

Knights of Columbus build garden to feed growing families at maternal care home

One of Calgary's newest vegetable gardens is located in the backyard of Elizabeth House (EH), a maternal care home that's now growing ready-to-eat plants alongside healthy babies. In a world hungry for good news, this project fits the bill, says Michelle Haywood, program manager at [Elizabeth House](#).

Opened by the [Diocese of Calgary](#) more than 20 years ago, Elizabeth House provides supportive housing to at-risk pregnant and parenting women who need a safe place to live. Seeded into two new raised beds, this year's inaugural garden is busy growing everything from lettuce to tomatoes, carrots and squash. It's also nurturing at least one young resident's interest in vegetable production—and it all began with a group of Catholic men who dared ask the folks at Elizabeth House a simple question: How can we help?

In Edmonton, the local Catholic Women's League, Knights of Columbus and other volunteers have stepped up to build a flourishing [community garden, and to deliver food and clothing hampers](#) for the Gianna Centre.

In Calgary, the raised beds, like every other landscape revitalization project undertaken at Elizabeth House since 2017, were built by the St. Peter's Council of the Knights of Columbus. That's the year the council's Grand Knight Peter Dugandzic reached out to Haywood. That conversation laid the foundation of a relationship that's flourished over four years, thousands of dollars and hundreds of volunteer hours.

"What the Knights have done here is amazing, but it's about more than landscaping," notes Haywood. "There's also a sense of being cared for by this group of gentlemen offering their hands and hearts to help us. It's hard to put that kind of support into words." By 2018, Dugandzic was leading a group of Knights of Columbus in some serious hands-on work. Together, the men transformed the home's weed-filled backyard into a summer oasis, complete with new sod and a new patio, outdoor furniture, a barbecue, perimeter shrub beds and an underground sprinkler. That same year, another council based in Airdrie provided the labour to re-side Elizabeth House and its detached garage.



The Knights of Columbus have built raised vegetable and flower beds in the backyard of Elizabeth House in Calgary.

Last year, the Knights tackled the home's front yard, again adding fresh sod, shrubs and irrigation.

"Everybody was pretty excited when Peter brought the idea to the council," remembers Lu Scarpino. Sworn in as the Grand Knight at St. Peter's this July, Scarpino was the council treasurer when the project began. "Elizabeth House is doing great work and it's nice to be able to support that. I think we've built a relationship that will continue for many years," adds Scarpino.

Rev. Jonathan Gibson agrees. The pastor at [St. Peter's parish](#), Father Gibson says the relationship between the knights and Elizabeth House reinforces the governing principles of the Knights of Columbus. Charity, unity, fraternity and patriotism have all been strengthened by the project, says the priest. He views the relationship between the Knights of Columbus and Elizabeth House as a real-world example of how these knights live the heart of the gospel by doing work that cares for the women and children who live at Elizabeth House.

With the vegetable garden beds built and seeded, Dugandzic and Haywood are now

focused on relocating a grotto built on the grounds of the original Elizabeth House site in the Mission district. The stone work will be done by the same skilled tradesmen who built the grotto and one at the new [Our Lady of the Rockies church in Canmore](#). The statue of Mary is being repainted by Dugandzic's wife, Dorothy Voytechek. The new grotto will include a glass panel to protect the statue from the elements.

The grotto will be added to the backyard; already a place of refuge for residents, their children and Elizabeth House staff, says Haywood. Given the complications of COVID-19, she knows the Knights at St. Peter's didn't have their usual opportunities to fundraise in 2020. That means some of the costs incurred were covered by individual knights and their families.

Dugandzic, who's already working with Elizabeth House on projects for 2021, says he launched the Elizabeth House project as a way to invigorate the Knights he led. Looking back, he admits the project's success goes way beyond the physical spaces they created. "Elizabeth House is dear to our hearts. We like the work that they do. That house is nearly always full and it feels good to know our knights have helped make it an even more special place."