

# On 'holy ground,' a **RESURRECTION** of **HOPE**

Franciscan Brothers' Mount Sinai retreat house gets new life as rehab center

BY BART JONES

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Two years ago, the Little Portion Friary in Mount Sinai was in danger of being bulldozed and the land used for condominiums. The Episcopal-affiliated Franciscan Brothers, who had operated it since 1929, had run out of money and men.

A year passed, and the brothers received a letter from the Rev. Francis Pizzarelli, founder of Hope House Ministries in Port Jefferson. His idea: Sell the friary to his nonprofit organization and use it as a home to help rehabilitate heroin addicts and other substance abusers.

So it is that on this Easter Sunday, Pizzarelli also is celebrating two other resurrections — of the retreat house and of the men who inhabit it while trying to turn their lives around.

"The whole thing is about resurrection, that hope springs eternal," said Pizzarelli, who adds that his program has helped at least 10,000 addicts in 36 years. "These guys that have been beaten down — some have been imprisoned, some have lived in the streets because of their addiction — and here is a real sense of resurrection."

The retreat house turned rehabilitation center, he said, is "just holy ground."

Fifty-five men are in Hope House's program, some staying in the former friary and some in the ministry's original building in Port Jefferson near Route 112.

The Franciscan brothers, who are members of the Society



The Rev. Francis Pizzarelli, founder of Hope House Ministries in Port Jefferson, gives Communion on March 18 in Mount Sinai.

of St. Francis and affiliated with the Episcopal Church and the Worldwide Anglican Communion, are equally pleased with the outcome.

"We are over the moon," said Brother Jude Hill, the provincial for the group's North and South America province. If the land had been sold for development, "we could have made a fortune, but we didn't want to do that."

Today, many of the men from the retreat house will attend a 5:30 a.m. Easter sunrise service with Pizzarelli at West Meadow Beach in Stony Brook, then attend Mass at St. James Roman Catholic Church in Setauket. At noon, Pizzarelli will celebrate another Mass at the house, and then cap off Easter by taking some of the men to dinner.

The story of the friary's trans-



Hope House Ministries baker Chris Burke begins baking bread for residents and the community at 2 a.m.

formation dates to 2013, when the brothers agreed to sell 44.3 acres of their land to Suffolk County and the Town of Brookhaven for \$4.4 million. The governments pledged to preserve the environmentally sensitive, wooded land.

## 'It worked out perfectly'

The brothers held on to 20.5 acres and the retreat house, hoping they could make a go of it. But the money wasn't there to maintain the aging building, a local landmark that attracted thousands of people for retreats and gained fame for the bread the brothers baked every Friday and sold to the public.

The brothers also needed to put money from the land sale into a trust fund to pay for aging members' health care. Plus, the few new recruits they were at-

tracting wanted to do urban ministry with the poor and homeless and not run a retreat house, Hill said.

So they closed the 11,775-square-foot friary and consolidated their U.S. operations in California. The group has 10 members in this country.

With the fate of the retreat house hanging in the balance, Pizzarelli stepped in with his proposal. The brothers agreed to accept \$500,000 for 5.5 acres of the land immediately surrounding the friary, said Pizzarelli, a member of the Montfort Missionaries, a worldwide order of Catholic priests and brothers with 20 members in the United States.

That price is well below market value, said Legis. Sarah Anker (D-Mount Sinai), adding that the brothers easily could





**The Little Portion Friary in Mount Sinai, shown in 2014, was sold to Hope House Ministries in a deal that saved the Franciscan Brothers' retreat house and bucolic land. ■ Video: [newsday.com/suffolk](http://newsday.com/suffolk)**

have sold it to a developer for at least twice that. The brothers gave Pizzarelli the two-story, 23-bedroom friary for free.

Suffolk County and the Town of Brookhaven are buying the remaining 15 acres and will add it to the preserved space from the earlier purchase, Anker said. The county and town hope to pay \$1.5 million.

