Why is the little yellow house on Stillman Street called Caroline House? The answer to that question takes us to Bavaria, Germany, where the Congregation of the School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSNDs) was founded 175 years ago. It was there that Caroline Gerhardinger, later known as Mother Theresa, was inspired by the need to educate young women.

One of the sisters, who had taken the religious name Sister Caroline, went with Mother Theresa to visit America. When Mother Theresa returned to Germany, she left Sister Caroline in Pennsylvania with three other young sisters to establish schools for the children of poor German immigrants. It is for Sister Caroline that the Stillman Street house is named.

From the beginning, the vision of the School Sisters was to transform the world through the education of the whole person, especially on behalf of poor women and girls. This vision became a reality as the SSNDs opened hundreds of schools throughout the United States, Europe, Asia, Africa, Central and South America, and the Caribbean.

Mother Caroline would be proud of the work going on today at 574 Stillman Street in Bridgeport. Just 14 years ago, the SSNDs opened Caroline House there as an education center for immigrant women and their children. Since then hundreds of women and children have passed through its doors.

On October 17 the Caroline House community hosted a Block Party to celebrate the 175th anniversary of the founding of the SSNDs. Prior to that day, the students learned about the congregation's charism of unity and oneness through reflections and videos about the work of SSNDs throughout the world. Sister Josephina Morales came to speak with the women about the heritage of SSND. In addition to that heritage, the festivities on the 17th also celebrated the seven SSNDs who are today continuing to live out on Stillman Street the vision of Mother Caroline: Sisters Ann, Bernadine, Connie, Ellen, Irene, Lorraine and Mariano.
Our Volunteer Spotlight - FUN in Summer School

During three consecutive weeks, from June 23 – July 11, 20 children with smiling faces and a spring in their steps arrived at the door of Caroline House by 8:30 a.m. The seven- to fourteen-year-olds then spent three hours working on math, reading, and writing with some art classes for good measure. Recess time always included 20-minute ball games of epic proportions with Kevin as the tireless, over the wall, lost ball retriever. During the entire session, not a single student was late…and every one of them stayed through the very last day.

Under the direction of Sister Ann, 10-15 tutors provided the much needed, one-on-one or small group attention, which helped with both learning and self-esteem. This team of dedicated volunteers was united by a common goal: each one had come to teach, to encourage, and to support the children whom they got to know and love.

Examples of the wonderful achievements include:

- Mary helped Beliza focus better in math and in the process helped her to like herself a bit more
- Jimmy clarified the principles of long division to 7th grade girls, who certainly didn’t mind being taught by a “cool senior”
- Shawn worked his mentor magic on Luis and his 4th grade posse of boys
- Anna and Lauren worked marvels with their individual students
- Lucas was known as “the coolest dude and real friend to his charge”
- Diane and Marie-Paule discovered a fascination with astronomy, dinosaurs, and art among their students and treated them with delightful museum trips to New York
- In the journaling class, Michel revealed a real talent for writing, and all students were able to learn that a story must have a beginning, a middle, an end, and lots of emotions.
- At recess one day, Jacques had an awesome (and possibly first ever) birthday party with cake, candles, and lots of singing to celebrate his turning 11.

Little kids, big kids, and grownups showed up daily and worked hard. All were sad to say goodbye but grateful for their time together and for all they had learned at Caroline House.
June 2008 was a time of good-byes. Deidre Signore, our early childhood assistant, graduated from Fairfield University and moved onto full-time employment. Deidre’s face was a familiar one at Caroline House, where she had worked with the children for four years.

It was also time for many of our children to attend kindergarten. Director Jean Fredricks and the pre-school staff were sad to see the little ones leave but were also very proud of them. They knew that these children had advanced in all 15 areas of academic and motor skill testing and had been well prepared to enter English-speaking classes in their new schools. Their readiness to take that step was due in large part to the efforts of the student volunteers who worked so hard with their little charges.

