

Santa Maria

THE EARLY YEARS

By S. Judith Metz

Let us celebrate 125 years of social, educational, and health services outreach to the poor and needy in Cincinnati, Ohio through Santa Maria Institute. Sisters Justina and Blandina Segale began their work among Catholic Italian immigrants in September 1897, and the “The Santa Maria Italian Educational and Industrial Home” was incorporated on Dec. 8 of that year. The Sisters’ outreach quickly expanded to other immigrant groups as well as to anyone in need regardless of faith or nationality. That work has continued without interruption, always evolving and adapting as the needs of the people of Cincinnati have changed.

Sisters Justina and Blandina were born in a small mountain village near Genoa, Italy, and immigrated to the United States with their family when they were young girls. Despite the family’s early economic struggles, both received fine educations that included attending Mount St. Vincent Academy. Their compassionate hearts were evident even in their youths when they brought solace and assistance to cholera patients in their homes. The sisters’ generous spirits continued when they both joined the Sisters of Charity in 1866.

By the time the two young women were called upon to work among the Italians in Cincinnati they were veteran women religious who had served in the Frontier West (S. Justina for 15 years, S. Blandina for 21 years) as well as in schools in Ohio and Michigan. Their new endeavor began in August 1897 when Mother Mary Blanche Davis asked S. Justina if she and S. Blandina “could do anything for the poor Italian children of the city.” S. Justina assured Mother that they “would gladly undertake anything on their behalf.”

Given five dollars to “go and explore the conditions,” the two Sisters agreed: “If it is God’s work it will succeed despite opposition – if it is not his work, we do not want it to succeed.” Despite a difficult beginning, they confidently believed it was God’s work, “so we do not fear though we have nothing to begin with.” Assured of the assistance of the Sisters of Charity, they immediately enlisted the support of local priests as well as Catholic Italian families. Their first efforts involved gathering the newly arrived in small groups to encourage them in the practice of their faith and to determine their needs. After early struggles to start a parochial school for Italian children, they realized the necessity of a neighborhood center for their work. Finding a penny on the street, S. Justina wrote, “that is the nucleus of our funds for the purchase of a



(From left) Sisters Blandina and Justina Segale opened The Santa Maria Italian Educational and Industrial Home in 1897.

house. ... A penny and two sisters are nothing. A penny, two sisters and God are omnipotent.”

Despite their optimism, the Sisters spent their early years in donated and rented space. Having no money, they held bazaars, accepted donations, and relied on Divine Providence. More than once it seemed they would not be able to continue. However, with the help of volunteers dubbed “Willing Workers,” they continued and expanded their outreach. In addition to the schools and home visiting, a small army of Santa Maria volunteers assisted in teaching Sunday school and evening classes, visiting hospitals and the sick in their homes, and the city jail, workhouse, and house of refuge. They assisted the Sisters in starting sewing classes as well as many other activities.

By 1905 the Sisters were able to acquire a small brick house on West 7th Street. They had been in their new home but a day when the first applicants appeared, asking to live there. The acquisition of this building allowed Santa Maria to begin expanding its programs. Activities included a nursery for infants and small children, a kindergarten, sending the resident girls off to school, and running the domestic science department that included sewing, dressmaking, millinery and cooking classes. They also sponsored clubs for the girls and their mothers, clubs for boys, and night school. In addition, a steady stream of people came to the door applying for help, advice, employment, and a home. That same year, when the city organized Juvenile Court, Santa Maria was invited to attend the initial meeting. To assist the court, Santa Maria formed a Juvenile Court Committee of volunteers. Later S. Blandina was appointed a probation officer by the judge.

