

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Early Years*

The story of service and volunteerism at Sacred Heart University starts with the teachings of Jesus Christ in the gospels, teachings that permeated the thinking in the Catholic Church at the time of the Second Vatican Council, and that led to the Church's reaffirmation of the role of the laity, the renewed call for social action and social justice, and specifically the Church's pronouncements on the preferential treatment for the poor.

When the Most Reverend Walter W. Curtis, Bishop of Bridgeport, contemplated founding Sacred Heart University, he dreamed of an institution of higher learning infused with the spirit of Vatican II, graduating young men and women ready to assume an active role in the life of the Church. That dream became a reality and the school's first catalog clearly stipulated that "one of the major goals of the university should be preparation for a life of personal sanctity and for active participation in the Catholic apostolate."<sup>1</sup>

Another defining characteristic of the new school on Park Avenue was its lay staff and administration. "It was Bishop Curtis who first suggested the establishment of its most innovative feature, a completely lay character," wrote Dr. John A. Rycenga, author of "Project Innovation," the institution's first self-study report. "The lay concept was hardly a new one, but with Vatican II about to begin, and with liberalizing trends apparent throughout American Catholicism, the time for its reintroduction was

propitious."<sup>2</sup> How propitious was to be measured by the response of Catholic academicians who left posts at other colleges to join in the new experiment, arriving at Sacred Heart University filled with the rhetoric of the *Aggiornamento*, and charged with a sense of idealism and purpose. "There was a challenge," recalled Doug Bohn, the current assistant vice-president of Academic Affairs and University registrar. "All of us came from backgrounds that were Catholic and probably from institutions that were run by religious orders. This was a lay experience."<sup>3</sup> John Croffy, who joined the staff in August of 1963 as the director of Student Personnel, said:

I'd like to reemphasize what I always believed the Sacred Heart story was, in relation to the laity. When I used to go out in the early days and into the Catholic high schools where there were priests and nuns present, I always used to explain the presence of Sacred Heart University to the students in the presence of these people as the new emergence of the laity in their faith. I think that Vatican II and Pope John pointed out, and history has shown, that the Church doesn't belong just to priests and nuns. It's not their responsibility alone. As a result of Vatican II, we were trying to educate Catholics at Sacred Heart along with other faiths, but particularly Catholics, to assume a responsible role."<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, administrators and faculty signing on at the new university believed they were participating in a defining moment in the history of Catholicism and higher education. For most, coming to Sacred Heart University was an act of faith, an answering of the call of the Church to help celebrate the emerging role of the laity in the post-conciliar world.

### *An Early Emphasis on Social Action*

The founding administrators—Dr. William H. Conley, the first president, and Dr. Maurice O'Sullivan, the vice-president—focused on building a quality curriculum and attracting qualified area students, but at the same time they stressed to incoming

students the importance of the core values of the Catholic intellectual tradition and particularly the spirit of Vatican II, with its emphasis on social action and social justice.<sup>5</sup> In his first address to the students, Conley called for “first, intellectual development; second, moral and spiritual development; and third, self-motivation to undertake a Christian apostolate.”<sup>6</sup>

This was, after all, the 1960s, a time heady with social activism. Lisa von York, a student leader writing in the school paper, the *Obelisk*, called attention to the “gradual shifting and realignment of American moral values occurring mainly in the ranks of the country’s young adult population.” She spoke of students being “galvanized” into action, “going out and giving help where it is needed.” Von York, the daughter of sociology professor Tania von York, noted that “tutoring projects in operation throughout this area are a testimony to a more concerned student mentality.”<sup>7</sup> And in his homily at the annual Mass of the Holy Spirit to start the 1967 school year, in recognition of the efforts of a new generation of social activists, Bishop Curtis said, “What a great privilege to be young in this post-conciliar age—to have the youthful zeal and openness to life.” He praised youth’s “heightened influence in society,” and exhorted the students to devote themselves to a life of service. “In the prospect of peace,” he said, “those of you who are privileged to receive an education have a responsibility to serve mankind.”<sup>8</sup>

