

Sister Pat Has Lost A Round — More to Come

By Geraldine Baum

DURING THE LAST 10 years, Sister Pat Griffith turned a coffee-and-cake klatsch for a handful of poor people into a full-service community center in Bay Shore. From a core of seven volunteers she created an army of 60. She stretched a few small donations into the \$40,000 that it costs each year to run her center in the basement of St. Patrick's Catholic Church on Main Street.

But then Sister Pat's attention was caught by another possibility, the Baybright, and that is a different story indeed.

Until a year ago when it was struck by fire, the Baybright, a three-story brick building also on Main Street — at 241 West — was a place where about 100 poor people and former mental patients lived, — in squalor. It had been Pat Griffith's idea to turn it into a supervised residence for patients no longer requiring hospitalization, a place where they could gather in clean living rooms, or where they might even call for help in the middle of the night from their own rooms.

"I thought if you have enough people who care, you can make anything work," the 38-year-old nun says. "I guess I'm a dreamer."

But Sister Pat's aspirations for the people of the Baybright ran afoul of officials who said, and who say, that their concern is for the broader community. They took Sister Pat's plan seriously, but they did not take her side.

"What she wanted to do conflicted with our local plans," says Michael LoGrande, Islip town supervisor, who adds that the project would have been, in his view, another obstacle to Bay Shore's redevelopment. "And if she was going to persist and jam it down our throats, then we had to match power with power."

Pat Griffith's struggle began on Christmas Day, 1984, when she read a newspaper item announcing that Suffolk County and Islip Town intended to buy and close down the Baybright and the Candee Avenue hotel in Sayville and relocate the occupants. Officials said the residents were disturbing neighbors, that the hotels were a blight on the area.

The nun, a member of the Sisters of Mercy order, had been at St. Patrick's for 16 years. She started as a teacher, led a folk-singing group and earned a master's degree in social work at Adelphi University during her spare time. And she formed the hospital center, where she met the people living down the street at the Baybright. "Boy, Merry Christmas to who? I thought when I read that story," she said. "What would become of the people?"

She was thinking about people such as Walter, whose dog was born at the Baybright and shared his room there for 18 months. Or Bruce, who grew up in Bay Shore and became a drifter and had roomed at the Baybright for eight years — the most years he had lived in one place as an adult.

Griffith asked for and got help from several volunteers from the parish and residents of the Baybright. They went to town and county meetings to protest the plans for sending the residents away. They convinced officials that the county's plans to buy the two hotels should include provisions for a nonprofit group to run them. Soon afterward, Griffith and a few others formed Mercy Haven, a nonprofit organization designed, they said, to find housing for the poor.

In April, 1985, Griffith and another nun went to a conference in California. The subject, again, was housing for the poor. There they met Nancy Travers, director of New York State's Homeless Housing Assistance Program (HHAP). Travers promised to send Griffith an application so she could apply to HHAP for a grant to buy and renovate the Baybright.

"I realized that the thing to do was for us to run it ourselves," Griffith said. "I was sure we could do it." But what she didn't know was that the Baybright problem had turned into an emergency. "The minute we got off the plane my parents told us the Baybright had burned and that the people were living in the church school. I couldn't believe it."

The 106 residents displaced by the April 13 fire were temporarily housed in the church, where concerned parishioners overwhelmed them with food and supplies. County and church officials tried to help them find permanent housing. The hotel owner,



Sister Pat Griffith, who hoped to rejuvenate Bay Shore's old Baybright hotel (shown below in 1974), which housed 100 poor people and ex-mental patients, now must seek another site.

Lance Galvin of Sayville, said he would repair the damage from the fire, but he never did.

Griffith and the Mercy Haven board members hurriedly put together the application for state funds. They had no experience with grants, Griffith said, "not even little ones." They found an architect in Brooklyn who agreed to draw up plans for free. A young Bay Shore attorney, Charles Adams, provided free legal advice. Griffith did the typing. "I typed for three days straight," she said. "And finally, we got it done."

The nuns also submitted dozens of letters of support from community leaders, including several Bay Shore clerics and politicians. There was also a copy of a letter to Msgr. Robert Emmet Fagan, pastor of St. Patrick's, from Islip Supervisor LoGrande, who said he would have no objection if a nonprofit group bought the Baybright.

But within months, both Fagan and LoGrande would object to turning the Baybright into a single-room-occupancy hotel — despite promises of around-the-clock professional supervision.

