

Their fight isn't over

Now in their 90s, Sisters of Mercy nuns have spent their lives advocating for immigrant justice — and they're not stopping now



Above: Sister Pat Murphy, 95, center, greets John Owens, left, before a prayer service for immigrants outside of Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Broadview Service Staging facility on Dec. 6. Stacey Wescott/Chicago Tribune
BY NELL SALZMAN | CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Sister JoAnn Persch and Sister Pat Murphy used to set up a sacred space in the McHenry County Jail library once a week for immigrant detainees.

The men held there — who could connect with their families only by phone — would file into the room in orange jumpsuits and take a seat. The sisters would offer a hand. And they would listen to stories about the men’s sons and mothers a world away.

“We used to fight against solitary confinement,” Persch, now 90, recalled.

Persch and Murphy, who is 95, have devoted their lives advocating for local and federal immigration legislation to fix a broken system. They’ve been arrested four times at demonstrations. They’ve fought for detained immigrants to gain more access to pastoral care. They’ve been foster moms.

The sisters have seen a lot of change in their time advocating for immigrants. But their fight isn’t over.

President-elect Donald Trump’s promise to enact mass deportations — potentially starting in just a few days — would go beyond anything they could have imagined when they started this work decades ago. To prepare, they said they’re ordering informational cards and packets from nonprofits to pass out to families.

“What could happen to these people is extremely important,” Murphy said. “(Trump’s) words ... the way he talks about immigrants. It’s an act of disrespect. Complete disrespect.”

While it’s unclear what Trump will do after his inauguration on Monday, Chicago is considered one of the targets for an immigration crackdown because of the city’s commitment to providing sanctuary for newcomers runs counter to Trump’s narrative and agenda on the issue. The incoming president’s top immigration official, Tom Homan, gave local politicians a warning at a public meeting in December that Chicago could be “ground zero.”

Since then, in the weeks leading up to the transition of power, advocates, attorneys and city officials have been busy preparing rapid response teams, “Know Your Rights” presentations and resources for what immigrants should do if captured by federal immigration agents.

The sisters say they are one piece of that mass mobilization.

Sisterhood

Books about immigration are stacked in the corners of Persch and Murphy’s carpeted two-bedroom apartment in south suburban Alsip. Their accomplishments and certificates of achievements are carefully framed and hung on the walls: a document from U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin’s writing them into

the Congressional Record for Women's History Month; Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich's lifetime achievement award.

But their advocacy isn't just marked in accolades. In 2018, they were arrested protesting on behalf of the "Dreamers," young immigrants who would have been provided protections under never-passed proposals in Congress called the DREAM Act. In 2019, the sisters were arrested while protesting the deaths of children in family detention camps on the border. The list goes on. The sisters met in 1960 working at an elementary school in Wisconsin. After several years, Murphy moved to Peru to be a missionary and Persch went to Chicago to teach.

Their careers follow a turning point in American Catholicism, where many nuns moved from traditional roles to activism. Persch and Murphy admired their sisters — some friends, some role models — who were doing groundbreaking work at the same time they were: Sister Theresa Kane fighting for women's ordination in the Catholic church. Sister Kathleen Desautels with the Sisters of Providence championing nonviolent protest. Persch called them "fearless." Their interest in immigration was inspired by their fellow sisters' path-paving leadership, rooted in religion.

The sanctuary movement — specifically in the United States — is a religious movement, said Emily Crews, executive director of University of Chicago Divinity School's Martin Marty Center, whose mission is the public understanding of religion. "Often we think resistance to immigration is religious, and I think that's true in some ways, but the protection of immigration is also religious," Crews said.

When Murphy returned from Peru to Chicago in 1969, it was a different time for the Catholic church than when the sisters first joined. The friends had stayed in close touch while Murphy was in Peru, and they reunited in their mutual desire to fight for justice.

"It was amazing, we were able to pick up where we left off," Persch said. "And we were able to do more of what we knew had to be done than we could have done."

They switched out their habits for jeans and sweatshirts. They decided to move out of the convent into an apartment and were given free rein to work with groups serving disenfranchised people. They capitalized on the "very new possibilities" of the time, they said.

The two nuns have a rhythm, strengthened as they've aged together. Murphy, the older sister, has a smaller frame and a softer voice. Persch is steady and straightforward. They both decided to join the Sisters of Mercy because they were impressed with how the congregation was responsive to the world around

it, they said. But they were especially drawn to each other because of their mutual deep call to justice. They both went to Mercy High Schools, and Jesuits met with them to impart social justice. They remember and can sing the Catholic action theme they used to perform as little girls. “The Sisters of Mercy have enabled us to do what we’ve done for so many years,” Murphy said. “We were bold. We were on the cutting edge.”

A 40-year fight

Persch and Murphy formed a public sanctuary in the 1980s and ’90s, opening up Su Casa Catholic Worker House, a home for survivors of torture from Central America, on the South Side of Chicago. Many of them now are U.S. citizens, said Persch. In 2007, they connected with a faith-based immigration lawyer who was frustrated with the deportation system in Illinois. That lawyer thought praying at the state’s deportation center in Broadview might help. For decades, immigrants have been bused from the center to an airport, where they are flown out of the country. The center acts as a bus station of sorts. People are shuffled through before they are transported to their countries of origin.