The Bishop’s words, “a responsibility to serve mankind,” sounded familiar to the assembled students, because earlier that summer several had met to plan a tri-university student council specifically to address local urban problems. “Students at Sacred Heart University,” the local press reported, “are developing a social action council designed to involve SHU students in Greater Bridgeport social service activities. The project follows a series of summer meetings with representatives of Fairfield University and the University of Bridgeport.” The same article noted that “the SHU organization will include representatives from various social service societies and interested students from academic fields concerned with social problems.” As to the purpose of the new organization, the article said, “The Tri-University organization has the dual purpose of enabling students at all three institutions to

become familiar with community needs, to encourage volunteer student participation in existing community social service programs, and to initiate new programs for university student participation.”

Fr. Martin McDermott, University Chaplain at the time, believed that the students’ activism could be traced directly to Vatican II. “Father McDermott attributes much of the current student enthusiasm for social involvement within the community to the currents unleashed by the Second Vatican Council and related developments which have emphasized concern for the poor and underprivileged,” reported an article in the *Bridgeport Sunday Post*. “He feels that much of this spirit has rubbed off locally and predicts greater SHU student involvement in the months to come.” The same article noted the participation of an “estimated 400 SHU students in tutoring and Confraternity of Christian Doctrine work throughout the local area.”<sup>10</sup>

The numbers of students volunteering in Bridgeport did not go unnoticed by the administration. An article in the school paper, “Brains and Service Recognized at SHU,” stated, “The university recognized students with significant achievements toward the two-fold objectives of the university—academic excellence and community service—in ceremonies conducted before vacation in the auditorium.” The Kreuzfahrer society was cited for work in an “inner city area with Action for Bridgeport Community Development (ABCD) program. O’Sullivan complimented the society and said that their work is truly a manifestation of the ‘service-above-self’ concept.”<sup>11</sup>

While Sacred Heart University students developed the Tri-University Social Action Council, the administration joined forces with the University of Bridgeport, Fairfield University, and Housatonic Community College, to form the Higher Education Center for Urban Studies (HECUS) to ensure institutional involvement in helping to solve problems in the Bridgeport community. “In the present troubled period when so much emphasis is being placed upon the problems of the urban community,” said the four area college presidents in a joint statement, “it is most appropriate that the institutions of higher learning in the Greater Bridgeport region combine their resources to assist in finding the most effective solutions to the problems in this area of

urban studies." The major purposes for the consortium were: "to coordinate research efforts in the field of urban problems, opportunities and concerns in Southwestern Connecticut; to initiate, channel and expedite the efforts of the member institutions and their service to urban activities in the area; to provide a center through which student learning might be enriched by closer association with urban problems especially through utilizing the community as a laboratory resource; to relate the institutions of higher education to the needs of the community, not only through normal educational programs, but also through a program of continuing education including conferences, seminars and specialized courses"; and "to develop financial support for appropriate urban studies from governmental agencies, foundations and other interested sources."<sup>12</sup>

HECUS was placed in the capable hands of H. Parker Lansdale, director of the YMCA and an urban activist voted "Outstanding Citizen of the Year" by Bridgeport's Civitans. "Parker had a real missionary zeal and a tremendous number of contacts in the community," recalled William B. Kennedy, a former member of the History Department and assistant to the president at the University. "His concept was to expand the level of educational opportunities to the people," said Kennedy, who added that the Center "certainly made the community much more aware of the higher education resources in the area."<sup>13</sup> While the main thrust of the program, said Croffy, "was to help minorities get into higher education,"<sup>14</sup> an added benefit provided by the consortium was a forum for administrators "to get together to talk," recalled Doug Bohn. "Registrars met with registrars, deans met with deans, and discussed items of mutual interest. Essentially Parker was trying to build a cooperative effort among the schools."<sup>15</sup> The consortium lasted several years, noted Kennedy, with Lansdale "its heart and soul." Kennedy added, "When he left it dissolved."<sup>16</sup>