Fagan, who has been involved with Catholic Charities for more than 20 years, said he believed Griffith's effort to run the place would be a "herculean task. There was no experience there — just goodwill. It's one thing to work with people four hours a day giving out food and counseling. It's another thing to do it twenty-four hours a day."

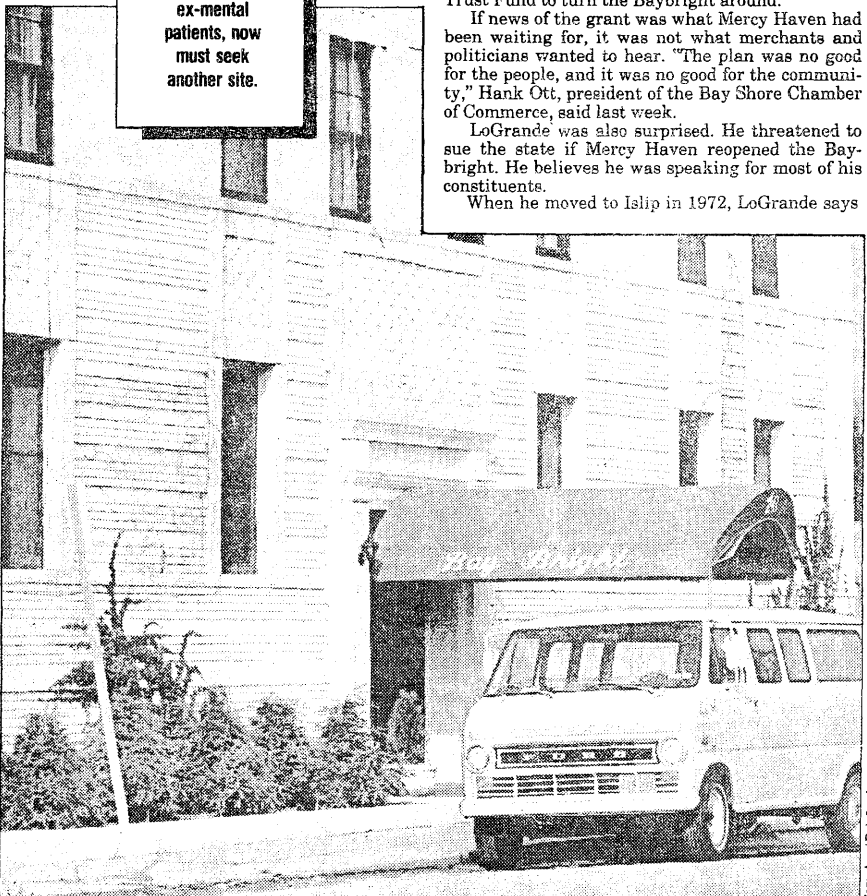
Travers, however, was not daunted by the nuns' lack of experience. "The Mercy Haven nuns submitted a quality grant, and we were especially happy because they were in one area of the state where we knew there was a particular need and not enough was being done," Travers said.

The application was submitted last June. By November, Mercy Haven had been awarded \$1 million from HHAP and \$600,000 from the state Housing Trust Fund to turn the Baybright around.

If news of the grant was what Mercy Haven had been waiting for, it was not what merchants and politicians wanted to hear. "The plan was no good for the people, and it was no good for the community," Hank Ott, president of the Bay Shore Chamber of Commerce, said last week.

LoGrande was also surprised. He threatened to sue the state if Mercy Haven reopened the Baybright. He believes he was speaking for most of his constituents.

When he moved to Islip in 1972, LoGrande says



now, downtown Bay Shore looked like a skid row pocked by empty storefronts and concentrations of vagrant mental patients who had been released from nearby state hospitals. During the last decade, he says, the hamlet has tried to improve the business area through redevelopment programs and at the same time opened several small homes for the street people. He listed homes for retarded adults, alcoholics, drug addicts and battered women.

"Islip has more than its fair share of families living on welfare and in specialized housing," he says. "At some point you have to draw the line." (A study a few years ago ranked Bay Shore second highest of 149 Suffolk communities in the number of facilities for the disabled.)

The supervisor contends that Main Street was the wrong place for a supervised home for former mental patients and that the facility would have been too large. "Why take people off of hospital wards with eighty people and put them in a building with eighty others? You're substituting one institution with another."

