Blog
Religious Life



Franciscan Sr. Caryn Crook, left, and Julie A. Ferraro set out from the House of Discernment for a breath of air. The house is sponsored by the Sisters of St. Francis of the Neumann Communities in Pittsburgh. (Caryn Crook)



by Julie A. Ferraro

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Discernment for some means deciding whether to pursue a religious vocation. For me, it means figuring out where I will next use my skills and talents to be of service.

When I discovered the Sisters of St. Francis of the Neumann Communities sponsor a house of discernment in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, I thought it would be the perfect place to spend time after more than a year helping care for my youngest two grandchildren in Washington state, and see where the Spirit guided me, COVID-19 restrictions notwithstanding.

Sr. Caryn Crook, vocation minister for the community, initiated the project in 2019. "Working in vocations, I found that many women need more time to discern than in the past," she said.

Reflecting on that past, when women had limited choices for a career — teacher, nurse or secretary — Sister Caryn said women became sisters to work in the church.

"Nowadays, options are limitless," she said. "I wanted to open a house where women can support each other in discerning their call."

Sister Caryn processed my application and related paperwork last July, and I was overjoyed to be accepted into the program, though I don't fit the usual mold for those in discernment. I bought my plane ticket, packed a bag and shipped a box, and kissed the 3- and 5-year-old bundles of energy good-bye at the departure gate of Washington's Sea-Tac Airport.



The House of Discernment is a renovated duplex which formerly served as a convent for some of the sisters. (Julie A. Ferraro)

I arrived at the House of Discernment on Jan. 7, tired after a flight delayed by mechanical issues, but eager. A brick duplex in Shaler Township, north of the Allegheny River, was formerly used as a convent. The interior had been renovated so both sides connect via an opening between the two living rooms. On the left side — looking toward the street — the living room, dining room and kitchen make up the lower level. The right side features a community room, a prayer room and office space. Three comfortable bedrooms and a bath occupy the upper level on each side.

At 8 a.m. Friday morning, Sister Caryn and I gathered in the prayer room, using *Franciscan Morning and Evening Praise* to start the day. After I unpacked and started adjust my internal clock from Pacific to Eastern time, Sister Caryn drove me around the nearby town of Millvale so I could see where a few key stores, the post office, and other places of note were located.

Perhaps the saddest site was the Sisters of St. Francis of Millvale's vast motherhouse, now vacant, atop a steep hill overlooking the neighborhood.

A merger of Franciscan communities, founded in the mid-1800s with roots in Philadelphia, into one congregation of approximately 400 sisters took place between 2004 and 2007. The respective motherhouses in Philadelphia, Hastings-on-Hudson, Buffalo, Syracuse and Millvale were sold, Sister Caryn explained. Plans by the buyer of the Millvale motherhouse fell through, leaving a day care center the only structure still occupied on the property. The five dozen remaining sisters who had lived in the building had been moved to a retirement community a few miles north.

At dinner on Friday, I met a young woman from American Samoa and Hawaii, who'd been living in the house with Sister Caryn since September 2020. She spent her daytime hours working at a local grocery store and volunteering at a food pantry.

We prayed in the evening, a blend of *Lectio Divina* — reflective reading — drawn from the day's Gospel reading, and petitions.

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Saturday morning, Sister Caryn and I hiked the walking trail along the Allegheny River. We snapped a selfie as we paused to view Pittsburgh's skyline before returning as the fourth member of our intentional community arrived. She had previously ministered at a home and school for children in Honduras and currently works remotely for a nonprofit agency.

That evening, Sister Caryn led us in a prayer service, welcoming the two of us to the house. We each received a wooden tau cross pendant, but the other "gifts" — honoring the Magi as part of a slightly belated Epiphany celebration — were even more special.

On four glass plates were folded yellow slips of paper. From the first, I selected one slip at a time and announced the name written on it.

The woman named then chose a slip from each of the other three plates. The first contained a saint's name, the second a virtue, the third a Scripture passage. These would be ours to focus on for the coming year.

Mine, not to my surprise, were St. Francis of Assisi, the virtue of wisdom and the passage,

"Alas, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, because I am a youth."

But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am a youth,' because everywhere I send you, you shall go, and all that I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you," declared the Lord (Jeremiah 1:6-8).



The Sisters of St. Francis of Millvale motherhouse sits vacant on a hill above the Pittsburgh borough of Millvale, sold when the community merged with four other Franciscan congregations to form the Sisters of St. Francis of the Neumann Communities. (Julie A. Ferraro)

Francis has been my favorite saint for nearly 50 years. That factored into the reason I applied to the house of discernment sponsored by a Franciscan women's community. Wisdom — well, if I don't have wisdom after living nearly 60 years … but I can always use more!

After we prayed, we moved from room to room, blessing the house, writing the three magis' initials with chalk above each of the four doors: 20+M+B+C+21.

Then, we sat in the community room and just talked, getting acquainted as we start the journey toward building an intentional community and our respective futures.

Part of that includes a personal growth plan, based upon reflection questions Sister Caryn gave each of us. Considerations about our spirituality, prayer life, physical health and future are used as a guide and reviewed on a monthly basis. We'll each

have a sister-mentor from the congregation and are encouraged to seek spiritual direction. Sister Caryn will be giving us classes on the Franciscan charism, among other formation opportunities.

For me, having time to pray and reflect in quiet is a blessing in itself. I look forward to growing, learning and discerning over the next six months or so where I'm destined to serve (noting the caveat: without interference from the pandemic!).

[Julie A. Ferraro has been a journalist for more than 30 years, covering many topics for publications across the U.S.]