The nuns led prayer groups as the buses went out every Friday, calling themselves the Interfaith Community for Detained Immigrants. The sisters asked to get inside the facility but were told no. They met with the Midwest director for the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, who recommended they go to McHenry County Jail in Woodstock, which at the time was housing 200 immigrant detainees.

Again, they were told no. “That’s where we got our motto. We do things peacefully and respectfully,” Persch said. “But we never take no for an answer.”

When asking didn’t work, they pushed for legislation. The sisters worked with the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights to successfully pass a bill allowing religious workers to enter immigrant detention centers. As a result, teams of volunteers from all different faith backgrounds — Jewish Muslim, Baptist, Christian, Buddhist — began joining them in 2010 in the McHenry jail library each Tuesday to have conversations with the jailed immigrants. They brought prayer books and holy cards.

McHenry County Jail

For 12 years straight, the sisters worked as volunteers in McHenry County Jail listening to stories and praying. They would pray that ICE would treat them with respect. They would pray for the elected officials making decisions that would trickle down and affect progress. They would pray to always have immigration lawyers.

The women have dealt with a lot of frustration, but also enjoyed some success. They say immigration stories are often circular.

A few years ago, Persch remembers meeting a Muslim man at the McHenry jail who had been detained at O'Hare International Airport because of a misunderstanding with ICE about who paid for his college scholarship. ICE agents thought he was lying about how he got to the U.S. so they put him in the county jail.

He had all of his paperwork ready to go to Valparaiso University, and the university staff didn't know why he never showed up.

With their connections to ICE in Washington, D.C., and help finding an attorney, Persch said he was able to get out of jail. He was able to register for a city college.

“Ironically, he now works with an airline at O'Hare,” Persch said with a laugh.

After the sisters spent some time at the jail, the guards started warming up to them. At first, Persch and Murphy said, officers would patrol the library, walking around the edges of the room.

But the officers got used to the homemade cookies and wrapped candy canes they would bring in around the holidays. Sometimes, they would come out to pray with the sisters. Eventually, they left the sisters and the detainees alone. Persch said they sometimes couldn't find an officer even if they needed something. When the pandemic came, the sisters were no longer allowed inside McHenry jail. They started holding Zoom visits and online prayer sessions. Immigration detention in county jails was outlawed in Illinois in 2022 with the Illinois Way Forward Act.

‘He doesn't need to respect anyone’

As the world emerged from COVID and buses of migrants from Central and South America were sent to Illinois by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott in 2022, the sisters jumped at the opportunity to help. They founded a nonprofit called Catherine's Caring Cause to help asylum-seekers settle in Chicago.

While many of their previous colleagues have died, every day — rain or shine — they pack up their briefcase and get in their red Toyota Corolla to get to work.

They've opened 17 apartments to house almost 100 asylum-seekers, many families with children. The nonprofit provides rent, utilities and food for one year. Persch and Murphy visit the homes weekly.

“Our goal now is to help those families get prepared for life under Trump,” Persch said. “We want to have parents put in writing who they’d like to have custody of their children if they are detained and sent away.” The sisters recently visited one of the families they’re helping house on the Southwest Side to drop off a “Know Your Rights” packet — how to stay safe, deal with people who come to their houses, request a judicial warrant and exercise constitutional rights in the event of a raid.

Zuleika del Carmen Valencia cox de Appleton, 52, and Oscar Alfonso Appleton, 43, met the two sisters while staying at a city shelter. “They’re warriors,” Valencia cox de Appleton said. “Unlike others who have crossed our paths and treated us poorly, the sisters are always looking out for us.”

The migrant couple, from Panama, left their home because of threats from organized street gangs, they said. They couldn’t let their 14-year-old son, Josafat, walk outside. They lived in constant fear that something might happen to them.

Valencia cox de Appleton had a law degree with a specialization in human rights in Panama. In Chicago, she is learning English at a city college. She cried when she thought about the fear her son faces at school, about whether she would be able to finish her English degree. “The expectation with Trump right now is that he’s going to do what he wants to do,” she said. “He doesn’t need to respect anyone. That’s the problem.” Murphy sat on the couch in their living room, slowly flipping through the packet. She spoke in slow Spanish. Then she raised her fist in the air. “I don’t know what we’ll do, but we’ll fight,” she said. It was an incongruous sight — the tiny nun, the fragile fist held in the air — against the wall of uncertainty facing the three-member family. It made Appleton laugh. “Yes, with your fighting, Patricia, we’re safe from the world,” he said.

A prayer

On a recent Friday morning, the sisters braved the 14-degree Chicago weather to pray. Persch wore a neon green hat with pink snowflakes and clutched a rosary. Her counterpart wore a white hat with red flakes. Their eyes watered from the cold. “We pray for those who have been harmed by this cruel and violent system,” they said.

The sisters said they spent years building up relationships with the ICE directors who knew them by name — who grew to trust and know them. There’s constant turnover, they said, and they haven’t had the opportunity to build new relationships.

It’s not too late, they said.