LoGrande says that the town wanted scattered sites — small, 12-person homes instead of an 80-person facility — and had plans to purchase several houses.

Since the Baybright fire, nine of the 100 residents have died. The rest have scattered. Most are living in the area — some are in adult homes, others are on the street, others go from one rented room to another. Some still drop by the soup kitchen Griffith started in the basement of St. Patrick's.

Last week, Bruce, who now lives in an adult home, and Walter stopped by the church for vegetable soup. They talked about the old brick hotel where they used to live and about Griffith's efforts to help them move back. "I wouldn't be comfortable there since the fire," said Walter. The fire had reminded him of a fiery car accident that killed his wife and two children and left him with burns over 50 percent of his body in a Brooklyn hospital ward for four years.

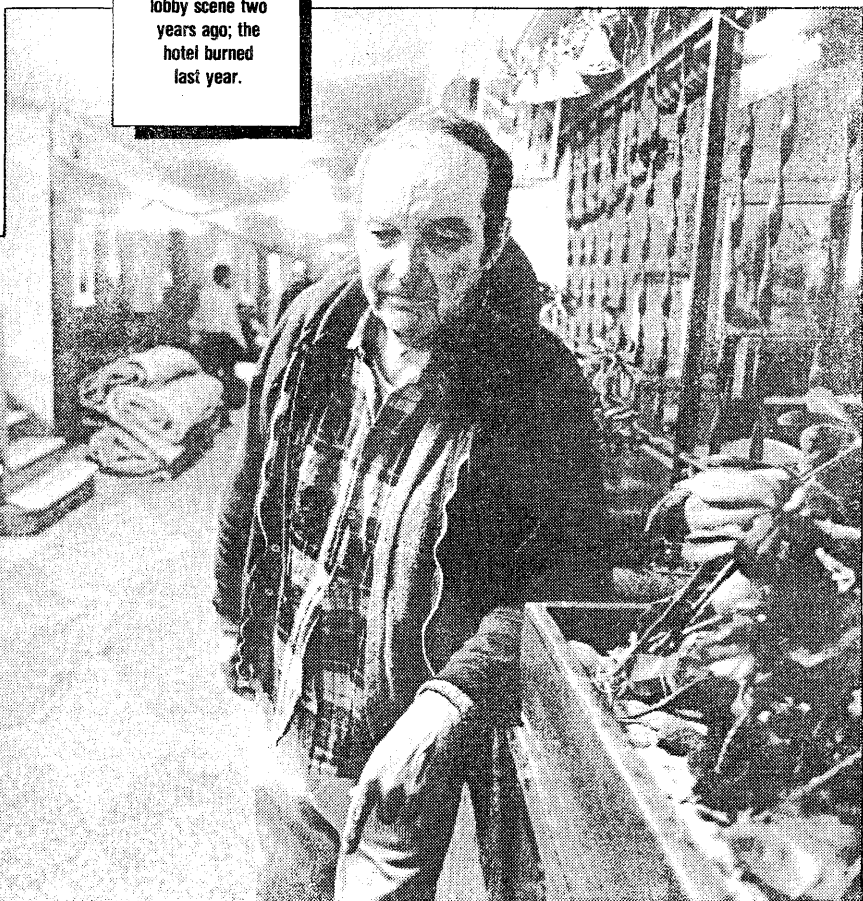
Now, for the former residents, as well as Pat Griffith, the dream of the Baybright has been shattered. The old hotel has reportedly been sold to a developer who plans to turn it into offices.

This summer Griffith will leave the parish that has been the scene of her vocation and fight on a larger front for housing for the poor. With the support of her order, she and the others who have shared her dream for the Baybright have begun looking for office space for Mercy Haven and for backers to help them open homes for the disabled and disadvantaged around the county.

The \$600,000 grant has been lost, and on Monday, the promise of the \$1 million state grant expired. But Griffith has put together and submitted to HHAP a proposal to use the \$1 million for an alternate site. "I have learned a lot over the last two years, and, if anything, I've learned that you don't measure success just by outcome," she said. "We'll be nobody's fool this time." /■



Sister Pat helps Nicolle Callaway, 4, at lunch in the community center she organized at St. Patrick's Church. Below, the Baybright lobby scene two years ago; the hotel burned last year.



Newsday J. Michael Dombroski

Photo by J. Michael Dombroski

NEWSDAY, THURSDAY, JULY 3, 1986

Part II / 5