### *A Focus on the Poor*

Even though the times gave rise to social activism on campus, the University's insistence on community service was, in part, inspired by the vision of Conley. In a talk to area civic

representatives and newspaper editors, Conley called the school “a product of the thought of the Second Vatican Council,” and spoke of the University’s “commitment to the gospel of social betterment through student community service.” At the same time, Conley promised that the University would “expand its efforts to encourage student participation in activities designed to uplift and advance progress in deprived urban neighborhoods.”<sup>17</sup> Reporting on the same talk, the *Obelisk* quoted the first president as saying “Schools are best qualified to develop students capable and conscious of community service obligations and who recognize such community service as their personal responsibility.”<sup>18</sup>

On campus, social activism and volunteerism soon became synonymous with the University’s mission. “When fraternities and sororities were approved,” recalled Bohn, “they could not be approved simply as social organizations. They all had to show the group providing some kind of service to the community.”<sup>19</sup> In a history of the school written in 1988 to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of its founding, Professors Charles Eby and Paul Siff called special attention to the on-going spirit of activism on campus when they wrote: “A number of students recognized a duty to consider and respond to issues beyond their immediate, everyday interests, and the social concerns of the 1960s were manifest at the University.”<sup>20</sup> This author tried to capture some of the fervor for community service in the introduction to a University catalog in the early 1970s:

It seems everyone is talking about commitment today. But at Sacred Heart we think we live it. You see, our students make a decision . . . they decide not to go away to school, but to stay in their own community where they can put their idealism to the test . . . Because they know that’s where the action is—in their own community . . . Like Armando, who teaches English to a class of Portuguese immigrants . . . or like Sidnee, who spends her spare time helping out in a local drug referral center . . . or like the kids who work as tutors for inner-city children . . . Yes, that’s the flavor of social consciousness, the meaning of commitment at Sacred Heart.<sup>21</sup>

The local press reported, "In Bridgeport and surrounding areas, there's hardly a community fund raising event that hasn't found SHU fraternity brothers and sorority sisters out collecting."<sup>22</sup>

In fact, the list of service sites and organizations benefiting from these early volunteer efforts reads like a "Who's Who" of community activism. A sampling of the efforts included: United Way, Tuberculosis Foundation, Leukemia Drive, Barbara Ann Fund, Cancer Fund, March of Dimes, Expo, parties for mentally retarded children, Muscular Dystrophy Association Fund Raiser, Halloween Party and Easter Egg Hunt for underprivileged children in Bridgeport, American Red Cross Blood Bank, Multiple Sclerosis Society, sponsoring a foster child, working at the Bridgeport Regional Center, letters and visits to prisoners, visits to mentally ill at Fairfield Hills, collecting a truck load of food, clothing, and supplies for Honduras flood victims, and visiting the Dinan Center.<sup>23</sup>

So, from the beginnings of the school, the spirit of community service thrived at Sacred Heart University, was viewed as integral to the school's mission, and included the efforts of a sizable portion of the student body. Moreover, besides volunteer work, several disciplines involved students in field work experiences, foreshadowing the current interest in service-learning which requires community service for courses. Dr. Elizabeth Kelly, professor of psychology, for example, talked about a special course sequence that enabled "students to test the theoretical classroom material they have been exposed to in actual clinical working situations."<sup>24</sup>

But aside from the volunteer efforts and field work experiences of the students, a few endeavors that began at Sacred Heart went well beyond the usual definition of "service" and deserve separate mention.

