



## For Rev. Maria A. Scates, it's about changing people's lives

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**UTICA, November 26, 2009 -- While Rev. Maria A. Scates had always led a life of selflessness, it took an awakening to bring her to Cornhill, and it all started on a Thanksgiving Day in Harlem.**

The CEO of Johnson Park Center, Scates, has been a community activist rallying against drugs and violence to make a better name for Cornhill since 1995. Ten years earlier, in 1985, she'd been a struggling Realtor who had an epiphany as she walked up the stairs of a church basement.

"It was Thanksgiving," Scates said. "I was low on cash and needed to sell. My lawyer friend (who had helped her sell her first listings) told me about a big Thanksgiving dinner in a brownstone building. He said he would ask the pastor who owned it if I could sing at Mass and also if I can sell the building for her."

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In the basement of the building she went, where she found the pastor cooking and preparing for the feast after church services. Per the reverend woman's request, Scates walked upstairs to a service full of homeless and needy men.

"She was feeding them all," Scates said emotionally. "She was taking care of them all. When I saw them, I knew ... My heart broke. That was the moment of change for me. That is what I was purposed to do. It wasn't about selling homes and making money, it was about people's lives being changed."

## **A YOUNG WOMAN FINDS HER MISSION**

A woman from a family of preachers, her's is no rags-to-riches tale. Scates came to town with a vision, and to her, vision is key. A Portsmouth, Virginia native, or "a country girl from the south," as she joked, she knew there was something special she had to do.

"I left home at 19 years-old to travel and see the world," she said. "Like many teenagers, I was hardheaded, stubborn, wanted things done my way or no way, thought I knew it all and thought I was smarter than my parents because they were old-fashioned and out-of-touch."

Scates began her journey serving in the Army from 1977-1981, and the Civil Service from 1981-1985. She got a job in Brooklyn and realized what the real world was all about, and it certainly wasn't kind to newcomers. She found herself homeless, learning to live on very little and even living in abandoned buildings sometimes. She got into the real estate business, and at what she thought would be one of her first sales, she instead found her mission in life.

Scates said she attributes her admirable qualities to her parents and their life-style.

"I am so thankful and grateful for the beautiful way they raised me," she said. "The tough love that I received from them, and how they did not give in to my wanting to do things my way...they taught me right from wrong."



**Rev. Maria Scates points out members of her family during an interview. Almost all of her brothers and sisters are reverends, including her father. (PHOTO BY LAURA C. LAUREY / UDN)**



**Rev. Maria Scates discusses the improvements she has made in Cornhill with visitors in October. (PHOTO BY LAURA C. LAUREY / UDN)**

## **A WALK OF FAITH THAT LEADS TO CORNHILL**

After missionary work in Russia and Jamaica, Utica was brought to her attention and became the focus of her life journey. Thirty-seven properties later, JPC is a booming community organization.

"When I came here, I had nothing. I had two beds and equipment from Bible schools," Scates said.

After taking a tour of the community, Scates reached Johnson Park and found what

she knew would be her home and her outreach center one day.

"We turned at Arthur and West (Streets) and when I saw this building, I knew this was the building," she said.

To get to the apartment she and Rev. Ursula Meier -- Chief Operations Officer of Johnson Park Center -- share at 26 Johnson Park, you walk through the first and second floors of the building, where youth programs and the main office are located. All freshly renovated and redone, you reach the third-floor staircase and walk up a flight of stairs to find old paint chipping and walls with peeling wallpaper.

She doesn't go out to buy herself a candy bar, a new outfit, or even a book. It's all dependent on what God brings her way, she said.

"It is a walk of faith -- I am a full-time volunteer," Scates said of her position. "I receive no salary nor do I have any pensions or savings. Through the small, limited donations and contributions given to the JCTOD Church is how I receive food, clothing and needed personal items."

Scates nodded to a large still-life painting of fruit. It was one of the special gifts she received from a woman moving away and getting rid of some belongings. It has symbolic significance, she said.

"I saw that this place could be fruitful," she said. "So every once in a while I would look at this picture and see what wonderful fruit could come forth from this place."



**Rev. Ursula Meier points out the lack of a window frame in the apartment she and Rev. Maria Scates share during an interview on October 20, 2009. All the money the Johnson Park Center raises goes to the organization; their apartment was never renovated like the rest of the building. (PHOTO BY LAURA C. LAUREY / UDN)**

Inside the apartment, windows are covered up with plastic and insulation and a bright yellow kitchen connects to a peach bathroom. Old plumbing could cost thousands of dollars to repair, so they make due with what they have. The only truly material luxuries are related to the outreach program -- access to the surveillance system, Internet services and of course they have cell phones.

"Rev. Meier and I are full-time volunteers," she explained. "So we do the best we can with what we have. All the money that comes to Johnson Park goes right into

Johnson Park. We put it where it belongs."

Rev. Scates does own a few prized possessions. In her office, hanging along one wall above filing cabinets and paperwork, are more than 30 hats. She grinned as she reached out spanning her arm across the wild and colorful display.

"This," she said simply, "is my hat collection. They're from everywhere - back home from my mother, from Jamaica, from Russia, from all over the place."

