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# A New Sister Act: College Students Move Into a Convent

At Pennsylvania's Neumann University, undergraduates share space with sisters.  
'Who's getting food at 3 a.m.?'

By *Melissa Korn* [Follow](#) / Photographs by Michelle Gustafson for The Wall Street Journal

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ASTON, Pa.—A group of students at Neumann University here spent an evening last month painting pumpkins, making s'mores and dancing to a DJ's playlist. Their neighbors—a bunch of sisters, and not the sorority kind—joined in the fun.

Call it a match made in heaven: Neumann wanted to increase campus housing for students. The Catholic Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia had extra space in their convent.



In August, 40 undergraduate men and women moved into the Our Lady of Angels Motherhouse Convent, at the edge of this small campus just outside the city. Forty sisters also reside in the building.

"Young blood, it's wonderful!" Sister Bernadette Brazil gushed recently when asked how she felt about the newcomers.

Campuses around the country have struggled to find enough, and affordable, housing for students. At Neumann, the two groups use different entrances to get to their quarters, so the sisters aren't in danger of stumbling upon a young man in a towel outside the shower. They don't share a dining hall for everyday meals, either.

But sisters and students are now getting in the habit of meeting up for nature walks, trading travel tips, planning knitting lessons, extending occasional dinner invitations and marveling at the lives one another leads.

Early in the semester a car drove up to the building well after midnight, dropping off a food delivery for a student. A sister who noticed the headlights didn't know what Uber Eats was, let

alone that any place could deliver at that hour.

“Who’s getting food at 3 a.m.?” a sister asked incredulously, according to Alexandria Thomas, Neumann’s director of housing and residence life. “It must have been the talk of the town.”

To celebrate the Feast of St. Francis in October, the sisters baked and gave to students almond cookies, a nod to the saint’s deathbed snack.



A room in the quarters for sisters at Our Lady of Angels Convent on the campus of Neumann University; right, Sister Kathy Dougherty and Sister Pat Smith at the student dorm room of roommates Kayla Patino and Katela Villaseñor.

The residence hall staff responded sweetly, securing Dairy Queen Dilly Bars and delivering them to the sisters. (That reflected an old summer tradition, when a senior sister would treat others to the ice cream bars.)

The exchange led to an impromptu tutorial on Philadelphia slang.

Zayyan Snell, a graduate assistant and hall director, recalls thanking a sister by telling her, “Those jawns were amazing,” and her face showing bewilderment.

“Those what?” she asked.

“The jawns. The cookies,” replied Mr. Snell, who graduated from Neumann in 2022 and is pursuing a master’s degree there.

“Jawn is a noun. It’s a person, place or thing. You’re a jawn, I’m a jawn, they’re jawns,” Mr. Snell said. “She was like, ‘Oh, I love that jawn’ about the word jawn. That’s the best thing that’s ever happened.”

Students also provide tech support, for instance jumping in to help a sister silence her phone during a conversation with a reporter.

The sisters' prim appearance—gold crosses laid atop turtleneck sweater sets; neat, short gray hair—belie their prankster personalities and wry humor.



Sister Bernadette Brazil rides in an elevator at the convent with Neumann University students.

Over a lunch of sandwiches and soft pretzels, Sister Pat Smith spoke of a road trip to Ohio, then looked at the others and admitted she failed her driving test twice, before finally passing.

“I failed my first time, too. It happens,” sophomore Kayla Patino reassured her.

Then came Sister Smith’s confession that she had talked her way out of numerous speeding tickets, which left students alternately slack-jawed and giggling.

“I had a misconception of how nuns and sisters were,” Ms. Patino said later. “I always thought they were strict and a little mean.”

The unorthodox housing arrangement provides an opportunity for valuable intergenerational exchange, say sisters and university administrators. But it’s also poignant—the sisters founded Neumann as Our Lady of Angels College in 1965—and serves a practical purpose.

“We do not need that building going forward,” said Sister Kathy Dougherty, vice president for mission and ministry at Neumann. In the 1970s, there were about 1,600 sisters in the Order of St. Francis of Philadelphia. Now, there are about 350, with a median age of 82.

More than 700 of Neumann’s 2,200 students live on campus. The school aims to increase that in a few years, in part by taking more space in the convent.



Students Kayla Patino and Katela Villaseñor have lunch with Sister Pat Smith and Sister Bernadette Brazil at the convent on campus. Neumann University was founded as Our Lady of Angels College in 1965.

For now, residents experience a tame version of “Rear Window,” with rooms facing off across the courtyard.

When Sister Brazil gets up at night, she sometimes peeks over to see if students are still up. “I expected a lot more noise,” she said. “That’s one reason I look out at night—are they really there?”

Standing in a student kitchen, Ms. Patino said she particularly liked the window across the way adorned with delicate lace curtains.

It was Sister Brazil’s room. She showed a few students the unit, a suite with six bedrooms and a common area with recliners and TV dinner trays facing a flat-screen television. Her bottle of hot sauce sat on a side table. (“I’m Irish, but I love any kind of hot food,” she said.)

They visited the convent library, where books on theology and philosophy sat alongside novels and a near-complete jigsaw puzzle.





Figurines in the sisters' dining hall.

Some sisters are just as curious. When part of the convent was transformed from a spiritual retreat to dorm rooms, “there was a storm of sisters” checking out the setup, recalls Ms. Thomas.

When Sister Dougherty was a first-year novice at the convent in the 1970s, she lived in a large room with beds partitioned by curtains. After that, she and others moved into rooms just big enough to fit a bed, dresser and narrow closet to hold two habits.

The new rooms are spacious, with private bathrooms. While students have bright bedspreads and walls covered with photos and posters, Sister Dougherty’s old room was adorned with nothing more than a crucifix. “Our rooms were much more simple,” she said.

On the near-term calendar, a sister act (sans Whoopi Goldberg). Ms. Patino is recruiting a small crew of convent residents, both sisters and students, to record a TikTok dance this fall.



The student section was transformed from a spiritual retreat to dorm rooms.

**Write to Melissa Korn at [melissa.korn@wsj.com](mailto:melissa.korn@wsj.com)**