

After 30 years, Hope hero stepping down



Photo by: Nancy Lane

Sister Margaret Leonard executive director of Project Hope in Boston.

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By: Tenley Woodman

Change is coming to Dudley Street.

After more than 30 years, Sister Margaret Leonard of Project Hope will retire as executive director of the nonprofit.

“This year I’m going to be 78 years of age, so it’s time,” Leonard told the Herald earlier this month. “I recognized, together with the staff and group, we’ve done a lot of really wonderful things, but we are living in a new age now and younger people have the kind of skills and abilities that I don’t necessarily have, and we need that kind of vision here.”

Leonard announced her decision late last year, and a search for her replacement is ongoing. Community leaders say it’s not an easy task.

“She’s such an important force in this city in so many different ways,” said Mayor Martin J. Walsh. “Her work around young people, young mothers and helping people getting back on track. Project Hope literally means hope for so many people. She’s been instrumental for turning thousands of lives around.”

Raised in Everett, Leonard entered the Little Sisters of the Assumption, a Roman Catholic order dedicated to working with the homeless and poverty-stricken, more than

50 years ago. After working and living with families in need in Harlem, N.Y., during the 1960s and early '70s, Leonard returned to Boston in the mid-'80s. She turned her focus to the Dudley area of Roxbury and Dorchester.

“Sister Margaret gave structure and vision to what was happening in that neighborhood,” said Dorchester resident and former state representative Marie St. Fleur, CEO and president of the Bessie Tartt Wilson Initiative for Children Inc.

Her work with the Little Sisters of Assumption began by sharing their home with families in need. Leonard has expanded Project Hope from a shelter at 45 Magnolia Street to a community resource encompassing job training and support for women.

“She’s an institution,” said Dorchester state Sen. Linda Darcena Forry. “I’m 41. I’ve known Sister Margaret since I was 10 years old. She is someone who is able to flow in any environment. How do we lift people out of poverty? She is someone who has been just true to that mission, just caring for others and making sure that people have opportunities and access.”

When Darcena Forry’s family first immigrated to Boston from Haiti, it was the Little Sisters of the Assumption and Leonard who helped them acclimate to their new country.

Leonard said her approach follows two principles. “When you look at an issue of poverty, you ask the question, ‘Why?’ When you identify the solutions, you don’t do it for people, but you always do it with people,” she said.

John Barros, chief of economic development for the city of Boston, worked closely with Leonard as director of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative.

“There are a number of neighbors she has been a friend to and guardian of,” Barros said. “It’s nothing Project Hope does, they don’t have programs for the elderly, it’s Sister Margaret. The kind of work she did in the neighborhood, to make sure people were being taken care of, was priceless.”

Leonard shies from praise, but St. Fleur, a Project Hope board member, and other leaders named the corner of East Cottage and Dudley streets in her honor in November.

“In the work we do, she is a person you need to know,” said Mike Durkin, president and CEO of United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley.

“There’s that great quote attributed to St. Francis: ‘Preach the gospel. Use words if you have to.’ That’s Sister Margaret,” Durkin said. “It’s what she did, how she did the work that impacted us all.”