There is a defiance and a fragility about the small backyard garden that she leads us to. We descend the three or four steps off of the rear of her beautiful row home in the museum district of the city, and we find a master’s work. It is subtly inspiring. Not powerful like a sweeping five-hundred page novel. More like a beautiful haiku – one that makes you want to go home and write one yourself. And because of its accessible holiness – you can.

We sat in the backyard of the home of Mary Ellen Graham. She is the founder and first executive director of My Place Germantown – a community-based permanent housing residence for men who have been navigating homelessness in the City of Philadelphia. It is a small effort to care for a maximum of twelve men who are particularly vulnerable because of physical or mental challenges, addictions, or any of the array of causes that lead to and keep people in the complex cycle of homelessness.

Mary Ellen is now eighty-years-old and has since retired from her day-to-day role with My Place Germantown. We discussed her work, her journey, her faith and her garden.

“When people bring me flowers or plants I never turn them away. I always try to plant them here in the garden. I don’t know whether they will take hold, whether it will work out or not, but I have to try.”

This radical hospitality has been one of the marks of Mary Ellen’s life. When recounting the story of My Place Germantown, she doesn’t begin with its launch in 2007. Instead she begins the story almost six decades ago when she was a single mom taking care of six children.

“The sheriff came to my home with a notice saying that we had twenty-four hours to move out.” She begins with the pain and insecurity of that day still faintly palpable in her voice. “And I didn’t know what to do. My oldest was around fourteen and my youngest was just three. I suppose I would have brought the kids to the steps of Saint Genevieve’s…but a red-headed Irish attorney intervened for us and we were allowed to stay in our home.”

This gesture made a lasting impact on Mary Ellen and seemed to have awakened something within her. As she speaks I wonder if that “Red-Headed Irishman” knew that his kindness would affect the lives of so many others in the coming years.
“I became attuned to the importance of space, to the importance of safety...and autonomy. I soon gained a reputation for taking people in.”

She then relayed story after story of how, amidst having six children to take care of, she would invite those who were without a safe place of their own, to stay with her. A teenager who got kicked out of her house. An abandoned divorcee. Stranded international travelers. Missionaries. Students. Immigrants.

“I never turned anyone away. There was always someone staying with us. After they grew up and would call home, my kids would always ask, ‘Who do you have staying there now mom?’ There was always someone staying with us...But I didn’t do their laundry. I already had enough of that to do.”

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I first heard of Mary Ellen’s vision for My Place Germantown in the early 2000s, sitting in the landmark Trolley Car Diner on Germantown Road in Philadelphia – just a few minutes from where the residence was to open a few years later. I had just finished working for Project H.O.M.E. the city’s (and one of the nation’s) largest care providers for individuals navigating homelessness. I was a street outreach worker engaging individuals every day and trying to get them into shelters, detox facilities, mental health institutions or offer them whatever they might need that day.

I walked into the diner and found Mary Ellen sitting in a booth. She was sixty-five years old – the age most people are when they are winding down their professional careers. This woman was just getting started. Already a grandmother, she had (and still has mind you) the energy of a thirty-year-old. She shared with me her vision for a permanent supportive residence (not simply a shelter) in the Germantown section of Philadelphia. At that time most programs for homeless men according to Mary Ellen, had “certain barriers to admittance and a brevity of time allotted for recovery”. She recalls, “For a number of years I coordinated a ministry focused on providing support services for over 70 impaired residents. I discovered that the operation was so exploitative and thus the care so inadequate that I had to create an alternative.”

This, too, was my experience with many agencies that addressed homelessness and cared for those experiencing it. Shelters were often just that – a place to come out of the rain- and little more. The better facilities could be difficult to be admitted to and there was often a limit to how long one could stay. And while certainly the minority, the worst spaces profited off of the social security or disability checks of their residents, while providing minimal, often lackluster and at times cruel, care. That isn’t to say that a lot of good – life changing good - wasn’t or isn’t being done around our city and around our country (and more of those stories need to be lifted up) but there certainly are some places that are perhaps doing more harm.

The My Place Germantown model of not turning anyone away and not having limits on how long residents could stay was, at the time, controversial. Now it has become the norm. And if furthering the field of caregiving for those who are experiencing homelessness wasn’t enough, Mary Ellen was getting push back from neighbors who “didn’t want a homeless shelter in their backyard.” She understood their hesitations, but saw this as an important win-win opportunity.

“One of the points of My Place Germantown (along with providing a safe supportive space off the street for men) was to break down stereotypes about homeless men. Rather than
being a threat, these men would be a benefit to the community bringing their unique gifts, their diversity, and more. Likewise with the work I’d done at Mercy Hospice and Bethesda Project (two agencies addressing homelessness in Philadelphia), I began to recognize the unique difficulties facing men who are on or are close to living on the street. Society believes that men should just be able to ‘pull themselves up’ when they are down. And that if they are homeless this happened because of their own mistakes and bad decisions. Society offers, understandably, a different kind of care for women and children on the street. But we give less help to men.”

