

Sisters on a Mission

By **Jack Tomczuk** - October 24, 2018

The Medical Mission Sisters Thrift Shop in Fox Chase has funded international outreach efforts



Shop with a purpose: All sales from the Medical Mission Sisters thrift shop, at 8400 Pine Road in Fox Chase, fund those in need around the world. At the heart of the thrift shop are the nuns who work there, many of whom are in their 80s. **JACK TOMCZUK / TIMES PHOTO**

For more than 40 years, the Medical Mission Sisters have operated a thrift shop tucked away in bucolic West Fox Chase.

It may be difficult to see from the road, but the shop's influence spreads around the world. Sales at the shop fund healthcare the Medical Mission Sisters provide in poor countries, as well as projects closer to home — including a recovery community in North Philadelphia.

The two-floor thrift shop sells a wide assortment of items. There's clothing, shoes, household items, video, and no shortage of knick-knacks. Everything on the shelves is donated.

At the heart of the shop are the nuns who work there, many of whom are in their 80s. Almost all of them

overseas, and now, as a “retirement job,” they are running the store.

Sister Elona Stanchak returned to the United States about eight years ago after spending 50 years as a nurse in a 225-bed hospital in Pakistan. On a recent weekday, she was in a back room on the shop’s second floor.

“We meet a lot of nice people, and I think we serve a purpose for those who can’t afford to buy elsewhere.”



A lifetime of service: Almost all of the nuns at the Medical Mission Sisters thrift shop have spent years “retirement job,” they are running the store. Above, Sister Elona Stanchak spent 50 years serving as a nurse in a hospital in Pakistan before returning to the United States. JACK TOMCZUK / TIMES PHOTO
Several of the sisters said they had never worked in retail before coming to the store. Most had been nurses who performed other medical tasks.

Sister Jane Fell traveled the world with the Medical Mission Sisters helping those in need. Her many stops included Uganda and Ghana.

Fell, who staffs the cash register, said her job now is to meet about 50 customers a day. Cashiering is part of starting conversations and getting to know people, she said.

“My ministry now is serving and sharing,” Fell said.

Part of the lure of the shop is the “treasure hunt” experience, staff said. Customers may browse the pack more looking for something that catches their eye.

Others come simply for a friendly face and jovial conversation.





JACK TOMCZUK / TIMES PHOTOS

The Medical Mission Sisters have owned the sprawling property on Pine Road since 1939, according to Si: outgoing director of the thrift shop. It serves as the order's North American headquarters and also includ Mission Green, a complex of affordable apartments for people over 55.

Foley said about 50 sisters also live on the property.

The building that houses the thrift shop also has a rather interesting history. In the Prohibition Era, it wa: boathouse" and served as a nightclub, Foley said. It was on the edge of a since filled-in lake.

Of course, that activity ceased when the Medical Mission Sisters purchased the property. However, Foley going there for vacation with the other sisters while the lake was still around.

The thrift shop opened in 1976, and the big doors where the boats would pull in are still visible today. Th where the parking lot is now.





Left: An old photograph shows a sister in a boat outside the property that now houses the thrift shop. Or the thrift shop looks like today. JACK TOMCZUK / TIMES PHOTOS

In addition to funding the Medical Mission Sisters' international efforts, the thrift shop also makes an effort in the local community.

Store manager Marilyn Reyes said St. Cecilia's parish and Birthright, a crisis pregnancy center on Oxford Street, refer people in need to the store for clothing and other items, which the shop provides for free. The shop also supports New Jerusalem Now, a drug recovery program run by the Medical Mission Sisters at 20th and Norris streets.

The thrift shop, located at 8400 Pine Road, is open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Saturday.

Foley said the sisters are looking for volunteers to help out at the store, and donations are always welcome. For more information, call 215-745-7930 or visit www.mmsthiftshop.org. ••

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