As the work expanded so did the need for space. In 1912 Santa Maria purchased a building on West 8th Street that eventually expanded into four adjacent properties allowing for a burgeoning list of programs and activities. Another 15 years would pass before they were able to move to even larger quarters, this time to 13th and Republic streets in 1926. Besides those services already mentioned, the Center sponsored an employment bureau, Boy and Girl Scout Troops, a milk station, Americanization classes, and classes in Italian, English, Braille, singing, and dramatics. Their work also included an exhaustive record of home visits that included the distribution of food, clothing and books. As the Sisters and their co-workers visited the jails and hospital charity wards, S. Blandina became involved in the issue of human trafficking. When she encountered a young woman who had been trafficked, the intrepid Sister confronted the madam who operated the house of prostitution. Her action spurred others to take up the issue, including the Federation of (Cincinnati) Catholic Women's Societies, who held their meetings at Santa Maria. In her book celebrating the 25th anniversary of Santa Maria, Anna Minogue observed, "There is not in Cincinnati any organization that has expended stronger efforts for the overthrow of commercialized vice than the Santa Maria Institute."

As their work grew the Sisters kept abreast of the latest trends in social work. They kept meticulous records, trained social workers at Santa Maria, and collaborated with other agencies serving the poor. In 1916 Santa Maria became a charter member of the Council of Social Agencies, now United Way of Greater Cincinnati. In that same year the Bureau of Catholic Charities, of which Santa Maria was a key member, was established by the Archdiocese of Cincinnati.

As the immigrant communities spread from downtown, Protestant proselytizers became particularly active among



S. Blandina Segale (second from left) founded Santa Maria in 1897 with her sister, S. Justina Segale, to welcome new immigrant populations to Cincinnati.



After its expansion in 1905, the organization was able to provide a nursery for infants and small children.

Italians who settled in Walnut Hills. In response the Sisters visited the neighborhood every Sunday for years to gather the children for Sunday school and Mass at the Church of the Assumption. Eventually they opened a neighborhood center that was instantly popular with families in the area. In 1919 this facility became the Kenton Welfare Center, an organization independent from Santa Maria.

Likewise, in Fairmount, on the near west side of Cincinnati, an Italian community had gathered. The Sisters first visited the area in 1906, urging the Italians to attend nearby St. Bonaventure Church. They continued their work in the neighborhood, and by 1917 Sisters and volunteers from Santa Maria were making home visits, teaching catechism classes, and preparing children for First Communion. In 1922 the San Antonio Welfare Center officially opened as a location for social, educational, and religious activities. Mass was said regularly at the center; soon the peoples' focus shifted from welfare activities to establishing an Italian parish, San Antonio di Padova.

As the work of Santa Maria proceeded into the 1920s, Sisters Justina and Blandina founded *Veritas*, a magazine devoted to Catholic news and educational matters. Each of the Sisters often contributed articles, writing in both Italian and English. In addition, S. Justina kept a comprehensive record of the work of Santa Maria from its beginning until her sudden death in 1929. Her 22 journals and scrapbooks contain a narrative of the work of Santa Maria and also include annual reports, news clippings and other items of interest. S. Blandina continued her work at Santa Maria until 1933 when she retired to her Mount St. Joseph Motherhouse. For more than 35 years these two Sisters built a strong foundation and a legacy that was handed on to future generations who proved to be equally dedicated to the work of Santa Maria.

Santa Maria

THE MIDDLE YEARS

By S. Judith Metz

As Santa Maria moved into the 1930s, those who succeeded Sisters Justina and Blandina Segale built on a strong foundation with a mission to serve those in need regardless of religion, nationality, or ethnicity. Their ministry, grounded in strong faith and reliance on God, was located at 13th and Republic streets where it served as a symbol of stability, security, and compassion in its Over-the-Rhine neighborhood. The center offered a full line of programs serving its clientele from infancy to old age delivered by a small cadre of Sisters of Charity augmented by a professionally trained staff, and a strong complement of generous volunteers.

In 1933, when S. Mary Kevin Keane was named director, she upgraded the equipment, furnishings, and program of Santo Bambino Day Nursery. The doors of Santa Maria opened each weekday at 6:30 a.m. when the Sisters and staff welcomed smiling, crying, and squirming tots as young as 18 months who settled in under the watchful eye of their caretakers. Free play and organized activities such as song, rhythmic dance and posture work filled their schedule. A snack break and dinner were included in the program along with a period of rest in the early afternoon. The 5 year olds attended kindergarten from 9 a.m. until noon where they had a catechism lesson and activities that encouraged the development of their social and physical skills.

