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# Regis today

## SAFE HAVEN

Families in need find a home and a direction from the “nuns on the hill.”



A photograph of Pauline Fillman and her son Nicholas sitting on a set of outdoor wooden stairs. Pauline is on the left, wearing a brown textured blazer over a dark top and white pants. Nicholas is on the right, wearing a black leather jacket over a dark shirt and blue jeans. They are both looking towards the camera. The background shows the wooden steps and white railings of the stairs, with bright sunlight creating shadows.

Pauline Fillman '02 made a new life for her family, including son Nicholas Fillman '12, with the help of the Sisters at Bethany Hill School.

FAMILIES FORGE NEW LIVES AT BETHANY HILL

# STAIRWAY TO THE FUTURE

13  
|  
SPRING 12

Teetering on the brink of homelessness in 1994, Pauline Fillman '02 breathed a sigh of relief when a friend told her about “the nuns on the hill.” Perhaps these religious women, who had just opened an affordable-housing community in Framingham, Massachusetts, were the answer to Pauline’s prayers. The tenacious single mother, struggling to make ends meet as a part-time postal carrier, was determined to forge a better life for her two sons. “We’d lost everything,” she said about the aftermath of a divorce. “We had nothing but each other.” Pauline knocked on the doors of the Bethany Hill School to plead her case and soon discovered a safe haven, an educational challenge, and lifelong friends in the Sisters who would champion her future.

BY PATRICIA MURRAY DIBONA '84

PHOTOS BY KATHLEEN DOOHER



Pauline Fillman '02 (left) found an advocate and a friend in Sister Denise Kelly '69, CSJ (right), the program director of Bethany Hill School.

Pauline connected immediately with Sister Denise Kelly, '69, CSJ, Bethany Hill School's program director. The Jamaica native with the island lilt and the Irish nun forged a special kinship, based in large part on their shared belief that education moves people out of poverty. "It breaks the cycle and shows people they don't have to depend on the system. There's another way," says Sister Denise. Pauline and her children embraced Bethany Hill School's unique condition of residency—participation in educational programs and communal activities—and slowly, happily, began to reshape their lives.

Pauline's come full circle now. She has a fulfilling career as a social worker and she reaches

out to people in every facet of her life. "I ask the Lord, send me someone who will benefit from my help," remarks Pauline, who says Bethany Hill was there for her and it is time to pay it forward.

Once a novitiate, a residential home for young women preparing for their vows as nuns, and later a school for children with special needs, Bethany Hill School offers its residents, adults with disabilities and single mothers with children among them, a second chance. The housing community provides apartments to 105 low-income families breaking free of homelessness, drug and alcohol addiction, and difficult personal circumstances.

Here they receive the support of the community's sponsors, the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Boston,

as well as local social service agencies and a network of volunteers. Programs for residents focus on parenting skills, financial and career planning, GED preparation, vocational and computer training, and children's enrichment activities.

Bethany Hill School's campus on Bethany Road near the Ashland town line sits behind a rustic cobblestone wall at the top of a grassy hill. It includes St. Joseph Hall, a retirement home for nuns, and Bethany Health Care Center, a skilled nursing and rehabilitation facility. The tranquil neighborhood is governed by the gentle tenet of the Sisters of Saint Joseph who live and work there: to combine action with compassion to bring about change.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Pauline's situation years ago. With encouragement from Sister Denise and financial assistance from the Sisters of Saint Joseph, Pauline enrolled her children in Catholic schools and herself at Aquinas College. Two years later, she had an associate's degree in social work with president's list status. She and Sister Denise laugh as they recall those hectic early days when Pauline, driving an "old jalopy of a car," chauffeured Bethany Hill neighbors and her growing family (daughter Zaria was born in 1996) to school.

Following her Aquinas graduation, Pauline was accepted as a social work major at Regis and completed her bachelor's degree in 2002.

"The kids and I were in school for a long time," she sighs, thinking back to those years of juggling parenting, work, and education. When her children's school schedule conflicted with college courses, social work classmates stepped in.

