

March 2021

Malta House

Malta House moving into new, larger home

By JOE PISANI

NORWALK—Twenty-five years ago, Michael and AC O'Rourke of Stamford dreamed of starting a home for homeless pregnant women and their babies. In 1998, Malta House opened its doors, and since then, it has served more than 600 mothers and their babies through its residential program and many more through its community programs.

This spring, as a result of a \$4.5 million campaign, it will move to the renovated former convent on the campus of All Saints School in Norwalk, increasing its capacity by 50 percent. The new home will provide 15 bedrooms, three of which will be family suites that can accommodate a mother and up to two children. There will also be classroom space, offices, a nursery, a play area for children and a chapel for prayer and Mass.

"We are really excited about the opportunity this will give us," said Executive Director Carey Dougherty. "We often have a waiting list, and sometimes we have to turn people away, which is why we are moving into a larger space where we can grow."

Over the next 20 years, the new Malta House will be able to help more than 1,500 mothers and babies, she said.

Founder Michael O'Rourke, who is executive director of Oppenheimer & Co., said: "Twenty-five years ago, my wife AC and I had a dream to open a home for homeless, pregnant women and their babies. This dream came after our beautiful son was born after 17 years of marriage and never-ending prayers for a child. We were so grateful to God for the greatest blessing of our lives and set out to ensure that every mother is given the chance to experience this same blessing and gift of bringing life to this world. The Good Lord had given us our miracle son, so it just made sense that my wife and I should help provide miracles for other women with no room at the inn... because there was no inn in Connecticut."

Malta House is the only group home for pregnant women over 18 in Fairfield County and one of a limited number of residential programs for parenting mothers

and their babies, Dougherty said. Since its doors opened, it has provided more than 8,500 nights of shelter, helped bring 355 babies into the world and assisted 335 mothers get back on their feet.

"Our goal is to empower women to live independently and provide a better life for themselves and their children," said Dougherty, who has worked at Malta House since 2017. "I always say I am blessed to have a front-row seat to see the transformative power of God's love in our moms. The encounter is nothing short of a miracle. At Malta House, we are providing this love and support. Babies are born into safety and love, and they are so nurtured in our nursery that it's the happiest place on Earth."

There are currently eight mothers at Malta House and six babies—including the first set of twins since Dougherty has been there. Three of the mothers are pregnant and five have children. The new home can accommodate 33 people—15 women and 18 children.

"Many times, we are often the last chance for keeping a mom and baby together," she said. "During COVID-19, we were only one of two shelters and congregating living programs that remained open and accepted new families."

"We were founded upon and guided by our Catholic faith, but our doors are open to any homeless, pregnant or parenting woman who needs a 'room at the inn,'" Dougherty said. "No woman should be faced with the unthinkable alternative because she doesn't have a safe place to care for her baby, and no woman should have to stay with an abuser because it's the only home she has."

Many of the pregnant women who come to Malta House are experiencing homelessness and have never lived independently or have come from unsafe or fragmented families. Malta House regularly receives referrals from hospitals, social service agencies, shelters and programs that will not accept a woman who is pregnant or a new mother.

"One thing that always catches me off guard in this county, where there is so much wealth, is that over 300 babies are born every year to mothers who live below the poverty line, to mothers who are experiencing homelessness,"



MICHAEL AND AC O'ROURKE

Dougherty said. "We believe a mother deserves every opportunity to a life of self-sufficiency and independence. Every baby deserves to be born into a world of safety and love. We are trying to be the family and support network to mothers who need to improve their lives and are looking for a future of independence."

Dougherty said Malta House assists the women with education, employment, financial literacy, health and nutrition, fitness, spirituality and parenting. There is free childcare so the mothers can go to school or work.

"We are also unique in that we continue to support our families who transition to independent living in order to ensure their continued and long-term stability," she said.

The average stay is eight months, but it can extend to 18 months until a mother has saved sufficient money and secured housing.

"Malta House is where the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist converges with the presence of Christ in the women and children we serve," O'Rourke said. "We lift our women up through education, training and spiritual counseling and introduce them to prayer. Rather than treating them as 'neutral poverty-stricken pregnant objects' devoid of virtue, we help them to become moral actors and contributors to the community. We want them to appreciate how and why they will make a difference in this world, especially since they are children of God destined for heaven."

Dougherty said success is measured by a number of criteria, such as how much money a woman has saved, steady employment, stable housing and the life skills classes she has attended.

"Sadly, most of our mothers come from fractured families,

abuse and unspeakable trauma," Dougherty said. "I think many can't imagine how they will be able to bring life into the world when they are so unsure of their own place in it. Honoring and serving our mothers the way Christ asks of us and opening our home and our hearts to them is an important part of them seeing and valuing the sanctity of life. I think it is hard to convince a woman that the child she is carrying has dignity and was chosen by God when she herself feels abandoned, discarded and unloved."

Malta House will celebrate the move with a hybrid in-person and virtual gala on May 7 at Woodway Country Club in Darien. Honorees of the "There's No Place Like Home" gala are John Altieri, board vice chair; Chris Anspach, builder; Frank Chapman, architect; Altieri, Sebor and Wieber; the Diocese of Bridgeport, and others who worked on the 18-month construction and renovation of the new home. Guests can purchase tickets for remote "live streaming" or to join the event in person.

(Tickets and sponsorships to the "There's No Place Like Home" virtual and in-person gala can be purchased at www.maltahouse.org/events. For information, contact Kim Killooy at 203.610.2358 or kkillooy@maltahouse.org.)

(To learn more about Malta House, go to www.maltahouse.org. A virtual tour of the new home can be found at: www.maltahouse.org/newhome?wvideo=pvzdz5wg94.)

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Save the Date!

MALTA HOUSE ANNUAL GALA

FRIDAY, MAY 7, 2021
6:30 P.M.

WOODWAY COUNTRY CLUB
DARIEN, CONNECTICUT

CELEBRATING OUR HONOREES
JOHN ALTIERI AND
THE MH2 DREAM TEAM