## **A DAY IN HER LIFE IS NOT TYPICAL, EITHER**

A day in the life of Rev. Scates depends on the circumstances. She busies herself within the community, reeling in grants and funding whenever she can, coordinating events and working hands-on with recovering addicts, domestic violence victims, children and the poverty-stricken. Some of the programs initiated through Scates and her colleagues include:

- Community development, such as the rehabilitation of many homes and properties near Johnson Park, and the memorial of Ricky Powell and Brian West on the corner of Arthur and West Streets
- Family Emergency Shelter -- the first of its kind in Oneida County -- where low-income families of any composition can stay during a crisis
- Youth Drop-in Center and Feeding Program
- Community Food Pantry
- Pre and post employment mentoring, training and support services for ex-offenders offered through the Second Chance Program
- A refuge and recovery process for women who are homeless, addicted, disabled, etc. through Johnson Park Apartments program. The program even offers advocacy at custody hearings, court appearances and with treatment providers.



**Rev. Scates(right) points out the newest building of the Johnson Park Apartments to Alma Balonon-Rosen during the Johnson Park Memorial dedication ceremony in August at the corner of West and Aurthur Streets. (PHOTO BY LAURA C. LAUREY / UDN)**



**Rev. Maria Scates discusses her life from childhood to homelessness during an interview in October. Scates professes that her experiences as a young woman trying to survive on her own in New York City steered her toward the life of generosity she now leads. (PHOTO BY LAURA C. LAUREY / UDN)**

## **A BEACON OF LIGHT IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD**

Scates has made a difference in the lives of many people. Some of them, she has no idea how much they respect the change that has come with her presence and diligence.

From childhood through his years as a patrolman, Utica Deputy Police Chief Mark Williams has seen the worst of Cornhill. Growing up on the 1500 block of West Street, he watched his neighborhood in the 1960s deteriorate through the mid-90s; until Scates took the initiative to help clean up the reputation of Cornhill.

"Rev. Scates drew a credit," Williams said. "Since the mid-1990s she's helped clean up that area. It really has been a positive thing. There used to be all these buildings in need of rehabilitation and with the fabulous grants she's received she had rehabilitated them. You can definitely see a positive change in that area."

Despite crime rates looming, they're still better since Scates took the reigns, he said.

"I've known her from all different ranks: from patrolmen through deputy chief," Williams said. "Her heart's in the right place. She's trying to make the quality of life better in that area and trying to give these kids a positive influence in that area; and I give her a lot of credit for what she does because it's not always easy."

Councilman Bill Phillips, who represents Utica's fifth district (which includes Cornhill), said while she came into town a stranger, she is a dedicated friend to the community.



**Rev. Maria Scates, rear, and Sharon Henderson check out some of the items various companies donated. The Johnson Park Center provided these items free to individuals in their various programs, most of whom have no way to buy basic necessities for themselves, much less their families. (PHOTO BY LAURA C. LAUREY / UDN)**

"When I first took office, I was a little leery of some of the programs she was running," he said, "because they were for troubled people and I didn't know if it was a fit for this neighborhood. After meeting with her and going through the programs, I saw how rigid she was with the people; and I'm her biggest fan now."

Phillips said there has been an absolute positive change in Cornhill since Scates' arrival.

"She's like a beacon of light in that neighborhood because of some of the things she's been able to accomplish," he said.

The funding Scates has roped in from state and federal grants and programs has brought in roughly \$10 million or more, Phillips said.

"Johnson Park was without a doubt the worst part of Cornhill," Phillips said of his earlier years in city office. "It was where drug addicts hung out, and people were afraid to walk down there. (Scates) literally turned it around to what it is today. It's probably one of the safest parts of the neighborhood now. It's been a terrific turnaround, and she's not finished. I've known her visions: It's coming out of Johnson Park and going up the street. She's got a ton of energy. She and Rev. (Ursula) Meier are a shining star in that neighborhood. She does basically all of this on a volunteer basis. She's not getting a salary -- she just loves building that neighborhood."

Even her own roommate, Meier, said Scates is an inspiration and role model to look up to. Meier came to Cornhill in 1998, and since then has been advocating for a positive change in the community by Scates' side. She named a few of the programs Scates initiated and paused for a moment when she reached mention of the youth center.



**Rev. Maria Scates pauses for a moment during her busy day to say hello to 3-month-old Devon Rollins. (PHOTO BY LAURA C. LAUREY / UDN)**

"The children really moved her," Meier said thoughtfully. "She's got a big heart -- a very big heart."

A room on the second floor of 26 Johnson Park showcased the blueprint for various projects done and under way through Scates' efforts. Meier said there isn't a plan Scates doesn't see through.

"Rev. Scates is always thinking ahead," Meier said. "The key thing with Rev. Scates is vision, vision, vision. In the 11 years I've been here, I know she sees things finished. She sees it and it's already done -- if you hang around her a long time you see she sees things

through.

Perhaps the largest impact Scates has made is on recovering addicts, battered women, and the lives of everyone else that she has touched. After being incarcerated after a drug bust in her home, Sharon Henderson was sent to a recovery center, and came to Johnson Park Apartments afterward and joined the Second Chance program. Now the job coordinator from the programs she graduated from just a few years ago, Henderson said she was thankful for Scates' work in Johnson Park.

"I needed the structure and violence," she said. "I didn't know how to live on my own. I didn't even have my kids -- they were in foster care. But I'm still here and I'm not going anywhere. This program encourages women to stay clean and be productive, and that's what I do."

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