I left our booth after our first meeting knowing that she was going to get this done. She has a determination and toughness about her that perhaps she inherited from depression era parents, or from immigrant grandparents, or from raising six children as a single mom, or from a lifetime’s dogged faith in God that won’t ever seem to fall away amidst challenges and setbacks. She’s a tough lady who follows a tough God that never let her go.

Her reputation for being tough went with her throughout her career as a writing professor. Teaching at Chestnut Hill College and at University of the Sciences was her “day job” while she was developing and fundraising for My Place Germantown. Her student reviews describe her as “a real toughie” and an “old school teacher” who always improves her students writing. She has a physical toughness too. She has had two hip replacements, a knee replaced, and a spinal fusion.

The years leading up to My Place Germantown’s founding demanded not only the gift for hospitality she possessed, but also every last bit of her physical, mental, and spiritual toughness. Through community meetings with neighbors who didn’t want this to happen, setbacks with permits and renovations, and especially with figuring out how to make this work financially – Mary Ellen has had to reflect the grittiness of her hometown of Philly.

“I spoke with Sister Mary Scullion (the legendary co-founder and director of the aforementioned Project H.O.M.E.) and she said that there are three ways to fund something like this. First you can have a major donor. We didn’t have that. Second you can have a large mailing list and receive hundreds or thousands of smaller and medium sized donations. We didn’t have a mailing list like that either. The third option is to apply for grants. So that’s what we’ve had to do.”

The writing professor picked up her pen, applied for and received enough money to get started.

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Mary Ellen in her garden, photo by Annalise Hope Howard

Down the road, about a half-mile from her home, large lush gardens full of beautiful flowers and statues run from the Philadelphia Museum of Art down to the iconic Boat House Row along the Schuylkill River. These curated green spaces with budgets from the city are far larger than Mary Ellen’s small garden. It’s difficult not to see the parallel between this contrast and the contrast between the work of larger multi-million dollar agencies in the city which have helped thousands of people over the years and My Place Germantown which only houses twelve.
And yet while sitting in her garden, it’s not clear to me which one is more beautiful. The stunning gardens that are a destination for couples getting photographed on their wedding days, or this little garden with its diverse array of flowers that have found their way to Mary Ellen.

“I come out to the garden every morning and again every evening. To be successful in this work, it takes attentiveness. I don’t think one can go into gardening and think that every flower you plant will flourish and make it.”

She tells a story about a rose that she received for her birthday. While planting the rose, she found that a plant she recently received and brought into her garden didn’t make it. She then pivots to tell the story of one of her residents.

“At My Place Germantown there was a wonderful older Jewish gentleman. He was the best storyteller. He was also an addict. Our team just loved him. But informed us that he was going to be leaving. His addiction led him to make some destructive and self-destructive decisions. I implored him to stay, trying to do so without putting too much pressure on him. But he left and moved in with a friend or relative in a space that would allow him to use.”

Her care for the one gentleman who didn’t stay, her grief over the one flower in her garden that didn’t make it at first seem like too much attention to the “failures” rather than the success stories. There are a number of men whose lives have been changed by My Place Germantown and a garden full of flowers that wouldn’t have lasted a week without being planted in this soil. In fact the success rate at My Place Germantown is astounding in that they’ve had no one return to the streets or to the shelter system.

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I brought my daughters along to interview Mary Ellen with me. Charissa for her attentiveness to detail and Annalise for her photographic eye. Charissa suggested using a poem to conclude this short piece, which only provides a very brief glimpse into the adventure of a life that Mary Ellen has lived. I agreed that it’s important to let this tough accessible saint have the last word here.

On the back wall of her garden grows a lupine plant. Mary Ellen wrote a poem about it. Here it is.

Growing Patience

The lupine, teetering on extinction, struggled to declare itself with two diminutive stalks. Disappointed, this hapless gardener warned of its vulnerability,

But delayed taking action.

Grateful for the reprieve, the lupine retreated underground, bracing itself for the winter’s trials. While, above ground, the leaves gathered and the soil hardened.

Only the winter rose appeared undaunted.

In time the spring rains came, and with them upright points of green: Hyacinths, daffodils,
paper whites. But what of the lupine? Perhaps it had succumbed to weather, disease, or plain weariness.

Or?

Then in a whisper, ever so measured, the answer came: two shoots, then three, then four—until three pregnant buds swayed atop three sturdy stalks—

Oh so grateful for one more year!

By Mary Ellen Graham