"Those Regis girls would drive to St. Tarcisius School in Framingham, pick up my kids, bring them back to Regis and help them with their homework while I finished class," she recalls. The

Fillmans spent so much time on Regis's campus, her professors joked that the young trio had enough credits to graduate.

**C**arol Dorr, director of the social work department at Regis, says Pauline stood out as an exceptionally hard-working, committed student. "She felt passionately about social work and wanted to make a difference in the lives of her clients, especially vulnerable and oppressed populations. I have no doubt that Pauline has benefited from her Regis education and has established herself as a leader and champion for social justice."

Pauline says women like Dr. Dorr and Sister Denise have left an indelible mark on her life. "Sister D, hmm, I don't know what I'd do without her. She's my friend, my family. She's been there for every graduation, every little thing." Dr. Dorr prodded her on when doubt and weariness clouded Pauline's drive to finish college. "I told her it was all too much and I just couldn't do it anymore," Pauline says, recalling that Dr. Dorr just looked at her calmly and said, "Well, Pauline, I have every confidence in you."

After graduation, Pauline climbed in her old jalopy and drove a few minutes down the street to the offices of the Justice Resource Institute, one of the largest human services providers in Massachusetts, intending to apply for a direct-care position. Instead, she was hired as the assistant manager of a group home for eight developmentally disabled men. Within weeks, she was promoted to the program's manager.

Pauline is there today, caring for "her guys," advocating for their needs and supervising staff. Recently, colleagues nominated her for the Association of Developmental Disabilities Providers' Human Services Professional Award, praising her leadership and hands-on approach.

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According to Lyndis Clarke, the Institute's residential director, "Most holidays and weekends, Pauline pops in to check on her guys, making sure everything is going smoothly, or dropping off a pie she made that morning."

Pauline still yearns for further education but her old nemesis, money, prevents her from pursuing a master's degree. She is still paying college loans and supporting her children: Nicholas, 22, a senior at Regis; Aaron, 21, who works as a caregiver; and Zaria, 16, a sophomore at Marian High School.

At Sister Denise's urging, she is finally taking time for herself. Pauline has received a scholarship and plans to attend a contemplative weekend this year at the St. Joseph Retreat Center in Cohasset.

Pauline's determined work ethic has been inherited by her children, though Nicholas's drive to succeed sometimes worries his mom. "I tell him, it's okay to take some time off, but he won't. People are depending on him and he refuses to let them down," she says.

The Regis senior is completing his final year as a communications major. In between his six classes, including a rigorous senior seminar, Nick works as a dietary aide at Bethany Health Care Center, a 101-bed skilled nursing facility adjacent to Bethany Hill School.

The job keeps Nick busy—he works every weekend from 6:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.—and it connects him with unique people like Sister Janina Mangion, CSJ, who lights up when Nick delivers a meal or sits to chat. "She's sweet," he says. Eager to share Sister Janina's wisdom with the world, Nick set up a Twitter account for the 105-year-old nun with regular "Sister Janina says" comments.

"He's always thinking. He's a go-getter with a heart of gold," says Jim Aujir, Bethany Health Care Center's general manager of hospitality and building services, chuckling as he recounts the Twitter story.

"Nick comes from a simple background and he's never had a lot but it doesn't matter—he shines," says Aujir, who also supervised Nick's hospitality management internship at the health care center.

**N**ick formerly was the stage manager for Regis theater productions and hopes his future career combines his love of hospitality with his special-event and technical expertise. And while he wasn't a fan of high school, he says his Regis curriculum has defined him. "I like to speak in public and work in small groups. I like to plan and coordinate...to be in charge," he admits.

Nick says of his past guest-services job at the IMAX 3D theater at Jordan's Furniture: "I went out of my way to help people and I even got some nice letters. It made me feel good that people had a great time because of me."

During a recent interview at Regis, Nick sat with his close friend and Regis classmate Molly Danforth, a junior nursing student. Nick and Molly grew up together at Bethany Hill School and have remained staunch allies through difficult times.

