



Sister Ruth Montrichard's 50-year commitment

Building a better Beetham

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When it comes to the struggles and solutions of East Port-of-Spain, few can speak with authority quite like Sister Ruth Montrichard. The religious sister attached to the Sisters of St Joseph of Cluny has spent 50 years working with the Service Volunteered for All (SERVOL) Beetham Life Centre.

She has seen the struggles of that society, the stagnancy of some who live there, but also the success stories that have emerged over the last five decades.

She started as a mere trainer for early childhood teachers, mainly working part-time at SERVOL in the afternoon as she was a full-time teacher herself at Nelson Street Girls' RC.

One of her first jobs was to set up a small library on Duncan Street where the children of East Dry River, Laventille, Beetham, and Sea Lots who did not have electricity or lacked parental guidance could visit after school and get help with their homework.

Montrichard's work with SERVOL would only deepen. She started working with the young women in Laventille, forning a women's training course using the Methodist Hall as their base. When the children who attended SERVOL left the building at 3:30 pm, Montrichard would teach the young women how to cook, sew, childcare, and handicraft.

Some of the young ladies would go on to work in sewing shops and at the Hilton Trinidad hotel as cooks.

SERVOL born out of struggle

Travelling along the Beetham Highway, it's difficult to miss the dark red building with the sign 'SERVOL LIFE CENTRE'.

"I was there when the first brick was laid," Montrichard told the WE magazine. According to its website, SERVOL was born out of the challenges of the country's Black Power Revolution of 1970, in which several people and groups sought to challenge racial inequality and force social, economic, and political change. But Montrichard

said it was a lot more than that.

"It was after those riots that Father Gerard Pantin went up into Laventille and asked the people how we could help, and they chased him away, saying the Government and the CIA sent him," Montrichard recalled.

It was the great West Indies fast-bowler, Reverend Sir Wes Hall, working at the time with West Indian Tobacco, who accompanied Father Pantin up the Laventille hills.

"Father Pantin put him in front, and he was walking behind," Montrichard fondly remembered. The residents listened to what Hall had to say, and gradually they began talking to Father Pantin.

"Before that, when he attended meetings, people would just stand up and watch him in silence," Montrichard recalled.

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Despite funding problems, Father Pantin and his team, which included Montrichard, would forge ahead with building the SERVOL Life Centre. It would redound to the benefit of the most vulnerable in East Port-of-Spain.

Working with the Beetham community, it was the residents who advised Father Pantin and his team what was needed for the SERVOL Life Centre. The same residents would help them mix cement and lay the blocks for the building that stands today.

"They sort of owned the centre in a way. They protected the centre. They knew it was for the good of their children," she remembered. Some of the courses Montrichard would lead included an early childhood centre, a daycare centre, a dental unit, a medical centre, and then skills such as plumbing, welding, masonry, catering, and nursing. Many of the students who entered the programmes were school dropouts, some addicted to drugs and others who had no communication with their parents.

She further recalled, "In those days, we listened a lot to the kids, and one of their big problems was fam-

ily life. They couldn't communicate with their parents. In those days, the Beetham was not that different; there was crime, and the students used to come to SERVOL with knives. I had a whole bag of knives in my office, and I told them when they graduated they would get it back. By then, they forgot."

Another key issue Montrichard and her team were able to address was teenage pregnancies. She recalled, "We did evaluations, and I remember one of the evaluations we did when I went down there in 1974, the young women in the Beetham were getting pregnant at 14 and 15 years. After the programme, we did another evaluation, and they were postponing pregnancy into their middle 20s."

She and her team at SERVOL would educate the young women about sexuality, their bodies, and other skills such as reading and writing.

A number of the young women graduated and would go on to launch their own businesses and would come back to SERVOL and employ students. Montrichard was carving out a life helping the most vulnerable in the Beetham area at a time when many of her religious sisters were teaching in prestige Catholic schools across the country.

"I felt a strong call that we were not reaching the really poor, socially vulnerable, hopeless people. I felt the strong call to go to the people who were on the margins that nobody else wanted to help," Montrichard said of her decision to stay in the Beetham area and help develop the young people living there.

Continues on page 36

50 years of service

From page 30

Montrichard will celebrate her 83rd birthday on Tuesday, and this year marks her 65th anniversary as a religious sister. In December, she will mark 50 years of service to SERVOL, and even half a century later, the Beetham community and East Port-of-Spain are still plagued with many of the same crime problems she faced in the 1970s.

"There is a lack of family life, a lack of educated parents, and how to bring up children," Montrichard answered when asked about why the criminality persists.

She would jump-start several programmes down the decades aimed at filling that void, particularly when it came to family life.

She added, "All of these things we had to take up in the program, like education in family life and the experience of family life that we recreated at the Beetham, really built them from hopeless to hopeful." Montrichard resigned as chair in March 2023 but now serves as a consultant.

She still visits the office three times a week and attends meetings regularly. She said these days even gang leaders in the community are bringing young people to SERVOL to get them involved in learning various trades.

Five decades after she started her work in the Beetham, while it may look like Montrichard hasn't had any impact on the state of the community, she has touched scores of lives that could have otherwise been lost.



Sister Ruth Bridget Montrichard over the years.

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—Sister Ruth Montrichard on why she chose to work in Beetham