

Sister Kathleen Carr, Sisters of St Joseph, May 6, 2025

Transcript

Narrator:

You tuned into another edition of The Break Room, a weekly conversation about how the City of Saint Augustine works from those who do the work every day, hosted by the City of Saint Augustine's Communications Director, Melissa Wissel. The Break Room offers a closer look at the different city departments and provides updates on current and upcoming projects and events. And now your host Melissa Wissel.

Melissa Wissel:

Welcome to The Break Room and thanks for tuning in. I'm Melissa Wissel, Communications Director for the City of Saint Augustine. The City Commission recently recognized the Sisters of Saint Joseph with the 2025 Adelaide Sanchez Award for Historic Preservation and Restoration. This award recognizes individuals or organizations for significant achievement in the restoration and preservation of historic resources in the City of Saint Augustine, and without a doubt, the monumental undertaking of rehabilitating, and quite frankly, bringing back to life the historic Saint Benedict, the Moor Schoolhouse qualifies as a significant achievement. So here in studio this week, I've invited Sister Kathleen Carr from the Sisters of Saint Joseph to tell us all about it. Welcome.

Sister Kathleen:

Thank you.

Melissa Wissel:

This is your first time on The Break Room.

Sister Kathleen:

Yes it is.

Melissa Wissel:

We're happy to have you.

Sister Kathleen:

I'm happy to be here.

Melissa Wissel:

We're so excited about this achievement. We'll get to the award if that's alright. I'd love for you to start if you would tell us about the Sisters of Saint Joseph. You all have been here a very long time. Doing a lot of wonderful work in the community. You've had your challenges. Tell our listeners all about the sisters if you would.

Sister Kathleen:

OK in 1866, our sisters were invited from La Puente, France by Bishop Verot. Who was the Bishop here at the time. And it was post civil war time, and he wrote the sisters in France. He had a niece in France. That's how he in particular knew the Sisters of Saint Joseph, a niece that was, that was a sister and invited them to come over to help teach and catechize, like, 500-600,000 emancipated slaves that the adults and the children and they were to come for, for that reason, and basically that reason only.

Melissa Wissel:

five hundred thousand.

Sister Kathleen:

Yes

Melissa Wissel:

Wow..

Sister Kathleen:

So that's why they came.

Melissa Wissel:

In, in America, essentially or in Florida?

Sister Kathleen:

In this diocese. Which would have been part of Georgia and all of the state of Florida.

Melissa Wissel:

Just in the diocese. OK.

Sister Kathleen:

Yes

Melissa Wissel:

That's a lot.

Sister Kathleen:

Right.

Melissa Wissel:

For how many? Twelve nuns.

Sister Kathleen:

Well, eight, forty sisters volunteered to come, and eight were chosen.

Melissa Wissel:

OK.

Sister Kathleen:

And they came. And they, of course, were only speaking French. And so the, as they were teaching the children and the adults, they were learning the English language as well. Another little word I will say is we have a wonderful museum on Aviles Street where you will see the where they lived and where they taught. And then the after that's on the father Miguel O'Reilly House Museum on Aviles Street, and then they built the school in 1894. Yep. Excuse me 1874.

Melissa Wissel:

We have, we have a friend in studio for backup.

Sister Kathleen:

And. In 1874, they built the school and they got that's where they got arrested for teaching black children. The whites were not allowed to teach the blacks, and that was a house arrest. And then they, through the state law, they realized and helped impact that that they were working in a parochial school and they were allowed to continue educating.

Melissa Wissel:

It didn't apply to the private school.

Sister Kathleen:

Right and at that school, the last principal sister Joseph A Marie, who passed away last year. She loves to tell the story about Martin Luther King Jr. coming to the rectory, right next

door to the school. And how she went to school one day and all the sixth, seventh and eighth graders were not there and they were out on the silent March. So, you know, it was all the time of the of the civil rights. Civil rights, yes.

Melissa Wissel:

So any other significant things in mind the sisters have been here that long and the work that you're doing, you're the school is shut down. In 1964 as part of the desegregation.

Sister Kathleen:

That is correct and In basically 2024, 60 years later, it reopened when we were a, took it on in around 2020. We started to get the inspiration and the spiritual invitation do something and we knew we knew we wanted to do something for single mothers and their children. We just didn't know where. And Father Tom Willis, who was the pastor at the cathedral parish, offered us the building and we didn't know what it looked like on the inside.

Melissa Wissel:

And so let's put this in perspective a little bit. So people that understand, if you've been here for a long time, this was pretty much a dilapidated, decrepit and uninhabitable. No roof, if I recall.

Sister Kathleen:

No roof, no foundation. And by that time, even the second floor had collapsed.

Melissa Wissel:

And it's in Lincolnville

Sister Kathleen:

It's in Lincolnville. Right.

Melissa Wissel:

Which is in the historic district, and it is on the historic register.

Sister Kathleen:

That is correct.

Melissa Wissel:

So you're sitting around and Father Tom says, well, you can have this building and you're thinking to yourself, great. Well, what I what am I supposed to do with that?

Sister Kathleen:

So they took the wood that was closing the what we consider the front door. They took the wood off. And we just kind of gasped a little bit and you know, maybe say put our boots on and use God's grace and said let's go for it. I would say as a I've been a sister for 48 years and I would say it's in the DNA of the sisters. We've done many things that we've worked throughout the state of Florida. And buildings like Saint Benedict's don't scare us.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, so let's talk about that. So when people say we want to under, we want to take something like this on, where do you begin? Like where you have to get money, consultants, contractors tell. Tell us a little bit about that.

Sister Kathleen:

Right. Well, you kind of just.

Melissa Wissel:

Tell us about the team, those those teams of people, though of of who all who were those folks that came to help?

