



The Charity Guild of Catholic Women members gather in front of Charity Guild Shop at 1203 Lovett Boulevard in 2022.

All photos courtesy of the Charity Guild of Catholic Women unless otherwise noted.

Charity Guild of Catholic Women: *A Century of Caring*

**A Classic Story of Can-do Determination,
Texas Grit, and Houston Generosity**

By Mary Frances Fabrizio

In the early 1920s, the economic engine of American enterprise stood poised to grow, bringing vast wealth and material goods to millions. As part of this growth, Houston was home to financiers, industrialists, and businessmen such as Jesse H. Jones and brothers Herman and George R. Brown who shaped the Houston economy. However, many residents did not enjoy the wealth and comfortable lifestyle of these prominent leaders. The effects of economic want were apparent in many areas, and some Houstonians grew determined to do something about it.

Among those who observed the community's pervasive poverty was Monsignor George Walsh, pastor of Church of the Annunciation in downtown Houston. The escalating infant death rate among his Mexican immigrant

parishioners shocked him, and he resolved to remedy it. Already well known for his love for the poor and particularly for this vulnerable population, he was aptly called "the social worker of his day."¹

Msgr. Walsh decided that the Mexican community needed a free clinic and some concerned citizens who could and would financially support it. A group of his female parishioners formed an organization known today as Charity Guild of Catholic Women to provide this essential funding.

Fifty-nine Friends with a Heart for Children

At Monsignor's request, Mrs. Lucian "Kate" Carroll, one of the most prominent women in the Catholic community, hosted a luncheon in her River Oaks home in October 1922. She asked her fifty-eight guests to donate \$1.00 each for a charity fund to benefit Msgr. Walsh's *Clinica*



Mrs. Lucian "Kate" Carroll, a founder of the Charity Guild of Catholic Women.

Photo courtesy of Kitty Bronec.

Gratuita, which was renamed San José Clinic in 1947.

The charity fund had humble beginnings for what would become a \$2-million-per-year charitable enterprise, Charity Guild Shop, owned and operated by Charity Guild of Catholic Women. These early women of compassion dedicated themselves to helping where needed but did not want to be burdened with the red tape of bylaws and scheduled meetings. Kate Carroll and the other charter members agreed, "We just got together, we were all friends, and saw where we were needed. So, we began to work."²

They invited others to join them as they conducted clothing drives, visited hospitals, and worked in the clinic. A mere two months after they began, they filled 300 Christmas stockings for children at Our Lady of Guadalupe School and gave \$70 for relief and another \$82 for Christmas baskets for needy people known to members.³ This achievement in such a short time set the tone for Charity Guild's future.

Perhaps no call for help in those early days gripped the fifty-nine ladies' hearts more than realizing that many families had neither clothing nor blankets for their newborns. Sometimes parents lacked burial garments for their stillborn babies. Thus, the group began making layettes for the little ones – a selfless act so central to the original mission of Charity Guild that today members of the Sewing Committee still make layettes to distribute to agencies serving infants.



The Sewing Committee has been making layettes for newborns from the Guild's earliest days.

Where Charity and Love Prevail

In the beginning, Msgr. Walsh's outreach focused on Houston's Mexican immigrants within the boundaries of Annunciation parish, but he soon realized that poverty was not confined to any one section of the city, and so this project grew. By 1926, Charity Guild had gained focus on its activities, defining its main objectives as assisting the clinic, sewing layettes, and providing volunteers and monetary



Members enjoy the St. Anthony Home Garden Party in June 1963.

aid. They appointed a liaison for the clinic and established committees for visiting hospitals, St. Anthony's Home, and the Social Services Lodge and Tuberculosis Camp.⁴

At first, the process for assisting the disadvantaged was simple and unstructured. An individual, a parish priest, or an organization with a need would reach out to a Guild member who brought the request to the membership for a vote. For example, Dr. Marshall Wallis, a volunteer pediatrician at San José Clinic, lacked enough milk for his young patients. His appeal to Msgr. Walsh found its way to a Charity Guild member who purchased the milk.⁵

Despite various worthy appeals, members never forgot their shared beginnings with San José Clinic. In October 1968, the membership voted to designate the clinic as their main project. They committed to making an annual donation to the clinic and set about raising the money each year. They hosted galas with auctions and luncheons featuring guest speakers. Proceeds from sales at Charity Guild Shop also helped the women reach their yearly goal. Over time, grants to the clinic evolved from \$2,500 to an award of \$50,000 today.⁶

Focus on the clinic did not limit the Charity Guild's outreach. Hurricanes, floods, and even a worldwide pandemic were no match for the members. They collected clothing for victims of catastrophic Gulf Coast hurricanes Camille in 1969 and Katrina in 2005. Hurricane Harvey devastated the city of Houston in 2017 and left the Charity Guild

building without power and surrounded by flooded streets. Despite that, members reopened the shop in three days and garnered the Mayor's Volunteer Houston Award.

What did deter them, although only for a brief time, was the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak, forcing the shop's closure for five months. Charity Guild Shop reopened in August 2020 with reduced hours of operation, precautions in place, and a renewed determination to make the Guild successful by serving customers, consignors, and, most importantly, the charities that depend on its grants.

