

# A Simple “Yes”

A one-year commitment to serve as a community organization’s secretary blossomed into a 30-year ministry of serving the dear neighbor in Carondelet.

By Jenny Beatrice

**I**n 1836 six sisters of St. Joseph arrived in Carondelet from France to make a difference in the lives of the deaf. It was 135 years later when six sisters walked from the motherhouse to the basement of the Carondelet library for a standing room only meeting of people energized to make a difference in their neighborhood.

That night one of those sisters, Sister Marie Charles Buford, CSJ, volunteered to be on the street and alley committee, a fitting choice for the daughter of a Chevrolet dealer. “That Soper Street was like a washboard,” Buford recalls. “I came from a small town and I never saw a street like that anyplace.”

Raised in rural Fredericktown, Mo., Buford says her head for business “was part of her blood.” She began working at her father’s dealership in high school and went on to study business and economics at Fontbonne College in St. Louis, where she first encountered the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet.

Her parents were surprised when she decided to enter religious life after her graduation in 1946, but her business background proved to be of great value as she served the CSJ community in various administrative and accounting positions in schools and health care, and eventually, as province secretary at the motherhouse in 1967.

In the summer of 1968 a local pastor enlisted the CSJ novices to participate in a study of the neighborhood being conducted by St. Louis University. Sixty young sisters dressed in black, including Sister Anne Kelly, CSJ, took to the streets in the hot sun to conduct interviews up and down the Mississippi. Kelly asked Buford to accompany her to take notes. “I don’t know if she came out of pity for me,” Kelly says, “but I’d say it was out of generosity.” Her simple ‘yes’ ended in much more.”





Above: Sister Marie Charles Buford was always a welcoming presence in the Carondelet Neighborhood. Center: Mayor Francis Slay (far right) proclaims November 8, 2007 as “Sister Marie Charles Buford Day” during Buford’s retirement celebration. Ted Naegel (left), CCBF board president, holds the proclamation.



From that initial meeting in the library basement, the Carondelet Community Betterment Federation (CCBF) was formed. Buford said “yes” to serving as the group’s first secretary. In 1977 she said “yes” to taking the post of director for one year. Thirty years later, in November 2007, Buford retired from her position as the executive director of the organization.

“The reason CCBF was formed,” Buford says, “was that the people in the various churches of all denominations were going to their ministers or pastors asking how they could get their house repaired or what could be done about the youth on the street corners. An ecumenical council decided a neighborhood organization was needed to address these problems.”

In the early days, Buford was a one woman operation. “I didn’t have a staff or an office,” she recalls. “I worked out of the library at the motherhouse using a donated filing cabinet. We tried to urge people to do their own thing.”

Buford empowered the people by capitalizing on the value of good communication. She secured sponsorships to publish a community newsletter. She provided the residents a list of city department phone numbers and encouraged them to report their issues. “If there was a problem on the block, we would tell them to get at least five people to call on the same day about the same problem,” she says. “That’s still an effective method.” She tracked the phone complaints and if she noticed a pattern, mini town hall meetings were scheduled.

Community events brought people together in new ways. With a diverse population of incomes and nationalities, Buford calls Carondelet a “microcosm of the United States” and she is especially proud to have facilitated the integration of class and

culture. “It was a wonderful opportunity to let people get to know one another,” says Buford.

CCBF grew, eventually landing its own office space. Staff and volunteer forces increased as new services emerged: housing repair, rehab and development programs, forgivable loans, food pantries, senior centers, family literacy, and youth programs.

Buford is a task master and, over the years, she has been hands on in every aspect of the organization. Ted Naegel, CCBF’s current board chair, describes Buford as someone who, “pays enormous attention to detail and is a stickler for being on time,” but it is her personal touch that has made her such a strong influence in the community.

“She’s not much on computers,” Naegel laughs as he mentions her IBM Selectric typewriter, “but she is definitely into personal relationships. She likes to do everything face-to-face—getting to know people, renewing old acquaintances—she’s very well connected.”

These connections have helped Buford earn respect among the city’s politicians. “She liked the political aspects,” says Kelly. “She has a keen sense of how to work the system in a very positive way.”

Lenley Weathers, founding member and original board chair of CCBF, sees her role as a religious to be a key component of her success. “One of the things she brought to the table was credibility, a very important ingredient in the make-up of a new neighborhood organization...that barrier of ‘what is this



Above: Buford and neighbor, Louise Barnes, chat in front of the CCBF office on Michigan Ave. This location opened in 1988 and still serves as CCBF headquarters.

person in it for?’ was eliminated.”

The respect she has earned within the political arena was recognized with a park named in her honor. In the early 1980s, riverfront park grounds were being used as a dump. The city began renovations, but a turnover in the mayor’s office brought the project to a standstill. Buford, with the help of local Alderman “Red” Villa, worked to push it to completion.

At the park’s opening ceremony in 1984, with a few hundred people in attendance, Villa put Buford on the spot. She remembers, “He came to me in this crowd and said, ‘we want to name this park after you,’ and I said, ‘oh, no,’ but it really wasn’t up to me. He just wanted to know how my name should read on the sign.”

Buford has received many awards and accolades over the years but, she says, they are not “her cup of tea.”

“I like to be in the background, but I accept the recognition as part of the community effort for all the people that worked together—the board, the staff, the volunteers—it’s all for them as much as it is for me.” She is in awe of the number of committed staff members and volunteers she has worked with, some for over 20 years.

Everyone who has worked closely with Buford can attest to her devotion to prayer, which she defines as the way to “meet the needs of the Church and the needs of the people.”

She views her “quieter” days working in office positions all as part of her preparations for her community work. “I built

up a prayer power so that when I got into the work, all my faith values flowed over into it.”

Buford considers her former ministry as a literal expression of the CSJ charism to serve the dear neighbor. “We’re sitting right here in Carondelet and I see all these needs. I feel we have a greater responsibility to address the people right near us. That’s what we’re all about; we keep in touch with God and share with our neighbor.”

Buford is grateful for the support she has received from the CSJ community and that the spirit of the mission will continue in Carondelet with Sister Mary Ann Nestel, CSJ as her successor.

“To be able to have an emphasis on the local neighborhood was a real blessing to me and a real call from the Lord,” Buford says, “and I feel good about that.” ✨



Buford always enjoyed getting to know the dear neighbor one on one.

*“That’s what we’re all about; we keep in touch with God and share with our neighbor.”*

~S. Marie Charles Buford