Attendance at the day care center, using a graduated fee scale based on a family's ability to pay, fluctuated according to economic and social conditions. During the Great Depression attendance was as low as 17; a decade later, when many mothers worked in defense plants and offices, 118 children were enrolled. The war-time increases were also due to an influx of families from Kentucky and Tennessee seeking employment in war production industries. Both the day care center and the kindergarten continued to serve many families in the post-war decades while the staff grew to include a doctor and a registered nurse.

Exemplary of the dedication of staff, S. Maria Caritas Condon who served at Santa Maria from 1948-'56, was lauded by Msgr. Marcellus Wagner, director of Catholic Charities, as "the best social worker we ever had." One Santa Maria



Wood working, metal craft, and sports activities were available programs for boys at Santa Maria during the 1950s.

mother wrote: "Please make special note of Sister Maria Caritas. We became acquainted with her in 1951 when my two younger children stayed at Santa Maria Day Nursery. She looked after us and helped us as though we were truly family," securing food, clothing, and financial assistance. "Each year the children ask if they can't go back to visit," she said, "and each time they see a Sister on the street they say, 'There's one of our Sisters.'"

Those who benefitted from Santa Maria's programs did not forget. A former participant, living in Milford, Ohio, in the 1950s, wrote to the Cincinnati Post of a boy from Santa Maria who needed a bicycle in order to attend a trade school in another part of town. She was sure if the need was known assistance would be offered. The very day the article appeared a bicycle was on hand for the boy!

On any given day, while the preschool and kindergarten programs were in full swing, hundreds of children from 17 area schools poured into Santa Maria for after-school activities. Boy and Girl Scout Troops, averaging about 100 participants, met weekly, while classes for girls were available in sewing, embroidery, knitting, and crocheting. Santa Maria provided the materials while the children kept what they made. The youngest girls met in a "Little Women's Club," while the older ones could participate in home-making, child care and cooking arts. Wood working, metal craft, and sports activities were available for boys. For anyone interested, arts and crafts, glee club, dramatic arts, plastic work, and typing lessons were available. Most of these offerings continued to be available through Santa Maria's summer programs.

Of course, none of this could have been available without an extensive corps of hundreds of volunteers. These included many local women; religious brothers from several communities who taught woodworking and shop skills; College of Mount St. Joseph students who directed group activities; College of Music students who taught class piano; Sodalists from Xavier University who taught other instruments; and many high school volunteers, most notably from Seton High School whose students have contributed their services to Santa Maria for many decades, and continue to do so. Volunteers were always on hand to donate to and assemble Christmas baskets of food, clothing, and toys for the Santa Maria families.

Outstanding among these was Mrs. Evelyn Maloney who, from 1951-1966, made ballet, square dancing and singing available to hundreds of young people at Santa Maria. Devoted to her profession as a dancer, Mrs. Maloney took deep satisfaction in instilling an appreciation for beauty and grace in the children. Each spring this dedicated teacher found herself knee-deep in satin, tulle, net, and sequins as costumes were created for the annual song and dance recital that gave excited students the opportunity to display their artistry. For her part, Mrs. Maloney considered each child “part of her family,” and found “much happiness” in her work.

Evenings at Santa Maria were reserved for adult programs. The “Americanization” or “Citizenship” classes grew in importance with enrollment burgeoning during the World War II years. Michael Digerolamo, a social worker and teacher for many years, noted that about 85 percent of the people taking the class were illiterate in English. “So,” he said, “teaching citizenship involved not only history and civics, but also reading and writing.” Continuing S.



Volunteer, Mrs. Evelyn Maloney, made ballet, square dancing and singing available to hundreds of young people at Santa Maria.

Blandina’s emphasis, participants were encouraged to preserve their own culture, but add American ideals to them. A mother’s study and discussion club, Cana conferences, and social clubs were offered as well as a placement division and assistance with legal matters. The “Oldsters” club for those over 65 met one afternoon each week for a meal, games, and a social. Members were thrilled when Sisters Elise Halloran and Agnes Celestia Schaumleffel from Mount St. Joseph provided joyful holiday music at one of their Christmas dinners.

