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Article published March 10, 2008

'Angel of mercy'

Sister Mary Ignatia helped pioneer treatment, care for alcoholics

By Elizabeth Gardner

Posted: March 10, 2008 - 12:01 am ET

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These days, any hospital admissions director caught admitting patients under false diagnoses, hiding them in odd corners and dosing them with fruit juice and dark Karo syrup would be let go, perhaps arrested and possibly even ushered to the psychiatric unit for observation.

But in the mid-1930s, Sister Mary Ignatia was doing what she felt she had to do for the alcoholics of Akron, Ohio. They were a vilified group. Alcoholism wasn't yet a recognized medical diagnosis, and those suffering from it were thought to lack morals or willpower. They were no more welcome in hospitals than anywhere else.

Sister Ignatia was one of the earliest to recognize that alcoholics needed a place to sober up and start to recover. Her illicit patients (whom she not only admitted but counseled and cared for, despite a lack of formal training in either nursing or counseling) were the first beneficiaries of a personal ministry that later became a specialty unit for treating alcoholism at St. Thomas Hospital in Akron, then operated by the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine. It was the first such unit in the country, and the first recognition that alcoholics

often needed hospital treatment for their illness.

For this pioneering work, Sister Ignatia is known as the “Angel of Alcoholics Anonymous” and has been admitted into the Health Care Hall of Fame.

Bridget Della Mary Gavin was born in Ireland in 1889 and came to the U.S. with her family when she was about 7 years old. As a small child, she had seen alcoholics in Ireland and had been afraid of them.

“She always felt that drunkenness was an offense to God,” says Amy Filiatreau, the archive director of Alcoholics Anonymous. “It had been so ingrained into her by her mother that she couldn’t stand even the word ‘drunk.’” But her mother also taught her to pray for alcoholics. In time, and despite her aversion, she would do much more than that.

She graduated from Notre Dame University with a degree in music, and entered the Sisters of Charity in 1914 as Sister Mary Ignatia. She taught music for many years, giving piano lessons and organizing a student band and orchestra.

It was strenuous work. Sister Ignatia was tiny—about 100 pounds—and physically frail despite the feistiness that later made her central life’s work possible. She also had emotional problems and had suffered what was then called a “nervous breakdown.” To protect her health, the order reassigned her to then-new St. Thomas Hospital in Akron in 1928, where she was in charge of admitting. Shortly after arriving, she struck up an acquaintance with physician Robert Smith, later one of the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous, and became a close friend.

She found an unmet need at St. Thomas. By 1934, in cahoots with emergency room intern Thomas Scuderi, she was moving ill alcoholics who came to the ER to an anteroom across from the hospital chapel, to let them sober up before putting them back on the street. To help them through delirium tremens (and to keep them from disturbing hospital patients and drawing attention to themselves), Scuderi would give them morphine. When they awoke, Sister Ignatia would ply them with black coffee and the juice-Karo concoction, which was thought at the time to be a calming mixture.

As the person in sole charge of assigning beds, Sister Ignatia was in a position to control who went where, and she soon took the next logical step: She admitted her first inpatient for alcoholism treatment with a diagnosis of “acute gastritis.” One “gastritis” patient led to another. By admitting them between shifts, Sister Ignatia evaded the immediate objections of the nursing supervisor, but soon she was making enemies among the nursing staff.

“No one wanted the alcoholic patients because they were noisy,” says Sister Mary Patricia Barrett, assistant to the president and chief executive officer of the Sisters of Charity Health System, and the one who nominated Sister Ignatia for Hall of Fame recognition. “The nurses would complain to the sister in charge, but Sister Ignatia always seemed to win out.”

By 1939, Smith and Sister Ignatia had persuaded the hospital's long-suffering management to establish an official ward for recovering alcoholics, where they would be introduced to the principles of the recently formed Alcoholics Anonymous. The ward was secluded from other patient-care areas so that the patients wouldn't disturb the rest of the hospital, and so that they could receive private counseling and support from AA volunteers. It was Sister Ignatia who introduced the custom of giving tokens to recovering alcoholics to mark their sobriety—she gave patients in the alcoholic ward a Sacred Heart medal to remind them of their commitment not to drink.

The ward lives on at St. Thomas (now owned by Summa Health) as Ignatia Hall, a six-bed inpatient detox unit supported by an intensive outpatient program. Scuderi went on to be medical director of Ignatia Hall for a number of years.

In 1952, Sister Ignatia was transferred to St. Vincent Charity Hospital in Cleveland, where she established an alcohol treatment unit that she called Rosary Hall Solarium, the initials of which were a tribute to Robert H. Smith. Even then, alcoholism wasn't a recognized disease—that shift wouldn't happen until the mid-1960s—and patients were admitted under the guise of "vitamin deficiency." They were treated with castor oil, vitamin injections and a membership to AA. The caseload quickly soared to more than 1,000 patients a year.

Sister Barrett was a social worker at St. Vincent's toward the end of Sister Ignatia's career there. She remembers an intrepid woman who was shy about public speaking but worked tirelessly not only with alcoholics but with their families, early in the development of Al-Anon. "She was wheelchair-bound right before her retirement, but she would still go over to the ward," Sister Barrett says.

Sister Ignatia retired in 1965 and passed away a year later at the age of 77.

Rosary Hall continues today as a substance-abuse treatment center, with a 16-bed inpatient unit and extensive outpatient services based on a 12-step philosophy of abstinence and recovery that treats drug addicts as well as alcoholics. Part of Cleveland's East 22nd Street, where St. Vincent's is located, bears the honorary designation "Sr. Ignatia Way."

According to her biographer, 15,000 alcoholics recovered under the direct care of Sister Ignatia, and she personally helped another 60,000 family members of alcoholics. Those helped indirectly by Sister Ignatia—by people she had helped or through programs inspired by her work—number in the millions.

But the need for her mission lives on as well, says Alexa Eggleston, director of public policy for the National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare, which advocates for better treatment options for those addicted to alcohol and drugs.

"We're still fighting this battle how many years later?" she says. While 2.5 million people seek treatment for alcoholism every year, according to government statistics, an estimated 20 million more need treatment and don't get it.

“Alcohol is the drug of choice for so many,” Eggleston says. “There’s renewed interest in catching people before they move to the end stage of addiction, and in educating the primary-care physicians so that they’re connecting people to the kind of care Sister Ignatia fought for.”



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