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Life's Reflections

Dear Friends and Family,

As we endure the coldest time of the year, we thought we could add some warmth to your day by sharing stories of our Sisters. Once again, Sister Therese Jilk has provided interviews with three Sisters to get to the **heart** of what these Sisters are all about. And we have a special added feature from a recently retired Mayo photographer!

Little did we know, when we started making plans for this issue in December, that two of the three Sisters featured would go on to their eternal reward before this reached your inbox! This is bittersweet, as it serves as a tribute to Sisters Colleen and Janet as well.

We hope you enjoy these reflections!

Kathy Gatliff

Editor, Director of Communications

Lessons Learned

Sister Janet Sieve as interviewed by Sister Therese Jilk

Janet Sieve (1943-2020)

Janet Sieve was born in the Worthington, Minnesota hospital in June of 1943 to August and Merle Sieve. Her home was on a farm in Reading, Minnesota, about 12 miles from Worthington. Her life-learnings were gleaned from formal grade and high school, though probably mostly from beyond the classroom. She learned "how to behave, how to do what needed doing day after day, including farm work." Soon though, her Dad said she was to "stay in the house and help Mom." No doubt Mom and Dad had talked this over, since Janet was the oldest (and only) daughter, and would soon be followed by her three brothers.

When Janet entered the Sisters of Saint Francis, her formal classroom education resumed on the college level at the College of Saint Teresa (CST). She recalls taking "Philosophy of Being" from Sister Gretchen Berg, followed by "Logic." For a girl from farm country, these weren't exactly familiar turf, nor her end goal in life. Most farm folks seem to know more about living such scholarly concepts than mastering the book learning about them. Nevertheless, Janet knew one thing about religious life was "doing what I was told to do." That sense of obedience carried over into her first ministry assignments. Janet taught primary grades for five years at Chicago, followed by one year in Glencoe Minnesota; then back to CST for more study until she earned her diploma.

Summers spent in Charleston, South Carolina with other Sisters--inspired by Sister Joachim, and under the leadership of Sister Maigread Conway-- were where Janet found her deepest joy, particularly her second year of four. There was very little teaching, just walking the streets and visiting folks. Not surprisingly, it was there that Janet's greatest gift met the greatest need of many folks in Charleston (and everywhere else): LISTENING!

No doubt it was that gift of listening that made Janet such a wonderful clinic companion for a good number of years. She was able to discern the unique whisperings of each Sister's body and spirit needs as they made their way from Assisi Heights to doctors, dentists, and therapists in Rochester.

For the past three years, Janet has lived on a floor offering an assisted living experience at Assisi Heights. She feels a bit "adrift" at times because most of her days are about "taking care of Janet." And, she states that the aging process is "not the way I planned it." However, she quickly added that she's aware of the importance of "being in the moment"--really being there to respond to what will lead naturally to the next moment of the day. Janet recalls a favorite book, The Little Prince, which was presented to her and her classmates as Junior Novices by the Senior Novices. Good taste for someone nurturing the gift of listening!

And how fitting for this Franciscan Sister, now in her aging process, who explains the work of the Sisters of Saint Francis is what drew her in the first place: "They [the Sisters] were so happy together!" That may very well be the heart of the matter, Janet! Letting God love you right here, right now, at this moment, and loving the other Franciscan Sisters, and the staff too, day-by-day, and letting them love you! (Just in case you've forgotten how loveable you are!)

A Compassionate Presence

Sister Colleen Byron as interviewed by Sister Therese Jilk

Sister Colleen Byron (1930-2020)

In July of 2018, Sister Colleen came to our discussion ready to put our conversation together in clear focus. When she regularly reviews her life in ministry, "relationship" has been and still is at the heart of her involvement in past years and her most recent work at Assisi Heights. "I'm not here only to be busy," she stated. That became obvious as our conversation continued.

Colleen was a vital part of the Assisi Community Center (ACC) for seventeen years at Assisi Heights.

She worked at the Gift of Life Transplant House as a receptionist and gave tours to potential residents, and ministered at the former Holy Spirit Retreat Center in Janesville, shortly after the site was purchased by the Community in 1997. Colleen served as a spiritual director, not only for one-on-one sessions, but in all of her active ministries. Most recently, her outreach was three days a week, serving at the Gift of Life Transplant House, the Ronald McDonald House and in pastoral care visits at Madonna Towers.

Many of us Sisters have enjoyed Colleen's presentations on journal writing and humor, which topics I'm sure have brought special joy to those to whom she has ministered.

All of the above statements point to one of the best pieces of advice she'd received, from the book, Compassion, by Matthew Fox: The quality of compassion we give to our selves is the same quality we give to others." Another book, Boundless Compassion, by Joyce Rupp, was also a favorite.

Colleen's listening skills accounted for the greatest joys of her interaction with others; the fruit of her greatest gift is listening.

I sensed all through our conversation that Colleen's life has been filled with deep gratitude for the gifts she has known herself, as well as the gifts of others in daily life. She believed that we Rochester Franciscan Sisters, wherever we are, want always to bring a spirit of being "other-centered" and deeply caring for those with whom we interact. We want them to know of our prayer and joy in living together in community... in the spirit of Saints Francis and Clare, who serve as our models in living the Gospel.

