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Calendar

Speaking words of comfort

Nun consoles by sharing her personal pain

By Maria Cramer, Globe Staff, 3/4/2004

To those who don't know her, Sister Bridget Haase appears a bundle of contradictions. Haase, a nun at the Ursuline Convent in Dedham, has witnessed the agony of starving children in Sudan, but says she is fearful of watching the bloody violence unfold in a new movie, "The Passion of the Christ."

She has 45 years of devout service under her belt. But she will tell a lapsed Roman Catholic that a spiritual life can compensate for missing weekly Mass. "But going to Mass is our main form of Christian duty," she cautioned.

And though she lost her father to suicide, she will talk openly about death and loss with the residents of the Boston Home in Dorchester, where she runs a "Spirituality and Wellness" program.

Haase is used to embracing complicated, messy emotions. It is an ability she developed while coping with the death of her father, Boris, a shoe salesman, when she was 26.

"I came to understand that guilt is a useless emotion," the 61-year-old wrote in an essay about him. "It took immense courage to accept the fact that I did not cause his death nor could I have prevented it. We are never able to read the heart of another, much less understand it."

For the past year and a half, Haase has brought her personal experiences to her job overseeing meditation sessions and on-site spirituality retreats at the Boston Home, where 82 percent of its 96 residents struggle with multiple sclerosis.



The Boston Home is more than 120 years old, and in recent years staff members saw a need to create more programs that would help residents whose bodies have failed them attain more meaning in life.

They decided they needed a coordinator to organize such services, said Norma Harrington, a nurse and social worker at the home. Haase, who had been volunteering there since 1998, was offered the job almost immediately.

"I love her," Harrington said recently. "She brings to the job a joy that I think her background contributes. She's great; incredibly creative."

Ellie Kasilowicz, 45, moved into the home in 1994, when symptoms of lupus began to overpower her. Solitary by nature, Kasilowicz said that her medical problems forced her to open up to people, and the program Haase coordinates helped ease her into talking about the death of her father when she was 6.

"I realized no one was ridiculing me," Kasilowicz said. "No one was making fun of me. It was the first time I felt comfortable enough to say something about it."

Haase acknowledges that working with people like Kasilowicz has forced her to ponder uncomfortable questions, like whether stem-cell research -- which holds hope for fighting neurological diseases -- is worthwhile, despite the condemnation of the Catholic Church because of its reliance on fetal tissue.

"I grapple with that," she said. "I really do. And if they prove it works, I'm really going to grapple with that."

Many Boston Home residents led rich lives -- as mountain climbers, photographers, nurses -- before their diseases overwhelmed them. Kasilowicz, whose porcelain-like skin makes her appear 10 years younger, is a licensed nurse.

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"I hated giving that up," she said. "I still consider myself a nurse. I read all the medical magazines and keep up with all the latest research."

If science could help them return to their old lives, it would be miraculous, Haase said. "I mean, wouldn't it be great to see Ellie walk again?"

Fortunately for Haase, few of the residents ask her opinion about scientific research.

"I think they don't want to get too hopeful about science that may take years to come," she said. "A lot of them think, 'Maybe it won't happen for me, but it might happen for someone else down the road.' "

Haase likes to describe her long career path as "checkered."

As a teacher in the 1980s and '90s, she traveled to San Antonio, Mexico, and Senegal. She's also a writer, and will record a CD of her book, "Well Said: Children's Words of Wisdom," this spring with WBZ radio personality Jordan Rich and 85 children from St. Brendan School in Dorchester. Proceeds from the CD sales will go to Children's Hospital in Boston.

But it was the year she spent trying to help starving children in Sudan in 1984 that was the most jarring and most memorable.

"I always live with those children on my shoulders," she said.

Witnessing so many deaths, she began to suffer from what she calls "compassion fatigue."

"You're tired of loving after a while. We can become comfortable with misery," she said. "And I prayed to God to make me as shocked by the next death as I had been by the first."

After so many years of traveling, Haase says, she believes she has finally settled down. Though born and raised in New Orleans, she prefers the Northeast, she says. Her mother, who has Alzheimer's disease, lives in Maine, which allows her to visit regularly.

"It seems that I belong here," she said. "But you never know: Life is full of surprises."