

Providence and Practice: The Grace Center Journey

A Conversation with Sister Marguerite Bartling
Interview by Monique Tarabeh, RGS

Monique: Welcome, Sister Marguerite. I am grateful that we can sit together today. For our readers,



Sister Marguerite is the executive director of Grace Center in San Francisco, a Good

Shepherd ministry that offers a safe and homelike recovery residence for women. She holds a master's degree in social work, along with certification in drug and alcohol studies, and completed social work studies with an emphasis in administration at San Francisco State University. Sister, thank you for being here. Shall we begin?

Sr. Marguerite: Thank you, Monique. I'm glad to be here.

Monique: To set the stage, I want to anchor us in the beginning. Your ministry stands on a long, faith-filled story in this city. For those meeting Grace Center for the first time, would you please take us back to its origins.

Sr. Marguerite: The roots reach back to the early 1930s in San Francisco. The Sisters of Mercy were caring for teenage girls in crisis near San Francisco General Hospital. When the hospital wanted to expand, the Sisters of Mercy spoke with the archbishop about the future of the girls in their care. He said this kind of work belonged with the Sisters of the Good Shepherd. That very night, the provincial leader in St. Louis boarded a train to San Francisco to meet the Archbishop and the Sisters of Mercy. In 1932, our sisters purchased property in a



Marguerite Bartling (center) with Sr. Regina Do (left) and Donna Miles (right).

neighborhood called University Mound and opened the University Mound School for Girls. Many of the girls were wards of the court. They had survived abuse, neglect, and the pain of being labeled throwaway. Our Sisters offered home, school, and stability from 1932 to 1961.

Monique: I hear both urgency and tenderness in that origin story. Fast forward to 1961. Your community sees a painful gap opening for girls who turn 18 and suddenly lose support. Help us understand what you did next and why it mattered.

Sr. Marguerite: We saw a painful gap. When our girls turned 18, the state no longer considered them wards. There was no housing or financial support. Many had nowhere safe to go. Our Sisters approached the local unions with a bold ask. Could they help us build a transitional home for these young women? Carpenters, plumbers, roofers, and





Sr. Donna Miles with one of the Gracenter residents at Christmas time.

many others said yes. They built the new residence in a single season in 1961, and they did it without charging us. A woman named Grace Finley was the engine behind the scenes. She persuaded suppliers to donate building materials and furnishings. That home became what we now call Grace Center.

Monique: There is a grace running through that chapter. You also speak about protection that felt very concrete. Tell us about the sign that became part of your daily prayer and courage.

Sr. Marguerite: There was a statue, believed at first to be Saint Patrick. We later learned it was Saint Emidius, who people invoke for protection from earthquakes. From 1932 onward, our community has prayed a short evening prayer asking Saint Emidius to watch over us. It felt like an early sign that God's care would meet us through people and timing.

Monique: That small evening prayer sounds like an anchor. As the city changed in the decades that followed, you kept listening to new needs. Bring us

into that period when the mission shifted and you discerned a new focus.

Sr. Marguerite: By the late 1970s, a wave of deinstitutionalization swept the country. The state stopped sending girls to large residential programs. We sold the larger campus but kept a strip of the original property. We looked at the needs around us and saw women without resources trying to break cycles of addiction. Luxury treatment centers were out of reach. In the late 1980s, Grace Center became a licensed drug and alcohol recovery residence for women who are serious about long term recovery and need a safe, affordable, structured place to rebuild.

Monique: Let us come to the present. If I were to walk through the front door today, I would likely notice the pace of a real household and the steadiness of the staff. Help readers picture the rooms, the people, and the daily rhythm.

Sr. Marguerite: We can serve 18 women. We recently added five bedrooms thanks to a remarkable gift. Right before the Covid pandemic, a women's recovery home closed and decided to distribute its assets to three programs. One Friday, the board president called and invited us to apply. The grant was very generous. It let us expand at the right moment. Today, we have a case manager, afternoon staff who prepare a home cooked supper, an overnight staff member, and a program manager who coordinates services and professional development. We are a licensed facility, staffed around the clock, and we keep a homelike atmosphere. The Sisters live on the property, which adds to the sense of safety.

Monique: I appreciate how you link welcome with accountability. Dignity is not an idea for you. It shows up in how a woman is received on day one. Walk us

through those first steps and how affordability stays central.

