

When life turns you upside down, she's the calm voice who lets you know it's going to be OK

The street corner outside these fourth-story classroom windows has a sign that bears her name, and it will surprise no one if someday this bright building on Dudley Street does, too.

But that is no concern now. It's Monday morning and Sister Margaret Leonard is sitting before seven confident and focused women in a job-training session at Project Hope headquarters in Roxbury, doing what she's done all her life.She listens. She encourages. She sparks conversation. She smiles. She inspires."This is why we're here, because of people like you,'' the Roman Catholic nun tells the women, each bearing a stick-on tag that carries not her name but the characteristic she hopes soon captures the attention of an employer. Strength. Respect. Confidence. Committed. Ambitious. Empathetic.

They are all adjectives that aptly describe the 78-year-old religious sister who for 30 years has led Project Hope, a nonprofit, multiservice agency. She will surrender that post, the capstone of a remarkable career, sometime later this year, leaving a legacy she began building a lifetime ago when she left her home in Everett to work among the poor.

"This is what I want to do with my life,'' she remembers thinking back to the late 1950s after she graduated from St. Rose High School in Chelsea. "It's you out in the street with people.''

She entered a religious order, Little Sisters of the Assumption, and collected her undergraduate degree at Assumption College in Worcester, before moving to New York in the late 1960s. She worked the gritty streets of East Harlem, fighting for medical care, freeing neighborhoods from the bondage of drugs, demanding basic services such as heat and hot water — basic human

dignity.
“I loved it,’’ she said simply.

Sister Margaret spent 10 years as the national leader of the Little Sisters of Assumption, signing off on a decision to open the doors to the order’s old convent on Magnolia Street in Dorchester to the homeless. It was dubbed Project Hope, short for “House Open, People Enter’’ and it germinated a seed that blossomed into an agency that battles homelessness, educates homeless women, provides job training — and jobs — and supplies day care for working families.

Sister Margaret has been the driving force behind it all. “She’s a woman of God and an old-school activist,’’ said Mayor Martin J. Walsh.
If you’re thinking pious, gray-haired, rosary-bead-fingering, and severe, think again. When her car was once stolen, she tracked down the thieves, who ran away. She cooks a mean baked, stuffed shrimp and enjoys a glass of wine. When the needs of Boston’s homeless population became so great, she and the other sisters decided to simply give the Victorian convent to them, converting it to the shelter.

The next time a rectory in these parts opens its doors to the homeless and then surrenders the whole place to them, please call me. I’ll spring for the smelling salts.
“She is a constant reminder of what it really means to be a Christian,’’ said her longtime friend Marie St. Fleur, who now leads the Bessie Tartt Wilson Initiative for Children. “When life turns you upside down, she’s the calm voice who lets you know it’s going to be OK.’’

Sister Margaret says she has no intention of leaving the Roxbury-Dorchester neighborhood where she helped oversee the 2006 construction of Project Hope’s headquarters on Dudley Street.

When she sees the construction cranes blossoming atop Boston’s skyline today, she does not see the glass-and-chrome towers that rise there but the widening gap between Boston’s ultra-rich and its chronically poor. “That gap is growing,’’ she said. “I want to spend a little bit more time on that issue of inequality.’’
No one will fork out $7,500 a day for her to perform that kind of work, the kind that does not accompany a global sporting competition with all-access passes to sit among the rich and famous.
There’s no glamour. Just hard work.
That doesn’t sound like retirement. That sounds familiar. That sounds like Sister Margaret Leonard.

By Thomas Farragher, GLOBE COLUMNIST MARCH 11, 2015