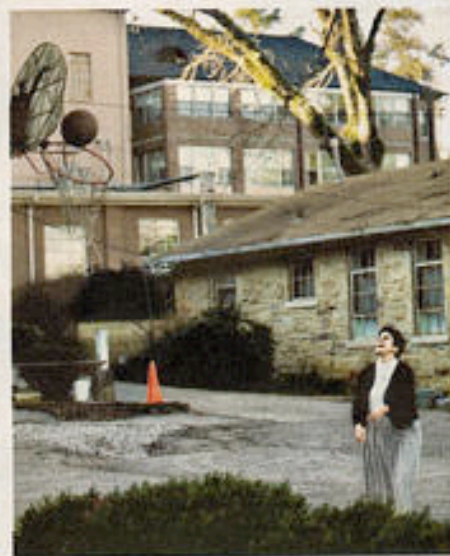




LEFT: "For me, the cemetery is not a sad place," says Sister Tonette Sperando (right) with Sister Mary Ruth Coffman. "Here, we celebrate the life each sister led." BELOW: Sister Tonette takes a shot at the goal, which was set up during her novitiate year.



## Monastery Mission

*Serenity seems steeped into the walls of this blessed community, a part of Alabama for 105 years.*

The sister grins, lines up her shot, and lets the basketball fly. It arcs through the air, bounces off the battered backboard, dances on the rim, and then drops through the ragged net like an afterthought. "I'm a little rusty," admits the shooter, who is dressed in a black sweater, simple skirt, and flat shoes.

Scooping up the ball, Sister Tonette Sperando continues strolling around her home—the lush grounds at Sacred Heart Monastery in Cullman. "My novice director requested that basketball goal for me as a form of exercise during my novitiate year," the Birmingham native says.

As the monastery's treasurer and development director, Sister Tonette's daily work now involves money matters, not hoop shooting. But no matter

how she spends her time, she says, "My challenge is to make certain that I go about each task glorifying God."

All of the sisters at this Benedictine monastery share that sentiment, following a long tradition of prayer and service. In April, Sacred Heart celebrates its 105th anniversary in Cullman. The sisters contribute in many ways to the community they've called home for more than a century.

### Young at Heart

At 38, with dark hair and flawless features, Sister Tonette seems even younger than her age. Her high energy mirrors that of many of the women here—even those well into their senior years. "I can't keep up with them half the time," says Sister Tonette, laughing. "Our lifestyle keeps us young."

One of these ageless workers is Sister Francine Hasenbein. "I was 24 when I came, and now I'm 81," says the spry woman with twinkling eyes. She talks as she stacks newspapers in a recycling bin, declining help when she hoists the heavy container.

A short while later, Sister Francine arrives at Cullman City Primary School, where she tutors once a week. Sacred Heart sisters have long served as teachers for children of local families. Two of the convent's 47 sisters currently teach at St. Bernard Preparatory School, just down the road from the monastery. The school is located at St. Bernard Abbey for monks, which is known for its Ave Maria Grotto attraction.

A little more than 60 of the 400 students at Cullman City Primary School speak little or no English. Most of the non-English-speaking students are Hispanic, but a few are Vietnamese, Japanese, and German.

Sister Francine speaks only English but says, "You don't really need to know their language to tutor." ▶





Words can only say so much.



If you're looking for a way to tell someone special how much you care, then come see our dazzling selection of classic styles and one-of-a-kind antique and estate jewelry at Alexander's Jewelry.

**Alexander's Jewelry**

COIN INVESTORS

256-536-3321

2314 South Memorial Parkway  
Huntsville, AL 35801

Visit our all new website at  
[alexandersjewelry.com](http://alexandersjewelry.com)

Monday-Friday, 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.  
Saturday 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.



ABOVE: Sister Francine Hasenbein tutors non-English-speaking students. RIGHT: Sister Eileen Gallagher treats patients from Morgan and Cullman Counties.

As first-grade students Isaac Rodriguez and Miguel Tizapa-Robles shyly join her, she smiles warmly. "Boys, you remember the cards we used?" she asks. The sister holds up a card with a drawing.

An hour and many flash cards later, the children return to class. Sister Francine, radiating joy, heads out to tackle the next task of the day.

#### The Doctor Is In

Sister Eileen Gallagher, a physician, serves just as cheerfully at Eva Health Center. "I picked out the color," the doctor says, as her tennis shoes tread past light pink walls. "I thought this color was restful." There's little time for her to rest, however, as she pops in and out of the three exam rooms.

The center draws patients from both Cullman and Morgan Counties. "Before we came," she says, "the people of Eva had been without a doctor for five years."

"We ordinarily see between 20 and 30 patients a day," continues Sister Eileen. "Most of our patients are older adults."

After her day at the clinic ends, the sister returns to the monastery. "They know that I'm at the monastery," says Sister Eileen of



her patients, "so they will bring me green beans, squash, and tomatoes and say, 'These are for the sisters.' People do that all the time."

#### Living To Serve

Each day, the sisters weave acts of kindness into the fabric of lives in this area. "We take our community philosophy seriously," says Sister Janet Marie Flemming, Prioress. "We are in the parishes, schools, and health care facilities serving professional and spiritual needs."

They're also in the courtrooms. Sister Lynn Marie McKenzie works on juvenile and disability cases.

Still others run Benedictine Manor, a retirement home on the monastery grounds that is open to laypeople of all faiths.

"We don't retire—forget it," says Sister Mary Ruth Coffman with a





The sisters wear this ring as a symbol of commitment to God and to the Benedictine tradition.

chuckle. "We just change our personal ministry."

That includes offering sessions of "direction for spiritual seekers," Sister Mary Ruth adds. At the beautiful campus, the sisters host retreats for individuals as well as civic and church groups. "Our monastery grounds continue to be a place of peace, harmony, and beauty enjoyed by many," says Sister Janet Marie.

#### All Welcomed

Locals often join the sisters for songs and prayer each morning (called lauds), noon (Eucharist), and night (vespers). "Everything that we do is rooted in our prayer life," says Sister Tonette. "Our prayer sets the rhythm of the day."

Task by task, the sisters try to better the world. "The place where I'm standing should be different because of what I put into it," Sister Tonette continues. "People should know that a Benedictine has been there."

For the past 105 years, Alabamians have, indeed, known the women of Sacred Heart, richly benefiting from their hallowed mission.

NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON

### Seeking Sanctuary

To find out more about Sacred Heart Monastery, visit [www.shmon.org](http://www.shmon.org), or call (256) 734-4622. On April 20, the convent will celebrate its 105th anniversary.



# The Spine Center

**TOC** The Orthopaedic Center



## Alabama's Largest Comprehensive Spine Care Center

Offering operative and non-operative spine care with six Fellowship trained Spine Surgeons and four Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation Specialists.

#### ORTHOPAEDIC SPINE SURGEONS:

Gilbert M. Aust, M.D.  
Cyrus Ghavam, M.D.  
Larry M. Parker, M.D.  
F. Calame Sammons, M.D.  
Brian M. Scholl, M.D.  
Morris B. Seymour, M.D.

#### HUNTSVILLE

ATHENS      GUNTERSVILLE  
DECATUR      MADISON  
FAYETTEVILLE      SCOTTSBORO

**1.877.957.7463** toll free

(1.877.95.SPINE)

**256.327.7463** local

(256.32.SPINE)

[www.visitTOC.com](http://www.visitTOC.com)