In addition to their scheduled programs, Santa Maria’s social workers offered guidance, consultation, and assistance to many individuals and families either in their offices or as part of an extensive program of home visits. During the summer Sisters of Charity, on break from teaching, were available to accompany them. The agency also offered low-income housing opportunities on the upper floors of their building. Several Sisters along with a staff of about a dozen professionals managed the organization.



Dramatic arts was another after-school opportunity available to the children at Santa Maria.

From its founding Santa Maria experienced financial insecurity. When the agency became a member of Community Chest (later United Way) in 1916 it gained a degree of financial stability, but it also had a core of dedicated supporters. The Society of Willing Workers was an ongoing booster of the Institute’s efforts, and by the 1930s many of the Italian families who earlier received assistance became donors and volunteers. Their “Italian Club” sponsored a semi-annual Ravioli and Spaghetti Dinner, a colorful social event drawing close to a thousand people. Santa Maria Guild, founded in 1951 by wives of the Institute’s Board, was another source of assistance. Eventually growing to more than 200 members, these women sponsored annual garden fetes and clam bakes, with proceeds going to purchase equipment and supplies for the programs, as well as to maintain the facilities.

In 1966, at the request of Community Chest, Santa Maria expanded its services to include the Southern Appalachian community in Lower Price Hill. While some programs remained at 13th and Republic streets, the after-school program was phased out. A new center in Lower Price Hill opened in a two-room storefront, but a year later moved to St. Michael Street, and soon opened an outreach office on Warsaw Avenue in East Price Hill. Changing its name to Santa Maria Neighborhood House, the agency directed its resources to projects such as the Lower Price Hill Community School, a Youth Service Bureau, a community health board, nonprofit housing corporations, a mother's club, and tutoring. At the same time, social workers maintained a large volume of case work.

S. Ludmilla Hartman was a staple through the years of transition from Over-the-Rhine to Lower Price Hill. Beginning her work at Santa Maria in 1959, this creative and caring personality took charge of the Oldsters Club, Boy Scouts and Cub Scouts, arts and crafts, and "boys and girls of all ages." When the children arrived for their after-school programs they always made a bee line for Sister. Somehow their activities were more enjoyable after their visit with the "Doughnut Sister" who seemed to have an unlimited supply of their favorite treat. When Santa Maria moved to Lower Price Hill, S. Ludmilla set up a scouting program and started a senior's program called the "Get-Together-Club" that grew rapidly because she "always tried to take a personal interest in each one as they came to the door." At their weekly meetings they were served a hot meal, which "for many would be the only hot one for a week." Later they played cards or Bingo, and sang and danced along with S. Ludmilla who lovingly cared for each one of them. When she received a donation of equipment for a kitchen, she used it not only for their weekly meetings, but to teach Home Economics to teenagers from the area. Although she "officially retired" in 1980 at the age of 81, she continued to be involved with the "seniors" for another decade.

By the late 1960s Santa Maria had evolved into an agency that was increasingly independent of the Sisters of Charity. In 1972, it incorporated as Santa Maria Community Services independent of the Sisters of Charity. Governed by a Board of Directors, it was fully prepared to move into the next phase of its long and storied journey of assisting the neediest in Cincinnati.



Ludmilla Hartman ministered at Santa Maria for more than 20 years and became known as the "Doughnut Sister," for always having an unlimited supply of the children's favorite treat.

Directors of Santa Maria

Sisters Blandina and Justina Segale, 1897-1932

S. Leonita Mulhall, 1932-1933

S. Mary Kevin Keane, 1933-1939

S. Kathleen O'Donnel, 1939-1940

S. Agnes De Sales Molyneaux, 1940-1942

S. Mary Omer Downing, 1942-1947

S. Mary Paul Doyle, 1947-1948

S. Marie Agnese Bonanno, 1948-1954

S. Martina Marie Poirier, 1954-1960

S. Ellen Joseph Walsh, 1960-1964

S. Mary Rita Vieson, 1964-1968

Edward Domit, 1968-1970

David Crowley, 1970-1973

Santa Maria

THE RECENT YEARS

The following article is a collaborative effort of S. Judith Metz and Christy Cauley, marketing and communications specialist at Santa Maria Community Services.