Sr. Marguerite: We begin with dignity. Many arrive homeless, undereducated for sustainable employment, carrying legal obligations like probation or mandated classes, and often feeling shame. We stabilize first, then invite each woman to set goals that reflect her real hopes including education at nearby City College, health care and mental wellness, family reconnection, transportation, and leads for job opportunities. We charge on a sliding scale because recovery should not be a luxury. One woman told us it took two weeks before she could answer a simple question, What do you want to do? No one had asked her before. Treating each woman as a person of worth changes the trajectory.

Monique: Let me name something for readers. Grace Center is not a hospital unit and is not primary treatment. You describe a recovery residence that makes sobriety livable. Please, say more about that mentoring model and why the structure matters.

Sr. Marguerite: We focus on recovery mentoring. Most residents come after three months of primary treatment and keep their therapists and their recovery sponsors. Our staff provides structure, accountability, and practical support so the work of recovery can stick in real life. The daily rhythm matters. Supper is hot. Someone is always on duty. Goals are reviewed. Court requirements are met. Step by step.

Monique: The fruits are often quiet and steady, yet some stories shine like beacons. Can you share a few outcomes that capture the ripple effect when a woman grows healthy and stable?

Sr. Marguerite: The ripple effect is real. When a woman becomes healthy, she can support her family and contribute to a safer community. Some stories



Two Gracenter graduates wearing recovery t-shirts, "Never Give Up."

shine. One graduate founded Rocket Dog Rescue, which has placed thousands of dogs into forever homes. Another started a recovery program for women with children. We see restored relationships, stable housing, honest work, and the quiet pride that comes with keeping a promise to oneself.

Monique: I love that recovery also makes space for joy. Houses like yours laugh, celebrate, and even adopt. Give us a light moment or two that still makes you smile.

Sr. Marguerite: Two come to mind. One day, that Rocket Dog Rescue graduate diverted on her way to our party to save two dogs scheduled for euthanasia. She arrived with a puppy that stole everyone's heart. We kept her and named her Gracie. She has been a therapy dog in her own way. I often hear a resident whisper I love you, Gracie. Our other friend is a cat who chose us before COVID. We named her Rosie for Saint Mary Euphrasia. Rosie appears for



Left: Gracenter Resident. Right: One of the Gracenter residents on her way to City College of San Francisco

breakfast and supper, never lunch, which tells me she keeps a second household. Gracie and Rosie coexist peacefully indoors. Outside, there is a bit of a chase. The pets provide comfort, laughter, and a feeling of home.

Monique: Partnership is a thread from the first page of your history. Teas, unions, banks, donors, neighbors. Tell us about the companions who have stayed with you the longest and how their presence still shows up.

Sr. Marguerite: Our Women's Guild began in 1932. Their first tea was on September 16 of that year. They have supported our mission partners and fundraising ever since. From the Irish Hibernia Bank that took a chance on us decades ago, to the unions that built our transitional home, to donors who answer the phone on a Friday afternoon with unexpected grace, we see the same pattern. God sends people.

Monique: Bring us to right now. You are welcoming new leadership on the team and discerning growth with care. How many women are with you at the moment, and what does healthy growth look like in the next season?

Sr. Marguerite: We have 10 in residence and a capacity for 18. A new program manager just joined

us and brings strong community connections. Our goal is to fill every bed with women who are serious about recovery. Growth for us is not numbers alone. It is deeper services, wiser partnerships, and a house that stays gentle, safe, and steady.

Monique: Many of our readers pray and act. If they hold Grace Center in prayer this week, give us a few intentions to carry and a way to stand with you.

Sr. Marguerite: Pray that we grow into our mission with courage and hope. Pray for the women who will walk through our doors, that they find long term freedom from addiction and a future filled with purpose, family, and peace. Pray for the partners who will be sent to us, as so many have been since 1932.

Monique: I want to end with the person who is hesitating, perhaps reading this quietly. To that woman, what would you want to say from your heart?

Sr. Marguerite: You are not at your worst day. You are worth a safe bed, a warm meal, and a plan that honors your real gifts. Recovery is not easy, but it is possible. When you step into Grace Center, you will be treated as a person, not a problem. That simple truth can change everything.

Monique: Sister Marguerite, thank you for sharing your heart and the living history of Grace Center. Your work and the women you serve continue to inspire us. I am grateful for this conversation.

To learn more or to support this work, visit Good Shepherd Gracenter, often called Grace Center, for program details, volunteer opportunities, and giving options: gsgracenter.org

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