The retreat house needed substantial renovation when Pizzarelli acquired it, and the men in his program have spent months on repairs and remodeling. Some moved in a day before Christmas Eve.

"It was a very sad thing the brothers had to leave," said Steven Miller, 29, of Mineola, who helped renovate the friary but does not live there. But, he said, "it worked out perfectly [that] we were able to take it over."

Today, the center is fully functioning. The men spend their days in counseling sessions, working on the house, praying, studying, and in some cases attending classes at local colleges. Another of the men, Thomas,

37, is a recovering alcoholic who grew up in Nassau County and has lived in the house about six months. A father of four and a former high school honors student, he said he had seven DWIs and served prison time. "This house for me is a new beginning," said Thomas, who asked that his last name not be used.

## Free help for those in need

The men typically stay in the Hope House rehabilitation program for 12 to 18 months. They pay nothing to stay at the center, which like all of Pizzarelli's operations is funded by donations.

Hope House Ministries also has a homeless shelter, a center for women and children in crisis, and other services in Port Jefferson. The ministries' annual budget is about \$4 million, said Charles Russo, the organization's board chairman.

The chapel of the retreat house remains open to the public, as it was when the brothers owned the building. So is the labyrinth, an outdoor maze for prayer and meditation.

The men in the program are continuing the brothers' tradition by baking bread early every Friday. It is sold to the public on an honor system — they leave the money in a can.

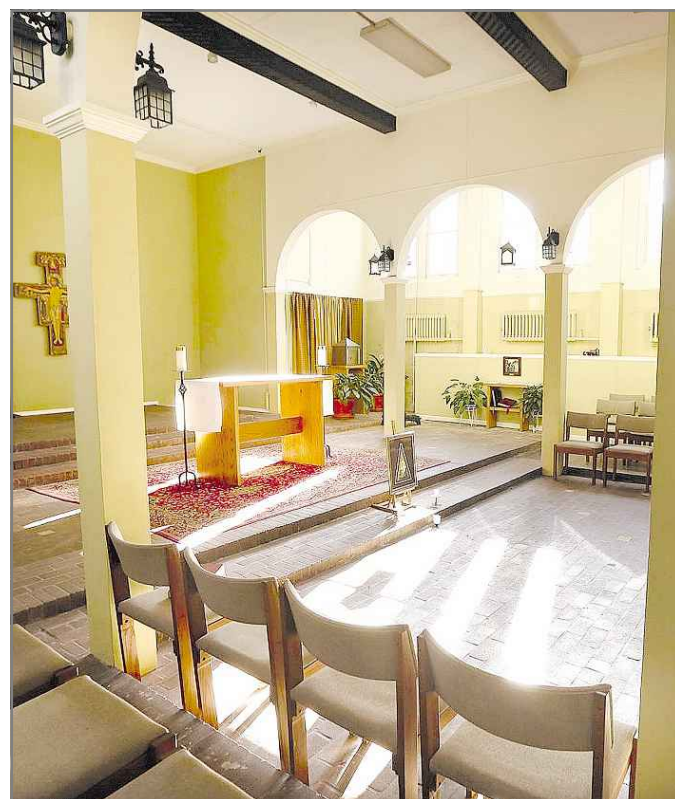
Some of them have formed a music group. At a recent Wednesday Mass in the chapel, its members played guitars and belted out songs, including the Jesuit priest Dan Schutte's hymn, "Here I am, Lord."

"I, the Lord of sea and sky, I have heard my people cry," they sang, as others joined in and Pizzarelli presided at the altar. "All who dwell in dark and sin, My hand will save."

For Pizzarelli, the retreat house's transformation is a symbol of both his relationship with the Franciscan Brothers and his own journey.

In 1980, when he started his work with addicts, he rented a cottage on the property for the program. He later shifted to Port Jefferson, where Hope House Ministries now has several buildings.

"We've come full circle," Pizzarelli said.



**The iconic Little Portion Friary retreat house seen Nov. 19, 2014. It was saved by the Rev. Francis Pizzarelli's proposal.**