September 2008 brought to Caroline House a new class of over twenty children speaking five different languages or none at all and being attached to pacifiers, bottles, and mommy’s legs. By now, however, most of those attachments have worked themselves out. In fact, we currently have children who don’t want to leave in the afternoon. Twenty-five volunteers (two adults plus students from Sacred Heart, Fairfield, and Bridgeport universities) came on board and are helping their pupils work on shapes and colors as well as on matching and sequencing. Students are also painting, and the results of their creativity are on display around the Children’s Room. In addition, the beautiful weather has encouraged fun and practice in gross motor skills outside in the yard.

This semester we are continuing the “Mommy and Me” classes and have extended the day for a half hour in order to offer a reading program for the mothers and children. This is one more effort to encourage mothers to be comfortable reading to their children. Eventually we hope to have the mothers start journal writing so that they will be able to tell their own stories.

The children are looking forward to visiting the local fire and police stations during the coming months. They are also preparing to welcome representatives from the Animal Embassy, a group that teaches school children how to handle small animal and emphasizes kindness and gentleness with nature. These activities, their new learning, and the coming holidays will certainly combine to keep the occupants of the Children’s Room busy, alert, happy, and enthusiastic.

Knitting Together

Sister Connie and Dolores Conway had talked about a knitting class for the Caroline House women students. When a week of extra curricular classes was offered after school closed last summer, that class became a reality.

Dolores shared her excitement with her daughter Danni, who works at Knitting Central in Westport. Danni, in turn, was able to purchase our needles at a discount and found three of the store’s customers who were eager to help with the teaching. Monica, a Caroline House volunteer, also offered to help. The Caroline House knitting class was ready to go.

On Monday, the women came in, chose from brightly colored yarns, and began to learn how to knit a scarf. Two of the students knew how to knit and shared their knowledge. A few had not knit in years and were surprised at how quickly their fingers “remembered.” In two days we had a knitting group. A few students were so enthusiastic that they sat through two knitting classes a day.

It was wonderful to watch the women “at work.” Both students and volunteers were knitting and chatting with one another, in the tradition of women around the world. Soon the women brought in their own handiwork to show each other: knitted and crocheted items, embroidery, and exquisite lace work.

By the end of the week, we had real knitters: some with almost completed scarves, others with only inches done, and a few who had moved on to knitting a hat. Many were eager to continue with a knitting group in the fall. Knitting Central has donated some yarn, and we are in the process of collecting more. This has truly been an example of women working together and helping each other.
Dear Friends,

Well into the midst of our 14th year at Caroline House, we are busier than ever. Each year we add something new, and this year has been no exception. In addition to the 4 levels of ESL and the once weekly meeting for the 5th level of English, in September we began a pre-literacy program for those women who know absolutely no English. A student who will soon have her Masters Degree in Spanish is teaching a few Hispanics who never learned to read or write in their native language and are anxious to learn English. Our after-school tutoring program meets twice a week and continues to draw new children from Luis Munoz Marin School, since Garfield School closed.

Bridgeport City Council Representative Maria Valle presented me with a document that acknowledges my work on the East Side of Bridgeport and at Caroline House. I was honored and humbled to accept it on behalf of all the Sisters who work with and for the people associated with both places.

As we ponder all the good things God has done for us, we have several sisters we can thank. The preparation of the house and all the preliminary work that had to be done when we first started here can be attributed to the leadership and efforts of Sisters Mary Lennon and Karen Kane. Coming after them and expanding the curriculum and activities, Sisters Brenda Lynch and Maureen Fleming continued the mission to serve those in need on the East Side of Bridgeport. We celebrate them and those who served here with them during this 175th anniversary of the founding of the School Sisters of Notre Dame.

We have reason to be proud of Caroline House and would be honored to have you come to witness what occurs here when we are in action. Blessings on you and yours.

S. Ann Moles, SSND

We here at Caroline House are well aware of the economic and financial difficulties facing many of you during these turbulent days. Historically, we have run a lean operating budget, even in the best of times. Today, however, we are confronting very tight constraints that affect our most basic budgeting needs. In order for us to keep our doors open and provide much needed programs and services to our students, we hope that you will share in the mission of Caroline House in any way you are able to during this holiday season.

Thank you for whatever you can do.