The several decades following the incorporation of Santa Maria Community Services in 1972 saw great growth. Programs underwent continual upgrading to meet the increasing demands for higher standards of care and new services. With its focus on a family-centered approach, the agency expanded its facilities and services into new locales, and by a decade later had a full-time staff of 50.

When Executive Director David Crowley left the agency in 1973, he was succeeded by Sister of Charity Jane Ellen Shappelle, who served in that position for the next 13 years with skill, enthusiasm, and strong leadership. While the 1970s saw expansion of government into the social service arena with grants and program support, many of these aids were reduced or removed during the 1980s. Santa Maria's board responded by developing a strategic plan for coping with cutbacks in federal funds that included the formation of a Development Board that was charged with establishing an endowment fund and sponsoring fundraising events. S. Jane Ellen was ably assisted in dealing with the changing climate by Program Director Steve Lange. His dedication, wealth of ideas, wide community involvement, and strong leadership set the tone for the development of many exciting initiatives. Another important staff member during this period was social worker/case manager S. Rosemary Clare Eagan who, with her gentle presence, supervised staff, counseled families and individuals, and assisted in emergencies. "I feel this is fulfilling the Gospel message to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, harbor the homeless," she said. "I feel that I'm doing as Elizabeth Seton would have done and I find joy in my work."



S. Jane Ellen Shappelle (back, right) served as Santa Maria's executive director for 13 years with skill, enthusiasm, and strong leadership.

Santa Maria's outreach encompassed every segment of the population from birth to old age. In the mid-1970s the agency merged with the Lower Price Hill Day Care Center that, a few years later, combined with the day care center from 13th and Republic streets when it moved to the Seton High School campus. In 1987, however, Santa Maria's day care program was transferred to the YMCA ending 90 years of the agency's day care ministry. As S. Jane Ellen explained, "There is a constant fluctuation of services as needs, populations, and locations shift. As one need is met, you move on to something more pressing."

The backbone of the Santa Maria Neighborhood Centers was neighborhood organization programs in Lower Price Hill, East Price Hill, and later



S. Ludmilla Hartman (standing, left) directed Santa Maria's weekly gatherings for the elderly, which included a meal and social activities.

Sedamsville. In East Price Hill the youth program was active in employment efforts, beautifying the neighborhood, creating a recreation center, tutoring, and crisis intervention. A popular program during the 1970s and 1980s was the Police-Youth Weekend Campout that regularly attracted more than 100 boys each year. The Family Nurture Center on State Street in Lower Price Hill served as a safe space for "hanging out," job placement services, child-birth classes, support groups, counseling, and GED classes.

Outreach services to the elderly that had been a staple of Santa Maria's work since its founding continued. S. Ludmilla Hartman directed weekly gatherings that included a meal and social activities, while an ever-expanding Meals on Wheels program served many. S. Charlotte Mollenkopf provided outreach services to the elderly, invalids, the sick, the abandoned and the neglected. She described her work as "assisting them with everything from securing food stamps and bus tokens, to handling social security needs, to reading to those with failing eyesight."

By the late 1980s Santa Maria was the largest neighborhood multi-service agency in Greater Cincinnati and was poised to continue its long tradition of providing services to every segment of the population in the areas it served.

H.A. Musser, Jr. joined Santa Maria on June 18, 1984 as a planning specialist and soon became a neighborhood organizer, helping bring together Price Hill residents to discuss common issues and work toward solutions. He later became the Sedamsville center director, and in 1989 he became the president and Chief Executive Officer, a title he still holds today.

