News
Religious Life



(From left) Katela Villasenor, 19, Sister Debbie Krist, Sister Pat Smith, Sister Esther Anderson, Sister Bernadette Brazil, and Kayla Patino, 19, practice before filming a TikTok video at Neumann University. (Philadelphia Inquirer/Jessica Griffin/Staff Photographer)

Susan Snyder

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Editor's note: *This story was originally published by the Philadelphia Inquirer.*

Neumann University sophomore Katela Villasenor proudly displayed the recently snapped photos on her dorm room wall of herself and a dorm mate donning white bunny ears and striking funny poses.

"She was showing me some of her dance moves," said Villasenor, 19, a nursing major from Reading.

Her 77-year-old dorm mate, however, wasn't quite so eager to show off the photos.

"I have to appear in public after this," Sister Esther Anderson said.

Actually, Anderson said she didn't really mind. That's life at the Our Lady of Angels Convent in Aston, Delaware County, since 40 college students moved in earlier this year, joining the 40 Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia who already lived there. The Catholic university purchased the adjacent 63-acre property and convent of its founding order last year to add much-needed student living space, but the school wasn't about to boot the sisters who still lived there. And they didn't want to leave.

"Being with the young is like a shot of cocaine," Sister Jane LaManna, 79, said recently when sisters and students gathered to talk about their unusual living arrangement.

Fellow sisters urged LaManna to use a different word, noting that she really has no knowledge of what cocaine is like. "Shot of adrenaline," one suggested.

"Stronger than that," LaManna insisted.

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Sister Pat Smith said she was glad that Neumann became the new owner of the convent property because it likely will carry on the sisters' legacy as their numbers dwindle.

The Sisters of St. Francis founded Neumann, then called Our Lady of Angels College, in 1965. At one time, as many as 120 sisters lived in the 152,000-square-foot

convent, built in the late 1800s. At its peak more than six decades ago, the order had about 1,600 sisters. By the time Neumann purchased the convent, the number of sisters had fallen to 360. Sisters are spread among 19 states, along with Ireland, and Africa. The median age of sisters who live at the convent is 82.

Given the proximity of the convent and its connection to Neumann, sisters over the years have been no strangers to students. They have attended student games and plays. Before retirement, many of the sisters taught in K-12 Catholic schools and colleges.

But actually living together has given both students and nuns a new awareness of each other.

"You look at sisters and think of them as always very strict and not people themselves," said Kayla Patino, 19, a nursing major from Springfield. "Living with them made me realize that they were people before they became sisters."

There are heavenly perks, too.

"They prayed for us for our finals, which I'm still thankful for," Villasenor said.



Students (back, from left) Katela Villasenor and Kayla Patino, both 19, and nuns (front, from left) Sister Debbie Krist, Sister Pat Smith, Sister Esther Anderson, and Sister Bernadette Brazil rehearse before filming a TikTok video. (Philadelphia Inquirer/Jessica Griffin/Staff Photographer)

Students have been attending sisters' events at the convent. Earlier this month, they went to a Mass where sisters renewed their vows, then joined the nuns for doughnuts. Sisters have been regulars at students' events, too. At a recent "novelty night," they designed Christmas ornaments and stockings and drank hot chocolate. It's also where Villasenor and Anderson got their bunny-ear photo booth shots.

"I love the students," said Sister Bernadette Brazil, 77. "I'm going to too many parties, though."

Students and sisters recently gathered to make TikTok videos, dancing and wiggling their way to music.

"Do you want to see it?" Villasenor asked after they made the TikTok.

"Noooooo," Anderson said.

Even students who haven't spent as much time with the sisters said they like the space in the sprawling convent. Their bedrooms have more square footage than other dorms. They share a bathroom with only one student; in other dorms, they share with two or three. There are laundry facilities on each floor, as opposed to one set per building. The university did some minor renovations before students moved in.

"I think it's better," said Joe McFiberesima, 23, a junior computer information system major from Philadelphia.

Chris Domes, president of Neumann, said the university, which enrolls about 650 residential students, has had a dorm-room waiting list for a while, and the convent helped to ease the crunch. More than 80 students applied to live in the convent, more than it could accommodate this year, he said.

Over time, more students will move in, Domes said.

There were questions and a little anxiety before the move-in, Domes said, but they quickly dissolved. Students and nuns aren't on top of each other. Students are in one section of the building, the sisters in another.

"We don't make much noise; they don't make much noise," Villasenor said. "I'm very grateful to be living here. And if I could choose to, I would probably live here again."

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