### *Founding the Thomas Merton House*

Part of the service commitment of the school was lived by the faith community at Sacred Heart University when its members established the Thomas Merton House of Hospitality, an effort to put into practice the spirit of the Gospels, and particularly the

Church's mandate for the preferential treatment for the poor. The poor, in this case, were the hungry and homeless of Bridgeport. There was a felt need on the part of the founders of the Merton House to do something concrete, to stop talking about the plight of the poor and to actually administer to their needs. The story about the beginnings of the Merton House was told by Jack Hickey-Williams from the diocesan Ministry of Social Concerns:

The early 70s was a fruitful period in the renewal of the church's commitment to her social mission. The Spirit's creation of gospel and ecumenical council gave birth to the movements that linked spirituality with service. One of the most frequently repeated quotations of the time was "The Church cannot preach justice to the world unless she is first just in the eyes of the world." How best to respond to this dilemma? Groups of worshipping Christians in many different Catholic settings were repeating this question. There was in a sense a quest to serve in such a way that worship was indeed true worship such as Isaiah had first described. In this larger context, the community that gathered at Sacred Heart University on Saturday evenings sought some help.<sup>25</sup>

Fr. John Giuliani, chaplain at the University at the time, recalled the spirit of the founding as follows:

The specifics of founding Merton House happened in the SHU Chapel on a Saturday night during liturgy.

Kathy Thorsby, then visiting from the Community of Non-Violence in D.C. (Kathy was originally from Westport), spoke of their opening day of Zaccheus House—a soup kitchen in D.C. when Mother Teresa visited and, contrary to her own rules, sat and had a bowl of soup.

After Kathy spoke, I asked her, "What can we do to help?" She answered directly: "Open a soup kitchen in Bridgeport."

This was in the spring. It didn't take long to open the Merton House. Our love of Merton has inspired us for years."<sup>26</sup>



The flyer celebrating the Center's twenty-fifth anniversary relates the rest of the story:

In the winter of 1973, Ed Kirchner, Bill Dorfer, Sister Kathleen Deignan, and Father John Giuliani made a retreat at the Weston Priory in Vermont to pray and discern about the possibility of opening a soup kitchen in Bridgeport. The fruit of that retreat was to go ahead with plans to open a house of hospitality. A building was found on One Housatonic Avenue.

After getting full support and backing from the group at Sacred Heart University, renovations were begun on the building. The name Thomas Merton was chosen because he had had a very profound impact on the lives of all those who had made the retreat in Weston. Thomas Merton truly exemplified all that a house of hospitality stood for, both by his writings and his personal example concerning such issues as peace and social justice.<sup>27</sup>

On November 17, 1974, the Thomas Merton House of Hospitality officially opened its doors.

The first day was "pure mission," recalled Giuliani. "Eight of us broke up in pairs as directed in the Gospel. We headed North, South, East, and West of Merton House. We approached 'street' people and told them about where they could eat a hot meal with no strings attached. Our first meals were canned soup and bread."

Ending his reminiscence, Giuliani said, "It happened in Liturgy where the gifts of the Spirit are given. Everything flowed from there, in Gospel spirit."<sup>28</sup> So the Thomas Merton Center became a reality. In his historical overview of the beginnings of the Merton House, and in particular about the Weston retreat, Hickey-Williams wrote, "The fruit of that retreat was to be a very new type of ministry. Plans for a house of hospitality in the Catholic Worker tradition but with the support of a diocesan university (Sacred Heart University) and diocesan ministry continued."<sup>29</sup>

