



Community
By Karen Wilson



Natomas Woman of NOTE



(above) KVIE's Rob Stewart shows his appreciation of Sister Jeanne Felon at the recent Stanford Settlement Monte Carlo Night held at the California Automobile Museum.

"When I came to Natomas," says Sister Jeanne, "West El Camino was all fields and our parking lot was gravel. Today, we are serving about 3,000 people a year overall, but I think what is more significant is that now we have programs every day."

Sister Jeanne

On August 9, Sister Jeanne Felon will retire from her position as Executive Director of Stanford Settlement Neighborhood Center. It is a post she has held for 43 years. We sat down with her to reflect on her long service to Gardenland/Northgate and Natomas, and on what she sees ahead.

"I grew up in this agency," she says. "I'll be 75 next January, and I came here as Director when I was 31 years old. So I've matured in this community. What will I miss most are the relationships, across the board. They are the highlight of my life, and

I would like to keep them."

Born in Chico and raised in Sacramento, Sister Jeanne entered the Community of the Sisters of Social Work in 1963. She was a student intern finishing her degree in social work from CSUS when she started work at Stanford Settlement. A year later, she was appointed Executive Director.

Jane Addams' Hull House gave rise to settlement houses, and the field of social work, throughout the U.S. Stanford Settlement was founded in 1936 by the Sisters of Social Service at the Stanford Mansion at 8th and N Streets. It provided a residential program for teens who were unable to live in their own homes, and the Sisters reached out to the surrounding neighborhood with groups and programs for young people and adults.

"This is the only settlement house in Sacramento," says Sister Jeanne. "They are more well-known in the east. We added Neighborhood Center to our name, so people would know who we are and what we do, because we are unique."

In 1963, Stanford Settlement separated from Stanford Home for Children to become a separate agency, and moved to its current location in Gardenland, where innovative social service programs were badly needed. In 1975, as

Sister Jeanne was moving into the Executive Directorship, the County of Sacramento bought the old Gardenland Elementary School and deeded it to Stanford Settlement. The agency incorporated, and separated from the Diocese of Sacramento.

Under Sister Jeanne's leadership, Stanford Settlement acquired property and funding for a Senior Center, added in 1978, with a larger center built in 1993. In 2009 the Teen Center was completed, with an indoor basketball court and computer lab. Programs for kids ages K-6th grade include after school activities and a Summer Day Camp. Staff members visit participants at home and at school, and sit on the Twin Rivers School District's attendance and review boards as a resource for families.

"When I came," says Sister Jeanne, West El Camino was all fields. Our parking lot was a gravel area. Today, we are serving more people (about 3,000 a year overall), but I think what is more significant is that now we have programs every day, instead of once a week. The kids and the seniors have a safe place to be and they need that. The consistency allows us to be



(above) Stanford Settlement Endowment was established in 2001. A stone monument commemorates the facility on West El Camino Avenue.



(above) Sister Jeanne Felion

more involved with them and their families. We're also able to influence their growth. You see it more in the kids but even with the seniors, you can see them warm up and establish friendships. That sense of belonging, having people who want you to be here, builds self-esteem."

Although the needs in the community are "basically the same", she says, "the challenges are greater than they were when I first came. Drug and alcohol addiction are more common now. Mental health issues are very difficult, and we can only do so much because people have a right to make their own decisions. We have more resources and funding to help, but we always need more. For example, where one staff person could handle 50 kids, nowadays it takes more."

The Senior Center is open to people 50 and over, though most participants are 70-90 years old. Services include a drop-in center with supportive services, daily lunch, case management and health and wellness activities. The agency provides door-to-door transportation to the Center, and helps find volunteer drivers for medical appointments.

"When I do tours or give talks, one of the things I let people know is that we're not just located in this community, we are a part of the community, an integral piece of the puzzle that makes up the neighborhood. We participate in what's going on, and

work with the neighborhood to improve what's happening in the community. That's the approach of a settlement house, to be part of the fabric of the neighborhood, not just an agency located here.

"Recently we met with Councilmember Harris and Mayor Steinberg. Our message was that this community often gets overlooked for services. The problems here are not as blatant as they are in some neighborhoods, and that has to do with

(right) Director designate, Julie Rhoten and Sister Jeanne taken by N magazine at one the Monte Carlo Night Events

(below) City Council Member, Jeff Harris of District 3 with Sister Jeanne and Monty Maxwell of Guild Mortgage in Natomas at a holiday gathering at Stanford Settlement.



the long-term family relationships, the ties to the community. Kids grow up and stay here. The work we have done with the community over the years has also helped to keep it stable. But we still need resources and the city and county need to help support us so that we can continue to be a factor in the neighborhood."



The Stanford Settlement Board has appointed Julie Rhoten, currently Assistant Director, to succeed Sister Jeanne effective August 1, although the leadership transition is already underway. It will be the first time that there will not be a Catholic Sister as director of the agency. "I'm the



only Sister of Social Service left in Sacramento," Sister Jeanne says. "Wellspring Women's Center has its first lay director now as well, which was a transition, so I've had some conversations with them. The same thing happened at Stanford Children's Home, which is now Stanford Youth Solutions. When the two sisters there could no longer do that work, it went under a lay director. It's all in who you choose. If we didn't have someone within the organization, I would be more anxious about my retirement.

"Our Board took the long-

(left) Some of Stanford Settlement buildings were part of a WPA (Works Progress Administration) project in 1939.

term view and appointed Julie, who has been here for 29 years, and that is significant. I feel comfortable knowing that she will continue our mission, which is to build healthy communities through individual, family and neighborhood services."

Like Sister Jeanne, Rhoten started at Stanford Settlement as a student social services intern at CSUS. She has since held virtually every job at the agency. "I love this place," she says. "Over the years I've seen the impact our agency has on the community. I'll have big shoes to fill." She says she wants to increase awareness of the agency's work as she takes on the challenge of finding resources to continue making life better for the community.

Sister Jeanne says she plans to "do nothing" for a while, except to enjoy a lunch at the senior center, and attend the Settlement's Monte Carlo Night fund-raiser in September. "I have loved the years that I spent here," she says. "Even in the midst of difficult challenges I have always looked forward to coming to work and doing what I do. I appreciate how welcoming the community has always been, from very first day I started. This is an accepting, warm community. You don't get that everywhere."

The Stanford Settlement Board will host a by-invitation retirement event for Sister Jeanne on Saturday, August 10. For more information, contact Stanford Settlement Neighborhood Center.

Learn more:

Stanford Settlement
Neighborhood Center
stanfordsettlement.org

Stanford Settlement Location
450 West El Camino Avenue
916 927 1303

Fore Good!
Benefit Golf Tournament
Wednesday, June 19,
Teal Bend Golf Club