reflected its interfaith spirit with "singing, refreshments and people of all faiths," Vernimmen said.

Sr. Ana Evelyn Vazquez, 82, another retired nun from Vernimmen's congregation, took a break from a painting class after Mass to talk to NCR about her missionary work that took her to Guatemala in 1969, where she spent 47 years. Her ministry was shaped by the socio-political struggles of the region, including the 36-year civil war in Guatemala.

"Life was difficult physically, because we would walk up to three days to get to the villages," she said, adding: "Mother Nature was our reward," referring to the natural beauty all around them.



Sr. Ana Evelyn Vazquez, 82, a retired nun and resident at The New Jewish Home, Kittay Senior Apartments since 2016, is pictured Dec. 13, 2024. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

Her work in Guatemala included establishing basic ecclesial communities inspired by liberation theology, a movement within Catholic theology that emphasizes social justice and the liberation of economically and politically oppressed people through the lens of the Gospel. These communities empowered local people to see their worth and develop their skills through the teachings of the Gospel. "We just lifted them up and they would get together in small groups and reflect on the words of Jesus," she said.

After more than six decades of service as a nurse, teacher and missionary, Sr. Mary Kay Finneran, 86, also has found a new chapter of her life in retirement at the Kittay Senior Apartments. For Finneran, who joined the Sisters of Charity at just 17, her retirement is about embracing diversity and fostering community, she said.

"I do like my life here. I wanted the diversity. It's richer. It might be poorer this way, but it's a much richer life."

"I had a choice to live at the college that we have at the foot of the hill. We have a convent with 40 other sisters. It's beautiful. It looks out on the Palisades, the river and delicious food, but I really wanted to spend my life living and being with most of the people here, not well-off." Finneran said that living at the convent felt like a "very privileged life," though she admitted with a laugh that she misses the food.



Sr. Marie Louise Vernimmen, 90, a retired nun and resident at The New Jewish Home, Kittay Senior Apartments since 2015, taking care of the Belle and Romeo, the parrots of the home on Dec. 13, 2024. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

Finneran said she finds new inspiration in the resilience and strength of her fellow residents. She spoke fondly of a recently deceased neighbor, an amputee who dressed beautifully each morning to greet people, and another, a blind pianist, who comes to meals daily with unfailing cheer.

Sitting next to Finneran, Sr. Florence Speth, 86, told NCR she was initially resistant to leaving her work and community in East Harlem. "I retired six years ago. ... I was falling a lot. My congregation felt I'd be safer here. I didn't agree with them in the beginning, but I do think they were right," she said.

Her choice to live at Kittay, rather than the more picturesque Mount St. Vincent of the Sisters of Charity in Riverdale in the Bronx, was deliberate. "I didn't want to live in that beautiful surrounding. It's too rich for me. This was the only one where we really mix with other people besides sisters," she said. Now, she said she values the

diversity of her new community, where veterans, religious sisters and others share meals and stories.

"I might have regretted it in the beginning. I wouldn't change it for anything now," she said.

Talking to NCR about some of the work she is the most proud of, Speth mentioned that during Ed Koch's tenure as mayor of New York City, she spearheaded the transformation of an abandoned building into housing for homeless women and children. "I wrote a proposal, and I was granted $1.6 million to renovate this building. It went wonderful," she said. The project became a haven for many, fostering a sense of family among residents.

"I really like my community now. When I came here, suddenly I was with 21 other sisters. I haven't had 21 other sisters since I left the novitiate," she said.



A bulletin board with announcements of programs and activities for residents of The New Jewish Home, Kittay Senior Apartments in the Bronx, New York, Dec. 13, 2024. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

Kittay is home to 220 tenants, and its population has shifted over time. "Back in the day, I would say the majority probably were Jewish. Now that's less, but it's always been open to people of all faiths," said Susan Brown-Mandel, associate director at Kittay. This inclusivity is deeply rooted in Jewish values, she said, quoting the book of Exodus: "Welcome the stranger, because you were a stranger also."

"You're not really alone here. There's always somebody to talk to," she said. For many, this sense of connection is vital. "Loneliness is like an epidemic. Here, you always know there's at least someone you could talk to, or you could watch a ball game in the lounge."

At 76, Sr. Chala Marie Hill's life is anything but typical. A widow at 32 — and a mother of three, grandmother of six and great grandmother of 10 — she entered the Franciscan Handmaids of the Most Pure Heart of Mary in 2002, following a late-in-life calling to religious life.

Hill's decision wasn't an easy one for her family. "My children were upset because they would lose their mother," she said. "They understood it right away. I was a matriarch. They love it now, but at the time, it was very difficult for them."

Residing at Kittay Senior Apartments since 2019, Hill said she continues to embrace an active life. "I'm still working. I'm not with the retired crew," she laughed, also mentioning her ongoing role as a spiritual director at St. Francis of Assisi Church in Manhattan. When asked about her opinion on the evolution of religious life and sisters' congregations dying, she said that "God is working right now. God has other people instead of just the religious doing things," and that she's been witnessing an increasing involvement of laypeople in theology and mission work.



At right, Sr. Cecilia Palange, 99, a retired nun and resident at The New Jewish Home, Kittay Senior Apartments since 2016, plays boardgames with residents from other cultural and religious traditions on Dec. 13, 2024. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

At 99, Sr. Cecilia Palange is the oldest retired nun living at Kittay with the group of 30. A retired nurse and member of the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Palange told NCR that her favorite activity is reading newspapers in the library in the morning after Mass. Every Friday afternoon, Palanege also takes part in the Shabbat service with some of the Jewish residents, sitting in the front row.

"To love God truly, one must first love people. And if anyone tells you that she loves God and does not love her fellow humans, you will know that she is not speaking the truth," said a meditation read aloud by a Jewish resident of Kittay when Cantor Daniel Pincus asked them to mention which of the weekly meditations they preferred.

Pincus proceeded with the prayers, and centered his entire sermon on the importance of dialogue and mutual respect between Catholics and Jews. After blessing the challah bread, he then broke it and distributed it to all the attendees, most of whom were in wheelchairs, both Catholics and Jews.

**The name of the The New Jewish Home, Kittay Senior Apartments has been updated throughout the story.*