

Woman

DO YOUR BIT TO HELP BEAT

WOMEN can do their bit for the fight against cancer by entering the 2012 Race For Life. You can sign up from tomorrow for the events,

which will take place in the summer. Races will take place at Barleylands, Billericay, on Sunday, June 24; Garon Park, Southend, on Sunday,

May 13, and in Lower Castle Park, Colchester, on Sunday, July 15. Cancer Research UK's Race for Life is a series of women-only events which

The very modern lives



Colchester Canonesses of the Holy Sepulchre – Sisters Gabriel Foley and Teresa Lenahan working in the kitchen. Inset: Sister Diana Impey Pictures: NIGEL BROWN C053176

THE nuns of Colchester Canonesses of the Holy Sepulchre tackle modern life head on. They have waged a war on issues of the day, such as combating sex trafficking and binge drinking, as well as embracing technology.

When I went to meet the nuns at their home, in Greenstead, they had just finished a morning lesson on website design where they were learning to make improvements to their community website.

There was not a habit in sight. In fact, the only thing that gave them away was the pendent crosses that lay discreetly around their necks.

At one time the nuns were based in Priory Street, Colchester, but have occupied a premises on the site of the old Anglican rectory for St Andrew's Church since 2009.

The 11-bedroom, contemporary property is light and spacious, and features an archive, studio and special prayer space.

I sat down to talk to Sister Teresa Lenahan, governor and prioress of New Hall School, in Chelmsford.

Sister Teresa is a patron for the charity Medaille, which helps victims of sex trafficking.

Prayers...then a morning learning about web design

"We all have different work we are involved in, Medaille tackles the huge problem of sex trafficking," she says. "What goes on is evil and it is very scary. It is big business and a huge amount of money is made. I think people are just starting to talk about it and acknowledge it now.

"I have spoken to female sex trafficking victims and they have to work extremely hard to recover from what they go through."

The Canonesses of the Holy Sepulchre lived at New Hall from 1642 to 2006. The nuns also have bases in Chelmsford and East London and they work tirelessly to integrate themselves into their communities.

All the sisters are involved in different work. Sister Gabriel

Foley is an assistant at St Andrews Infant School in Colchester, Sister Patricia Barclay is chaplain at Essex University, Sister Ann Bamford is the ward chaplain at Colchester General Hospital and Sister Mary Stephen, former

Working as a street pastor? It means I am not easily shocked!

head of art at New Hall, creates pieces inspired by religion.

Sister Mary Magdalene is the main archivist for the nuns and is busy organising the archive for the community's 370th anniversary of its foundation, in October 2012.

Diana Impey teaches cooking at the homeless shelter, the Night Shelter, in Colchester and is also a street pastor in Colchester, spending many a Friday and Saturday nights handing out flip-flops and water to worse-for-wear revellers.

Sister Diana says: "It means I am not easily shocked! The key is to walk slower than the slowest person, so people will stop and talk. Everyone is in a rush, but we are there to listen not to judge. At the homeless shelter, I get pleasure from teaching people a new skill."

But how do they keep so positive?

"We can only be an understanding ear and pray for them," says Sister Diana. "It is surprising what people can overcome after a lot of hard work."

The community will soon be visited by nuns from Rwanda and the Congo.

These visits remind the Sisters in Colchester of the unique challenges they face.

"Our Sisters in the Congo face different issues to us. It is a place where rape is rife and it is used as a weapon of war," says Sister Diana.

"In July, a soldier tried to break in. The Sisters fled and escaped, but a young girl they were looking after was killed.

"It is inspiring for us to have them here and for us to see how they can have something so horrific happen and pick themselves up and carry on with a renewed determination. That rubs off on us."

Visit www.canonesses.co.uk for more information.

CANCER, SIGN UP FOR THE RACE FOR LIFE

raise millions of pounds every year for life-saving research into 200 types of cancer – helping men, women and children across Essex beat the survive. It is not a competitive race and

women can choose whether to walk, jog or run the 5k or 10k route. Gill Burgess, Cancer Research UK's Essex events manager, said: "Come on ladies, please enter

Race for Life events in Essex today. It's all of us versus cancer and we need you to join the fight as soon as possible." Last year, 26,767 women took part in Race for Life in Essex and

raised £1.6million. This year, organisers want 27,000 women and girls to put their best foot forward and help raise £1.8million. Go to www.raceforlife.org or call 0871 6411111.

