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In Memoriam:

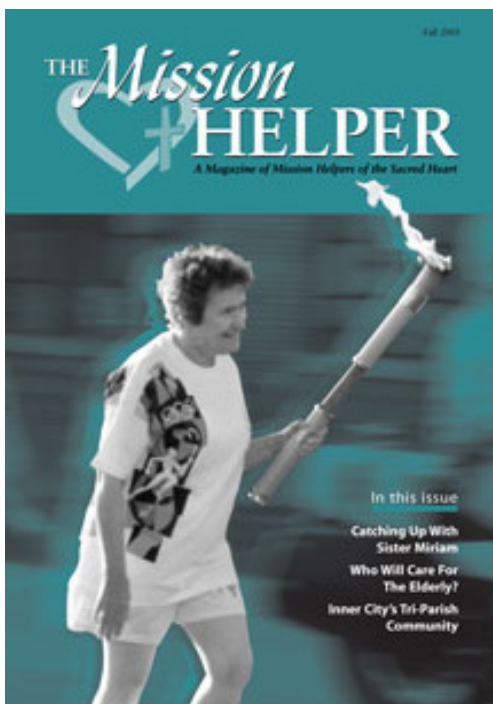
## Laguna Honda's Torchbearer, Sister Miriam Walsh

by Patrick Monette-Shaw



Sister Miriam Walsh, beloved friend, and Laguna Honda Hospital's Director of Pastoral Care for nearly 30 years, passed away December 3, 2009 in Baltimore, Maryland following an extended illness. She was 82.

Sister Miriam, affiliated with the Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart, began her service to elderly and disabled residents of Laguna Honda Hospital in 1981. Generations of residents at Laguna Honda and their families were comforted by Sister Miriam's service, faith, dedication, and her feisty spirit. As she said at the time of her retirement in December 2008, she knew she had found her calling to provide pastoral care services when she first began volunteering at Laguna Honda 27 years earlier.



A Laguna Honda resident submitted Sister's name to the 1996 Olympic Torch Relay Committee nominating her as someone who had given generously to the community. Sister Miriam was chosen to help carry the 1996 Olympic torch through the streets of San Francisco. At almost 70 years old, she saw herself as "no spring chicken," but was tickled that no one was able to keep up with her as she carried the torch for two City blocks. My hunch is that her dedication to spiritual service gave her extra adrenaline to shine while carrying the Olympic torch (see the Fall 2003 issue of the [Magazine of Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart](#)) [available on the Internet].

In 1999, Sister Miriam worked tirelessly with the *Laguna Honda First* campaign to gain passage of the general obligation bond measure authorizing the rebuild of her beloved Laguna Honda Hospital. She considered the authorization to rebuild Laguna Honda as a highlight of her career providing help to the elderly at LHH for even more decades to come.

Sister Miriam believed fiercely that our society has a special obligation to care for the elderly and disabled. In December 2005, she published "We Won't Abandon our 'Old Friends'" in the San Francisco Archdiocese's newsletter, *Catholic San Francisco*, quoting Pope John Paul II's Lenten message that "the care of the elderly, above all when they pass through

difficult moments, must be of great concern to the faithful.” Sister Miriam had already made that her life mission, and she was deeply moved when the Pope declared caring for the elderly an ethical priority.

Just as tirelessly, Sister Miriam was a founding member of *San Franciscans for Laguna Honda*, a committee that placed Proposition D on the June 2006 ballot to create a special use district to protect vulnerable San Franciscans at Laguna Honda following the disastrous 2004–2005 so-called “flow project,” which caused massive displacement of the frail elderly out of Laguna Honda to create psychosocial programming space for younger, disruptive, and dangerous San Francisco General Hospital patients.

Just after Laguna Honda’s former Executive Administrator, John Kanaley, was appointed in 2004, he summoned Sister Miriam to his office to discuss her advocacy against the flow project. I remember the Irish twinkle in her eye — for which she was famous — when she relayed to me the story of her first meeting with Kanaley. “What did Mr. Kanaley want?” I asked her. She replied, grinning ear to ear, “He wanted me to agree to a deal to keep Laguna Honda’s name out of the media and wanted me to pipe down. I told him, ‘No deal,’ and that was the end of the meeting.” Sister Miriam was never intimidated by the “powers that be.”

During the decade that I was privileged to be her co-worker at Laguna Honda, she taught me that the appropriate response to injustice is to actively resist by trying to change, and not accept, the political and social environments, inaction is never an appropriate response.

In 2008, Sister published “Dying Patients Lose Spiritual Care at Laguna Honda Hospital” in the *Westside Observer*, launching a fund-raising campaign to fund a half-time Hospice Chaplain position at Laguna Honda’s Hospice when City budget cuts heartlessly eliminated a chaplain position in the hospice.

Sister Miriam almost single-handedly recruited and developed a loyal cadre of over 400 dedicated volunteers who donate their time caring for Laguna Honda residents.

A funeral mass for Sister Miriam was held December 9 in Baltimore, and a well-attended memorial service for Sister Miriam was held at Laguna Honda on December 16 led by Bishop William Justice from the San Francisco Archdiocese and Laguna Honda’s Spiritual Care Coordinator Bob Deel. After nearly three decades of dedicated public service to Laguna Honda, noticeably absent from the memorial service were Laguna Honda’s current Executive Administrator Mivic Hirose, Director of Public Health Mitch Katz, District 7 Supervisor Sean Elsbernd, and Mayor Gavin Newsom.

Sister Miriam is survived by her brothers John Walsh of San Mateo, CA, and Raymond Walsh of Wilmington, DE; by her sisters Loretta Marshall of San Francisco and Sister Maura Walsh of Baltimore, MD; and by her extended family in the Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart.

For nearly three decades, Sister Miriam carried the torch for elderly and disabled residents. Now it’s our turn to keep carrying the torch for her on behalf of LHH’s patients.

*Contributions in Sister Miriam’s memory can be made payable to “Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart,” 1001 West Joppa Road, Baltimore, MD 21204-3787, or to “ZHP – LHH Hospice Chaplain Fund,” c/o Zen Hospice Project, 273 Page Street, San Francisco, CA 94102-5616. Both entities are 501(c)(3) tax-deductible organizations.*

Light a candle, and carry a torch, for Sister Miriam

**Patrick Monette-Shaw**  
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