A Long Way from the Gas Station

Charity Guild has a 100-year history of helping the needy, young and old. Eventually, though, the mission began to solidify around meeting the needs of vulnerable children. The question then became, how could the Guild create a sustainable source of income to fulfill its mission. The group had a ready source of volunteers. The members had committed themselves to raising funds to help children. And they were bonded in their Catholic faith and belief in *Deus Caritas Est*: God is Love.

Ever inventive and energetic, the dedicated philanthropists decided to open a thrift shop in 1953 in an old gas station, the first location of Charity Guild Shop. A nostalgic Houstonian reminisced that the only problem was that "we didn't have any heat in the winter or any cool in the summer, and whenever it rained, the merchandise and the people were soaked."⁷



Dr. George Quirk, husband of Charity Guild member Anne Quirk, distributes gifts at the annual Christmas party at San José Clinic in 2009.

The Guild soon leased another space at the corner of Richmond Avenue and Woodhead Street. A volunteer gratefully observed that after the move to Woodhead, the shop had "no more hulking gasoline pumps for decorations or open-air weather control." With space for more merchandise, the Guild increased its profits, and by March 1955, the bank account was \$3,024.55.⁸

Two more moves, both on W. Main Street, preceded the purchase in May 1960 of a 1920s era house at 1203 Lovett Boulevard. Finally, Charity Guild members realized their dream of holding title to real property. The group approved additions to the house in 1965 and again in 1978, with the highlight being the

addition of a second bathroom.⁹

Eventually, the beloved house began showing its age. To increase the shop's footprint and avoid expensive repairs on a deteriorating building, the only path forward was to demolish the house and rebuild. Charity Guild purchased a lot adjacent to the old house and developed a five-year plan to save for the future construction.

Guild members readily stepped up to donate toward a building fund and soon raised three-fourths of the funds necessary to break ground in 1994.¹⁰ The following year, a bright new shop on Lovett Boulevard, completed under budget and one week early, replaced the original little house.

An addition in 2010 significantly increased both retail space and areas for shop administration and operation. Charity Guild Shop could now showcase quality furniture in charming vignettes and expand the boutique and jewelry departments. In the early days of running the shop, members loved to call it "the Neiman Marcus of the resale clothing shops in Texas."¹¹ The imposing building at 1203 Lovett Boulevard, which the Guild paid off two years early, could now live up to this designation. It was certainly a long way from the gas station.

Every Business Day is a Busy Day

From Monday through Thursday, the volunteers in the Charity Guild Shop happily receive consignments of trendy apparel, practical housewares, unique knick-knacks, one-of-a-kind antiques, and quality furniture. A consignor since the nineties said, "The Charity Guild is a great place. Great people and a great way to spring clean and make money doing it. Highly recommend."¹²

Charity Guild volunteers decked out in their signature pink aprons can easily be spotted by shoppers who say they love finding bargains and appreciate the recycling feature of resale. Hoping to buy merchandise at the lowest cost, they especially like the scheduled reduction in price by 25 percent if an item has been in the shop more than thirty days and 50 percent if



In 1960, the Charity Guild purchased a house on Lovett Boulevard for the shop and expanded it in 1965, as shown here.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD6N-1966.454.



Invitation to the fundraising luncheon for new Charity Guild Shop, September 1993.

it has remained there for forty-five days. It is not unusual to find that generations of families are loyal customers. As one customer put it, "I began coming to Charity Guild Shop with my mother and grandmother in 1968 when I was twelve years old. Now I come with my sister, daughter, granddaughter, and niece about twice a month."¹³

Shoppers, consignors, and Guild members run across an array of the unexpected at Charity Guild Shop. The head of the shoe department once found a wad of one-hundred-dollar bills in the shoes she was pricing. Looking back, she said, "I called the consignor and she tearfully explained what she thought happened. Of course, I happily returned the money."¹⁴

Another consignment included a valuable collector's map of the United States, one of only 100 published around 1816 and valued at \$30,000. Again, the volunteer returned the item. The consignor expressed gratitude with a bequest to children's charities and these words, "We are enclosing a donation check to the Charity Guild in the amount of \$1,800 in heartfelt appreciation for the integrity of your organization. ... We will be pleased to bless the children that the Charity Guild helps."¹⁵

It Is All for the Children

When their feet start to hurt after six hours standing at a cash register in Charity Guild Shop, members remind themselves that all their volunteer efforts benefit children. Ever-increasing revenue from shop sales has allowed the Guild to expand both the number of charities it benefits and the dollar amounts distributed. Faced with this success, the members soon realized that they needed a systematic and equitable method for choosing charities to receive grants.