HOW CUTE
Photographer's adorable snaps of newborn babies
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of our nuns in Essex

It's hard not to be in awe of the dedication of modern-day nuns, whether or not you have faith. Unflinching in their quest to tackle difficult issues head on, a nun's life is anything but sheltered. And, it seems, more young women are looking to devote their life to God. Of those choosing to become nuns, the number of women under 40 has risen from 42 per cent in 2006 to 70 per cent in 2010, according to the National Office for Vocation. LOUISE HOWESON went to the Colchester Canonesses of the Holy Sepulchre and Our Lady of Walsingham in Brentwood to find out more

HAVING worked in nightclubs for most of her life, Katherine Durban is probably not what you might expect from a traditional nun.

Katherine, 30, originally from Southend, came to the community of Our Lady of Walsingham two months ago.

She chose the convent, in Brentwood, because it is a new community and it is also one of the youngest in the UK, accepting women aged 18 to 38.

Katherine says: "I was worried that because I had worked behind bars in nightclubs, it would go against me. But when I first came to meet the community I mentioned it and they didn't judge me."

"I met Sister Camilla, who is brilliant at understanding young women and relating to them. She described my past as a vase that had been shattered and glued back together – and told me to imagine that by letting Christ in, even more light shines through. That stayed with me."

There are currently four nuns who occupy the large Edwardian property in Brentwood – Sister Camilla Oberding, Sister Gabriel Gasz, Theresa Weight and Katherine.

Camilla and Gabriel established the community in 2004 and the House of Prayer is run by the nuns as a retreat centre where people can come for a day visit, or book to stay overnight.

Katherine says: "I was offered a place at Lourdes in France, which is a wonderful holy place and I was lucky to be offered it. However, I did wonder whether it was the right place for me because it is enclosed and would have meant I would not have seen my family unless they came to visit."

"We are always busy here and when people wind down in the evening it means our work just continues and we do not switch off until about 9pm."

"But I have found more time for interests that I had not enjoyed for a long time, like making arts and crafts."

Katherine's life is very different to

I was worried that because I worked in nightclubs it would go against me, but they didn't judge me

how it used to be. She says: "I used to be like any young girl. I had boyfriends and fell in and out of love. I worked for an animal charity, had my own flat, lots of pets and lived my life however I wanted. But I never felt fulfilled and I felt there was something more to life."

"I grew up with a Christian mum and atheist father. I used to go to church with my mum until I was 16, when I rebelled and stopped going."

"I had been having family problems, and I had been praying, and I did ask myself why had I been praying if I did not believe in God."

"I went back to the church I had always gone to, but something did not feel right to me. I found St Helen's, in Westcliff, and went inside. I spoke to the priest about Catholicism and decided that was the path for me."

Becoming a nun has been an ongoing decision for Katherine.

"I had an inkling when I was

It was not an easy decision for me. Giving up my pets and my flat was very hard

younger that I was destined to be a nun. However, it was not an easy decision for me and I kept pushing the feeling back, but eventually I realised it was my calling."

What sacrifices does she feel she has made?

"Giving up my pets and my flat was very hard, but I have settled in well and it all feels more permanent now."

Sister Camilla believes such a life-changing decision should not be made rashly.

"Everyone makes sacrifices to become a nun and it is not easy," she says. "A woman in her thirties might go through a grieving process because they will not marry and have children and that is normal. We talk about this together and support each other."

"I know I had wanted to marry and have children, but what people do not realise is when a woman gives herself completely to God, she also lives her life fully."

She has noticed a rise in the number of women interested in joining the community of nuns.

"There is a six to nine-year period until a woman makes her final vows, during which time she can leave if she



Calling – Theresa Weight (behind), Sister Camilla Oberding (right), Sister Katherine Durban (front) Pictures: LUAN MARSHALL C053176

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