Their connection is palpable, although outwardly the duo is quite different. Nick slouches comfortably in his seat, easy and relaxed in an oversized Adidas black sweatshirt, tugging every now and then at his knit cap. Molly sits upright, a picture

of poise in a classic cardigan, honey-colored hair brushing her shoulders, her blue eyes warm and direct as she speaks. When the subject turns to Nick's aspirations in the hospitality field, Molly teases, "You're going to be a wedding planner, Nick?"

This gentle ribbing got its start years ago when the two played together on Bethany Hill School's basketball court, attended summer camps and participated in the young people's nonviolence group. As they matured, Molly and Nick became leaders within the building. "The younger kids look up to them," says Sister Denise, adding, "I love that they are still so helpful to each other."

**M**olly moved to Bethany Hill School when she was five. Her mother, Kathy, was initially a resident in New Beginnings, a program on the school's first floor for recovering alcoholics and addicts. "She got clean and sober, transitioned into an apartment, and I moved in with her," says Molly.

Soon after, her older sister and three brothers followed. Molly's sister is now 28 and her brothers are 26, 25, and 22.

"Kathy wanted so much for her children," affirms Sister Denise. "She had them when she was young, one after the other, and then she got sick."

Despite declining health, Kathy worked diligently to better herself as a parent. She and her boyfriend, Bill Blake, attended parenting classes. "We learned to listen better, to discipline the kids fairly and set limits," recalls Bill, noting that Molly and Kathy often went to classes together.

Still, life was difficult for young Molly, particularly after her biological father died when she was 11. "I was angry at the world," she says. Molly enrolled in Resiliency for Life at Framingham High

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School, a voluntary intervention and prevention program that develops skills and confidence in students who are at risk of academic failure.

Molly blossomed in the structured program, graduating from high school a full year early. Blake explains that Molly's motivation to finish school was also fueled by Kathy's desire to see her daughter graduate. "Kathy was very sick and we all knew she didn't have long to live," Blake says. Molly began taking classes at Framingham State College and her mother died six months later.

Molly wears an elegant silver necklace engraved with the words "my angel" around her neck. "It has my mom's ashes in it," says Molly, gently touching the cylinder pendant. "One of her friends from Bethany made it for me." Molly says her mother was sick for as long as she can remember. "But she never, ever gave up."

The Danforth siblings received emotional support from the Bethany Sisters throughout their mother's illness. Molly remembers hugging Sister Betsy Conway, CSJ, then program director for New Beginnings and now the director of spiritual life at Regis. "Sister Betsy and Sister Denise were always with us. They drove us to and from the hospital. They were very much a part of our family."

After her mother died, Molly completed her prerequisites at Massachusetts Bay Community College and was accepted into Regis College's School of Nursing. "I decided to pursue nursing after my mother died. We kids all took care of her so I knew what it entailed, and I appreciated the relationships she had with her nurses." Molly says her

first clinical rotation was at the hospital where her mother was a patient. "I'd been in those rooms, been on those floors."

Molly thinks she'd like to become a neonatal nurse and be present during the first precious hours of life, even if that life is precarious. In the future, she hopes to enroll in Regis's pediatric nurse practitioner program.

Both Molly and Nick are eager for the next chapter in their lives. Nick, who will graduate in May, says he'd like to work for a Boston hotel and buy a nice house and a new car. He imagines he'll be single for quite some time and will be a favorite uncle to Molly's future kids. Until then, the friends relax at Molly's new apartment, do their homework together, and dream about the future.

Sister Denise believes that Molly, Nick, and Pauline are perfect examples of Bethany Hill School's mission. "They are incredible people who are motivated to do well and make a difference," she says with pride.

As Bethany Hill School celebrates its 18th year with a Spring Gala in May, Sister Denise remarks that friends often ask her when she plans to retire. She glances toward the bathroom in the children's playroom where a plumber wrangles with a broken pipe and then cocks her ear toward the hallway and a runaway rambunctious toddler, and admits that she is just too busy to consider retirement.

"A lot of miracles happen here," she asserts. "I'm going to stay until the miracles stop." ■



"A lot of miracles happen here," says Sister Denise Kelly '69, CSJ, standing here between Regis students Nick Fillman '12 and Molly Danforth '13.