Sister Kathleen:

We have a great development director. We have a great COO, a gentleman, Frank Castillo. And then the sisters themselves, the leadership team. I'm just having conversations, conversations with the diocese, conversations with Father Tom. And so, you know, those kind of conversations took place for quite a long time and then meeting with the city and getting the the OK. I think the city was thrilled that we were going to do it. I know for fact that, you know, people directly said to us almost you'll never do. It.

Melissa Wissel:

Yeah, I can, knowing looking back at the condition that I could see why people may think that.

Sister Kathleen:

Right, right. And I think our mode was well, God can do it.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, I was going to say you had a little bit of a higher power, on your side. If if folks are just now tuning in, you're listening to The Break Room. I'm Melissa Wissel, Communications Director for the City. And I have with me in studio this week, sister Kathleen Carr. She's with the Sisters of Saint Joseph. They were recognized for the 2025, Adelaide Sanchez Award. For Historic Preservation and Restoration, we're talking about, of course the Saint Joseph Neighborhood Center in Lincolnville a beautiful, rehabilitated facility. Let's talk about that. So, the idea was inspired around 2020, 2022 things really started happening. You start seeing the construction. Can you give me a shout out to some of the consultant contractor folks? Let's give them some credit.

Sister Kathleen:

OK. So John Benoit would Best.

Melissa Wissel:

Is it construction or consulting?

Sister Kathleen:

Best construction and his crew. Don Critchlow was the architect. Yeah, and gosh, there were so many.

Melissa Wissel:

I know. And we can't what we're going to leave. We're going to leave somebody off. But.

Sister Kathleen:

I don't want to forget my Minorcan Masons who did a lot. Vern, who worked the crane work is, you know, you're trying to build a new building inside of the old brick walls because we weren't going to destroy the brick walls and so many things had to be lifted out.

And then when all of that was cleared out, then that's when they brought in loads and loads of dirt and the concrete laid a foundation and the day they poured the concrete, John Benoit said that the built the bricks that were there started to creak a little bit, and they all held their breaths. And then. The foundation the foundation was there some of the exciting things that I find about the building is that the the trusses that were taken out of the roof. You know, we were informed that this is good old old pine and that they could remill it to become the flooring for the building.

Melissa Wissel:

Oh, very so.

Sister Kathleen:

So they were able to do the whole upper room with the flooring and the stairwell and the hallway downstairs. And one day I happened in when they were while the floors were being laid and I got a very strong scent of what I thought was Pine Sol. And I was informed that there was sanding the pine up. Years and I was just so amazed at the odor was so strong to me. It's very symbolic. Yes, no matter how old we are, the oil versus spiritual. For me, the oil

doesn't run dry and that the oil of God 's love is there. And it just was a good feeling to smell that oil.

Melissa Wissel:

And that so the floors. The pine floors came from the trusses in the attic or in the roof.

Sister Kathleen:

Yes

Melissa Wissel:

That's amazing.

Sister Kathleen:

And then another interesting thing. In fact, I was just met the engineers this past week. They once the new building was inside. It needed to be connected to the old building. So that so that they could be one and they had these spiral like about eighteen inch screws is what the best way for me to describe it. And there's sixteen hundred of them in the building so that the two buildings were brought together to form one building.

Melissa Wissel:

So can I see the old structure if I go inside or is it kind of hidden in the walls.

Sister Kathleen:

Oh, it's. It's hidden

Melissa Wissel:

OK, but it's there. It's holding. It's holding up the building.

Sister Kathleen:

Yeah, we can show you lots and lots of pic. Yeah. Yeah.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, I think that's really just it's fascinating. The facility is beautiful. I have not been inside yet, so I need to come over and get a visit. But I do want you to share with our listeners the work that you're doing now. When we recognized you, what we said in our remarks was you have reopened the doors to fulfill your mission to serve the needs of women and children in the community through education, spiritual growth, intergenerational mentoring and community support. So what does that look like to someone who's needing help? Who, who? Who am I if I need to come to you?

Sister Kathleen:

Well, you can get in touch with the Saint Joseph Neighborhood Center or you can get in touch with the Sisters of Saint Joseph. They vet all the women that come through there. Some of the women come to us from the homeless coalition some, and we're trying to move them to a different level. Tier one, they get a lot. A lot of support. And this is a level where if they want a little more education, better, better job, then that's what we can help them with. And we have. We actually started the program, I was looking to say we're not going to wait for this building. Let's do what we can here on our mother House grounds. And so we've already seen some great success stories of some of the women who have moved on and not only just their just them, but their children as well. We've watched them grow, their relationships grow and just professionally.

Melissa Wissel:

Nurturing. Restoring that healthy, healthy relationship in the in the family.

Sister Kathleen:

That's correct.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, the work that you're doing is wonderful. The facility. Congratulations.

Sister Kathleen:

Thank you.

Melissa Wissel:

On the facility in and of itself and we look forward to many more years of of your work. And anything else you want to add in there.

Sister Kathleen:

I just want to most of all, of course sound like a football players to give my praise and glory to God. And that's, you know, it's it's that's really. Who renovated that building and continues to bring programs. We're also working with our diocese, with our Bishop on programs for evangelization. So there's I I kept saying this is God's building. It's not our building. And when it's God's building, God only knows what's going to happen.

Melissa Wissel:

And so much more beautiful things to come.

Sister Kathleen:

Yes.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, thank you for coming and sharing the story with us. And again congratulations on the building and the award.

Sister Kathleen:

Thank you very much.

Melissa Wissel:

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Narrator:

You've been listening to The Break Room, a weekly program addressing projects and programs offered by the City of Saint Augustine join us each week as the city's Communications Director Melissa Wissel has in-depth conversations with the people who make our town work to meet the needs of our community. See you at this time next week for another edition of the break.