Today, the Merton Center, which moved into the former St. Joseph's Church at 43 Madison Avenue in 1989 to accommodate

its expanding programs and services, is an integral part of Catholic Charities of Fairfield County, where 250 guests are fed and assisted daily. Its current mission statement reads: "The Thomas Merton Center is committed to providing a loving, safe, and hope-filled community which responds to the needs of its guests, and respects the dignity of each person. We reflect to the individual and the community our shared responsibility to love and support one another."<sup>30</sup> Besides the soup kitchen, the Center maintains an After-School Program, as well as a Family Support Center for young mothers and their children, a medical clinic, mental health services, prayer groups, Narcotic Anonymous, and literacy volunteers. At a recent fund-raising breakfast, Bishop Edward Egan, the newly appointed Archbishop of the Diocese of New York, said in praise of the work of the Merton Center, "I say to myself, Lord, maybe I could be that good, that generous, that giving. Everyone that comes to Merton House is treated as an honored guest, a child of God, an image of the Divinity. And that is a lesson for all of the Greater Bridgeport community, and it is a lesson for all of us. . . . I want to thank anyone who has any part in the Thomas Merton Center, for the wonderful good you do for the people who are hurting in our community, and for the great inspiration you give to us."<sup>31</sup>

Over the years, as the Merton Center grew to its present size and scope, the University made its presence felt with staff and students volunteering year around. Maryann Furlong, current director of the Center, noted this ongoing support when she said, "groups of students come to help at the Family Support Center, the soup kitchen, with the after-school program. Sacred Heart people have been coming here for as long as I've been here." Then Furlong added, "I think the Merton Center is a perfect example of what happens when the laity really understands and believes in their power to effect change, that it doesn't have to come from the hierarchy. Father John Giuliani was involved but I'm sure he was on an equal footing with this small group of lay people who just got together and prayed, and they said 'All right, we are praying, but there's got to be another step.' And one thing led to another—prayer in action. I think it's continued since Vatican II. Lay people are alive and well."<sup>32</sup>

A flyer explains the Center's focus: "For the first ten years, our main focus was feeding. However, the changing face of those in need has caused us to dramatically expand our mission to include programs to help people move out of the grinding cycle of poverty. Today, we are committed to helping our guests become more self-sufficient, and we currently have several programs that enable and encourage them to take their lives in a positive direction."<sup>33</sup>

### *The Appalachia Connection*

Another early University commitment to service took the form of an annual clothing, toys, and food drive, culminating in truckloads of goods driven down to Appalachia by students. As early as 1966, Appalachia's plight took on a special meaning for the campus. "We spent our week working for the local branch of the Office of Economic Opportunity," said Jan Muldoon of her experiences in Dickenson County, Virginia. "Our task was to assist two Community Aides by going about the country side urging people to register the following week. . . . It seemed as though the county, tucked away in the mountains, had been forgotten by the twentieth century."<sup>34</sup>

A couple of years later "a group of concerned juniors and seniors who wished to see more social action" at the University, founded Sigma Tau Omega. "We began a food, clothing, and toy drive which was to benefit the people of Appalachia," said fraternity members. The *Prologue* called the project "a huge success," and the fraternity "decided to sponsor the drive every year."<sup>35</sup> The *Bridgeport Sunday Post* reported:

The fourth annual Appalachia drive is underway at Sacred Heart University. The drive, which will bring four truckloads of clothing, canned foods, toys, small household items, and baby furniture to Vansburg, Ky., is coordinated by Sigma Tau Omega fraternity at SHU. . . . Dean of students John A. Croffy affirmed the value of the Appalachia drive as an effort to help students broaden their community interests.

The drive's chairman expects to collect more than 20,000 pounds of materials for Vansburg, transporting them in four trucks donated by local branches at car rental agencies. . . . A small group of fraternity brothers and interested students will drive the 600 miles to Vansburg on Dec. 22. The goods will be distributed the following day, and the SHU students plan to return home by Christmas eve.<sup>36</sup>

By 1975, "over 100,000 pounds of toys and clothing" had been distributed in Appalachia.<sup>37</sup> Before Christmas each year, boxes of donations piled up in the school's corridors, were loaded into rental trucks, driven down to Appalachia, and distributed to the needy.