In the 1990s, Santa Maria began to expand its reach in two Price Hill neighborhoods. In 1992, Santa Maria purchased 3301 Warsaw Avenue and renovated it to consolidate East Price Hill services and agency administrative offices into one facility. Two years later, The Lower Price Hill Center, located at 718 State Avenue, was purchased, providing much needed youth development services for Oylar School students.

S. Blandina was known as the protector of children, especially immigrant children. Just before the dawning of the 21st century, Santa Maria partnered with the Every Child Succeeds Program providing intensive home visitation services to first-time parents, carrying on S. Blandina's tradition of caring for the health and



H.A. Musser, Jr. (with board volunteer Mary Ann Rozum) was named president and Chief Executive Officer of Santa Maria Community Services in 1989 and continues to hold the title today.

education of children. Santa Maria continues their partnership with Every Child Succeeds and has since added the Promoting Our Preschoolers program to prepare children ages 3 to 5 for kindergarten.

With the new century came a major renovation of the Lower Price Hill Family Center, expanding access to the youth development program in Lower Price Hill. Santa Maria also added the Bienestar program, a Hispanic Health Access Initiative. Santa Maria's Wellness Program, which provides assistance in both English and Spanish, now hosts two free health fairs every year.

In 2006, Santa Maria partnered with the Price Hill Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program to teach staff and volunteers annually to be IRS-trained and certified to help individuals prepare and file taxes, a service they still offer. In 2008, Santa Maria became a Better Business Bureau (BBB) accredited charity, receiving the BBB Dynamic Seal.

The following year, The International Welcome Center opened to assist immigrants with adjusting to life in the Greater Cincinnati area through English as a Second Language classes and other programming. Just as Sisters Blandina and Justina once cared for Italian immigrants, Santa Maria continues immigrant outreach in Price Hill, welcoming immigrants from many different backgrounds.

The 2010s brought many new opportunities to serve families in Price Hill. In 2011, The Price Hill Financial Opportunity Center opened, offering financial coaching as well as workshops and classes. In the ensuing year, Literacy Center West merged with Santa Maria, offering GED preparation and job-readiness training at no cost.

In 2014, Santa Maria added the Project Advance AmeriCorps program, a national service program that provides full and part-time job opportunities. Participants work to serve their communities and meet social service needs. Santa Maria also

received the Agency of the Year award that year from the Alliance for Immigrant Women/YWCA.

As part of their 100th anniversary celebration in 2015, The United Way recognized H.A. Musser, Jr. as one of their 100 United Way

heroes. Santa Maria also received the Agency of the Year award from the National Association of Social Workers that same year. Additionally, Santa Maria partnered with Price Hill Will to develop the Homestead Program which provides homeownership opportunities through non-traditional lending methods.

In 2016, Santa Maria established the Joe Williams Family Center to be the new home of its Youth Development program at 2312 Glenway



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Avenue in Lower Price Hill. The former Boys and Girls Club facility was provided by Community Matters and renovated through the Cincinnati Reds Community Fund's 2016 "Community Makeover" in partnership with P&G, the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden and other partner agencies.

In 2018, Santa Maria added an annual fundraising event, The Sharing Table, a community dinner focused on raising awareness about childhood poverty in the region. It had to be canceled in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but returned in 2022 at Price Hill Will's ARCO Cincy event venue.

During the pandemic, Santa Maria quickly pivoted to serve clients remotely where possible, switching to virtual classes, programs and fundraisers. Clients

were serviced through porch drop-offs and videos, rather than in-person home visitors. During that time, Santa Maria provided almost 70,000 pounds of food, more than 2,000 bottles of hand sanitizer, and more than 5,000 masks. They also organized local vaccine distribution for hundreds of residents.

Most services are back to in-person, although Santa Maria still offers some classes and seminars online. Santa Maria proudly carries on Sisters Blandina and Justina's vision by providing educational tools and resources to build strong families, promote healthy residents, and foster neighborhood revitalization. As S. Blandina is being considered for sainthood, her legacy lives on through Santa Maria's work.



The Joe Williams Family Center offers learning spaces for Santa Maria's Youth Development program, a gym, tutoring center, kitchen, and art and dance classes.