Colleen valued the richness of being a companion to interested Cojourners, finding that same connection of listening and sharing what life, at its best, is about. Family members, too, remained very important faith-sharing partners. Other connections with friends, neighbors and strangers are part of that same family of God...all brothers and sisters whom we hold in our hearts in daily prayer.

Colleen, the spirit of your ministry - YOUR LIFE - seemed to me to have brought you to and through many "thin places where the distance between us and incomprehensible mystery disappears," as the Irish say, and you continued to bring them alive for and in us.

Fond Memories

Sister Seton Slater as interviewed by Sister Therese Jilk

Sister Seton Slater

Sister Seton (Vivian) and her twin brother, Vincent, were born in January 1928. Seton came on the scene just before Vincent--probably a harbinger of a little friendly competition for years to come. During their childhood, Seton felt responsible to take good notice of whatever Vincent was about, including tattling when necessary. Seton was the fourth oldest of seven children. She notes that brother Bob was the in-charge, sensible one. He was also funny, which no doubt brought comic relief to many situations. However, when Bob died of a heart attack at a young age, it was a very tough blow to the family, especially Mom and Dad.

Most of Seton's Franciscan life was spent in the ministry of teaching students in the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 6th grades. Not too surprising is that she'd been assigned to teach, which for most of us, didn't make the assignment wonderfully pleasant--at least not in the beginning. She was aware that she had very good Principals serving in her schools, which helped a lot.

Leaving that ministry, her more recent years at Assisi Heights were spent in the Craft Room. At first, Seton was afraid of that room, as she walked past it following the assignment. But once she got into it, she put her best foot forward, smiled and greeted the Sisters working there, and found them to be most welcoming. This also helped her not to be afraid of being "artsy." The fear left her and was replaced by gladness for the welcome and friendly acceptance.

Seton loves to read...mostly biographies, and of course, the daily newspaper. Another pleasant hobby is jigsaw puzzles. She enjoys doing the entire puzzle herself to feel a sense of accomplishment. Her best gift to share with others is her memory, she says, of both long-term and current things, because it "lets folks know who I am."

When asked the best advice she received in the Community, she would speak of the work of the Sisters of Saint Francis, herself included, as "do whatever you're assigned to, and do the best you can do." Seton, it sounds like that is the way you have lived, and continue to live into your ninth decade of life. Thank you for your long and generous faithfulness! And thank you for letting God's Light shine through your days here with us.

Sister Generose and the Candy Dish

by Joseph Kane

What words come to mind if you were to be asked to associate them with our beloved Sister Generose? Perhaps caring. Community. Compassion. Concern. Cooking. Candy. Yes, candy! M&M candies to be more specific. Those brightly colored chocolate tidbits have apparently been seen and consumed by countless numbers of both friends and strangers alike who over the years found their way to her office on the main floor of the Francis Building.

I knew very little of Sister Generose or St. Marys Hospital when I came to Rochester 34 years ago to begin my career at Mayo as the first medical photographer to be based full-time in surgery at Rochester Methodist Hospital. Strangely enough, my first day working in surgery was actually at Saint Marys during orientation.

Little more than a year later, I found myself assigned to Mayo Photography based on the ninth floor of the Plummer Building. One of my first assignments was to photograph the signing of the official documentation that formalized bringing Mayo Clinic, St. Marys Hospital, and Rochester Methodist Hospital under one umbrella. Being in the Plummer Building now provided the regular opportunity to photograph not only downtown but at St. Marys as well. It became the norm to hear languages spoken other than my own, to see clothing associated with countries I had only read about, and to observe the unassuming Sister Generose walking the halls of the hospital, that I learned she knew all too well. Rummage sales held in the Domitilla Building to support the Poverello Fund, canning pickles or providing blessings on newly completed improvement projects, made Sister Generose a familiar face to me.

No, I have not forgotten about those M&Ms! Just a few years back, dressed in blue surgical scrubs and on a lunch break from covering in surgery, I made my way up to the main hallway, a short distance from her office. As luck would have it, she was in her office and invited me in to have some M&Ms. Sitting in plain sight on a desk to my left was a fixture that I had come to expect, a bowl of M&Ms. Not simply a bowl, but one being hoisted over the shoulders of two adorable colorful M&M characters and filled with the aforementioned treats. Never one to pass up chocolate, I placed a spoonful into my hand. They were gone in an instant.

Being midday, Sister Generose suggested that I take some for later. I knew that they should only melt in my mouth and not in my hand, but I hesitated in taking any additional ones. Understanding the dilemma, she looked around her office and then handed me a tissue so that I could safely transport my treat for later. Thanking her, I left and went a few feet further down to another office and shared my story with Sister Lauren. (There we enjoyed some salted peanuts!)

Who would have thought a simple candy dish could evoke such memories of a woman of faith that inspired others around her with courage and love? I will always have these sweet memories of the friend and mentor of many, Sister Generose Gervais.

Photo courtesy Mayo Clinic Archives.