### *The REPHAS Project*

Besides founding the Merton Center and supporting the annual Appalachia drive, another social action project initiated at the University around the same time was a program for physically handicapped children. In 1973, Jack Farina, a psychology major, started a program called REPHAS (Recreation for the Physically Handicapped After School), which included the efforts of several outside agencies, students receiving three credits for field-work experience in psychology, and the members of several sororities and fraternities. Dr. Donald Brodeur, chair of the department at that time, recalled:

Jack Farina had been working during high school and his early college years at a summer camp for disabled kids upstate in Connecticut. When he came to Sacred Heart he realized through his contacts with the disabled community that there was nothing for the kids in this area. So he started on his own, working with kids after school, and he said, "Why can't I get some more students to help me?" He asked me about setting up a program for it, and I said, "Go ahead and try it." So he put together a program for handicapped kids after school and he called

it REPHAS. He got a bunch of students from the fraternities and sororities, but primarily focusing on psych majors, to help him. And eventually we incorporated that into a field experience program which became a required three-credit course for our students. Jack's REPHAS program was really the beginning of that.<sup>38</sup>

"The goal of the program," noted an article in the 1977 edition of the school yearbook, was "to give these children the opportunity to get involved in activities that are not normally available to them. Mr. Farina's reasoning behind the program was that 'like most children, their parents don't have enough time to play with them in outside sports during the week.' Moreover, their confinement to wheelchairs or dependency on crutches further lessens their opportunity to play outside with the neighborhood children." The *Prologue* article pointed out that Farina "was able to devise the program through the cooperation of the Easter Seal Rehabilitation Center, the Bridgeport school system, Sacred Heart University and the Busch Bus Company. The Woman's Auxiliary of the Easter Seal Rehabilitation Center has continued to finance the program." Many of the REPHAS activities, concluded the article, "could not have materialized" had it not been for the cooperation of "sororities and fraternities on Sacred Heart's campus."<sup>39</sup>

Over the years, Brodeur said, Farina's program "expanded to the point where we now run five or six sections of field experience every year during the summers—up to a hundred and fifty students, and sixty hours a semester in all kinds of agencies, working with handicapped kids, working with mentally retarded children and adults, working in halfway houses for recovering addicts. It has turned out to be a very successful program in a number of ways."<sup>40</sup>

### *The Melady Years*

As the University moved into and through the 1980s under the energetic leadership of Dr. Thomas Melady, a former U.S. ambassador to Uganda and Burundi who would later serve as

ambassador to the Vatican under the first Bush administration, the school's commitment to community service continued unabated. In 1983, to celebrate its twentieth anniversary, the University commemorated "two decades of service to Southwestern Connecticut by honoring twenty leaders in a community service awards ceremony," reported the *Bridgeport Sunday Post*. According to Melady, the honorees "marked by achievement in education, industry, civic and religious endeavors," exhibited "a commitment to the community" that exemplified "the meaning of the University."<sup>41</sup>

Similarly Melady praised the students' volunteer efforts "to build a better world." He wrote, "At least with the young men and women I meet on a daily basis, I see a group of people volunteering their energies and expertise in participatory government and social action. We have numerous examples of young people giving their time and energy to community projects."<sup>42</sup> In another place, Melady spoke of the role of educators to "lead our students to a better understanding of how to conduct themselves." He went on to say, "We can tell students that the good life evolves from a series of worthwhile endeavors, and that selflessness and a willingness to perform services for fellow human beings is more important" than amassing material wealth.<sup>43</sup>

In the journal *Catholicism in Crisis*, Melady wrote:

The time is right for the development of community-supported self-help programs to lift the poor out of poverty, enhance their sense of pride and dignity, and provide a solid material and spiritual base for the next generation. In particular, the challenges of changing technology require mechanisms for training the pre-school urban minority and other disadvantaged because social policy ought to aim at *empowering* the poor to become self-reliant and self-sustaining.<sup>44</sup>

### *Focus on Educational Programs*

In the mid-1980s, the University's Education Department began an intensive six-week summer remedial and enrichment program called Bridge, for low income and minority high school