

The Agnes Story

A modest white clapboard and red-brick fronted ranch house nestles on 4989 Hickory Signpost Road, a suburban street off John Tyler Highway, in Williamsburg, Virginia. The few dried leaves scattered about the yard are the only indication that the season is transitioning, for the white oak and ash trees still hold their leaves. Everything looks orderly on this mild, early October day, as we follow the driveway behind the house to park alongside the tired-looking Ford Econoline van and a pickup truck that clearly has seen some better days. A knock on the front door brings no response, but we are given a broad wave from the rear deck to come into the kitchen. Welcome to Martha's Place, a residential home for disabled adults.

In this family reside individuals with physical and intellectual disabilities, people with autism and those with impairments that need support to meet daily challenges. A tall, strongly-built woman, her hair tied in a brown floral kerchief that matches her caftan, greets us with a warm handshake and beaming smile, which belies the fatigue in her eyes. She bids us take a seat on one of the stools at the kitchen counter. She, however, alights only briefly, as there is a minor night situation to be resolved, morning food to be prepared, and a day to be organized.

Sr. Agnes hails originally from Nairobi, a family of eight children. The neighborhood that makes up Jolly Pond, her first home for disabled adults is a world away from her original intention of joining the cloistered, contemplative Dominicans. On a home visit, her father's encouragement to "do what you have to do" led her to the Little Sisters of St. Francis (LSOSF). At this point, Rose, a young client sporting new white-laced black sneakers, bustles into the room, wanting to know when the hairdresser is coming to give her braids. Sr. Agnes, for the first of a dozen times, patiently explains all the chores and activities that must first be accomplished before the hairdresser will arrive. Rose hugs her and sits down for a few minutes before repeating the question. This is her birthday present, and she is particularly anxious.

Without pause, Sr. Agnes compares her spiritual and professional path to the seasons, how "one must plant, plow, and then harvest. But first you must prepare and create the rains; and don't forget the weeding." To prepare, she attended the University of Rochester and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), where she lived with the Sisters of Mercy; and then Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., where, with her background in special education, she decided that she could best serve God and her community through the opening of residential homes for disabled people.

This realization has been a thorny process at times. Financial and visa obstacles had to be overcome. Her passion was not always embraced by others. “Some say I am crazy,” she chuckles, “but they eventually came around, maybe grudgingly.” She also says she prayed a lot. Sr. Agnes believes one person can make a difference, and she views the homes she has purchased and manages—sleeping on a nightly rotation in each one—much like the small scale farms back in Kenya, where the cow’s milk nourishes the family, who are then able to grow the crops that feed the village.

The complexities of managing five homes, with more to come, has meant Sr. Agnes’ circle of caring people has expanded, along with her own knowledge. Compassionate and enlightened individuals have offered wise tax, mortgage, and legal advice. She rolls her eyes at the term ‘interest rates,’ and acknowledges her deep gratitude towards others’ expertise. Her vision is once again turning toward East Africa. Globalization has brought economic benefits, but other problems as well. Her face saddens as she recalls her youth, when neighbors casually visited back and forth. “There are fences now; people are busy; generations coming down the road will have it very rough.”

Her indefatigable optimism demands a resolution, and so turns towards helping the children. This is much like planting a new crop. With the enthusiasm of her American friends and Sr. Agnes’ understanding of her culture, there are plans to build an orphanage. The challenge is to build a home, to provide the psychological and emotional support—a family—that will create the cultural roots for those children who have lost parents to disease and war. “What type of spirit must we have?” she asks.

Sr. Agnes has planted roots that have brought forth greater community understanding. The residents of Jolly Pond, Martha’s Place, Hickory Signpost, St. Charles of Lwanga Home, Lwanga “G” Home, Seaton House, and St. Michael’s Day Support Program are our neighbors. They are not segregated in institutions, but are people achieving to the best of their ability. Sr. Agnes, the other sisters of the diocese, and those who work with these individuals are their advocates; they provide an abundance of support, from the daily logistics of cooking and cleaning to transportation. At times they nurse, teach, or listen. They remember holidays, favorite television shows, and birthdays. Sr. Agnes and her community model the success that comes from inspired action. She has taken a dream and with her strong faith and determination brought it to fruition. Now the hairdresser has arrived, and Rose will get her braids.



Sr. Agnes with Hairdressers

Information on Sr. Agnes' residential homes and day support services for adults with disabilities in Williamsburg and Virginia.

The Franciscan Brethren of St. Philip in Virginia

The Franciscan Brethren of St. Philip is a private, non-profit organization that provides residential and day support services to adults with disabilities. Our philosophy is that all people have an inherent dignity and each individual will be treated with respect, regardless of age, race, creed, color, financial status, or developmental/intellectual, mental, or physical impairment. We have two Intellectual Developmental Disability Waiver Group Homes and two Assisted Living Facilities. Each home is in a beautiful residential neighborhood and may only have six to eight residents. The home provides meals, medication management, laundry services, and twenty-four hour supervision and individualized training. We also offer an Intellectual/Developmental Disability Waiver Day Support Program.

- 1) Jolly Pond Residential Facility, Williamsburg, VA—26 acres
- 2) Martha's Place Group Home, Williamsburg, VA—1 ½ acres
- 3) Seaton House Group Home, Quinton, VA—25 acres
- 4) Lwanga "G" Home Assisted Living Facility, Williamsburg, VA—1 ½ acres
- 5) St. Charles of Lwanga Home, Williamsburg, VA—34 acres
- 6) St. Michael's Day Support Program, Williamsburg, VA—4 acres



Little Sisters of St. Francis, Friends and Volunteers

Currently, the Little Sisters of St. Francis manage five homes for disabled adults in the Williamsburg, Virginia area. They were recently licensed to provide daycare support for disabled adults in the state of Virginia.

On the other side of the globe, The Little Sisters of St. Francis in Kenya and Uganda are involved in finding homes for orphans in Kenya and Uganda. Sister Agnes hopes to return home someday to continue their efforts and mission work in Africa.