In 1996 the Guild created a committee to accept and evaluate grant applications from charities that help children from conception to eighteen years. The newly formed Children's Charities Committee was charged with vetting each applicant and then recommending the non-profits that should receive allocations from Charity Guild. Membership

approval completed this process. The committee originally received five to six requests for aid in any given year. Recently 100 or more agencies have applied for grants annually. In the past twenty-five years, Charity Guild of Catholic Women has awarded over \$7 million to 178 unique agencies that serve children in need.¹⁶

The services these grant recipients provide are as varied as the children who need a boost to thrive and become productive citizens. For example, Target Hunger delivers breakfast and lunch boxes to families. Cherish Our Children's mission is counseling for middle schoolers with incarcerated parents. House of Tiny Treasures, another non-profit recipient, runs an early childhood program for homeless and low-income children. The needs are extensive, and these agencies, plus a multitude of others, fulfill the mission of charity towards children.

During the annual grant awards reception in February, each organization gratefully accepts the help they received from Charity Guild. Recipient testimonials confirm the many ways Charity Guild touches the lives of children. The founder of San Francisco Nativity Academy, which serves Houston's Gulfton area, noted that third-grader Tiffany is thriving and "has been eager to learn from the very first day of school." Mom of a cancer patient named Natalie expressed her gratitude to the Periwinkle Foundation, where her daughter "got to experience a fun week of day camp." Second Servings picks up unused food from food businesses. Its president said, "We are glad the Guild agrees that redirecting perfectly edible surplus food to hungry children, instead of the landfill, is practical, efficient, and essential."¹⁷

Celebrating Their Past, Innovating for Their Future

Over the span of 100 years, the small group of women has grown to the 600-member Charity Guild of Catholic Women. The original \$59 they collected for charity has

increased to an annual commitment approaching \$500,000 for distribution to Greater Houston area children's charities. In



Working the customer service desk, member Frannie Gary proudly wears her apron showing the Charity Guild philosophy, "It's all for the children."



Members Ruth Dougherty, left, and Helen Lewis, right, provide much-needed school supplies to children at the annual San José Clinic Back to School Party.

honor of a century of service, the members set a goal to distribute \$1,000,000 to children's charities between February 2022 and February 2023, and they are well on their way.

In 2021 and 2022, the Guild improved systems in Charity Guild Shop to make day-to-day operations more efficient and profitable. Even in the midst of these renovations, the women found time to honor their past and celebrate 100 years strong. To mark the beginning of a yearlong observance, Daniel Cardinal DiNardo celebrated a Mass at the Co-Cathedral of the Sacred Heart in October 2021.

During his homily, the Cardinal recalled how the Guild and the San José Clinic, birthed around the same time, were like two diamonds woven into the thread of the Catholic faith in Houston "because they are brilliant, and they are important to the city. It's a beautiful indication of how superb the faith of women is and what they can do. Each member of the Guild plays a role."¹⁸

Throughout the centennial year, Guild members participated in 100 Acts of Kindness, a hands-on program providing supplies to some of the grant recipients. The generous ladies collected mountains of socks and undergarments for Clothed by Faith and stacked up pots of Play-Doh for Harrison's Heroes to use in art therapy at hospitals. The bins for diapers donated to the Blessed Beginnings Pregnancy and Parenting Life Center at Catholic Charities were overflowing. Band-Aids, alcohol pads, and other supplies piled up for Christus HealthCare to stock school clinics.

In April 2022, Charity Guild celebrated its 100th year at a joint birthday party with San José Clinic at the Houston Zoo. A ball in October of 2022, a joyful evening of dinner and dancing, was capped off by the presentation of the Founder's Award, gratefully accepted by Kate Carroll's granddaughter Kitty Bronec and grandson Joe Goeters.

The final event of the year-long observance was a closing Mass at Church of the Annunciation, the parish where it all started, followed by a reception at Charity Guild Shop. Father

James Murphy, CSB, president of St. Thomas High School and Guild Chaplain, celebrated the Mass and stopped by the shop afterwards to lift a toast to the Guild. In true southern tradition, the ladies were "at home" – in the shop – to end a year of festivity.

During a year of celebrating a century of caring, members welcomed forty-seven new volunteers from nineteen different Catholic parishes to the ranks of Charity Guild of Catholic Women. These provisional members have worked in Charity Guild Shop greeting customers and assisting consignors. They have toured San José Clinic and learned about the historical connection between the two charitable organizations. They have learned and lived the mission of assisting children in need and lifting each other up in prayer.

The new provisional class, one of the largest in recent history, points to the promise of many more years of compassionate volunteerism. Kate Carroll continues to inspire the women who have sewn layettes for infants, have held at-risk children in their laps, and have worked toward improving the lives of many little ones. The Charity Guild has celebrated the past and now looks to the future, the next 100 years of caring. **✚**



Cardinal DiNardo greets the family of founder Kate Carroll at the Centennial Opening Mass in October 2021.

Mary Frances Fabrizio, an Ohio native and graduate of Michigan State University, relocated to San Antonio, Texas in 1975. She moved to Houston and worked for thirty-two years at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston Medical School. She joined Charity Guild of Catholic Women in 2003 and has served as recording secretary, membership chair, member and chair of the Children's Charities Committee, member of the Centennial Committee, and currently serves as chair of Archives.

Charity Guild Shop

1203 Lovett Boulevard, Houston, 77006

713.529.0995, charityguildshop.org

Wednesday-Saturday, 10:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m.

Consignments by appointment only