

CONNECTIONS

Newsletter



August 2023

WELCOME TO STORIES OF SSMN'S 150 YEARS IN TEXAS

As a continuation on the theme of the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the Sisters of St. Mary in Texas, we celebrate the impact they have had on the lives of so many. Not long after their arrival, young women began joining their community. Their numbers grew over the years when all they hoped for was "to do a little good." From their first official Texas school of 29 students to the grand Our Lady of Victory Academy, the Sisters shared their spirit of simplicity and joy, and displayed virtues of hope, humility, peace and justice, and compassion for those in need.

In this issue of Connections we share not only the stories of a few of the Sisters, but also stories of alumni whose lives they have touched.

OLV ALUM REFLECTS: THE LIFELONG IMPACT OF THE SISTERS

Barbara Lamsens

I was very fortunate to grow up on the south side of Fort Worth very near two Sisters of St. Mary Schools. In fact, it was more than fortunate, it was a blessing that I still carry with me to this day.

I knew the Sisters before I ever started school since we lived next door to **Sister Josephine Stewart's** family and my cousin, **Sister Caroline Wolf** who was the laundress at OLV all her life.

In addition to receiving an exemplary education, for which I am eternally grateful, I credit the Sisters

with teaching and imparting incredible values. Of course, my parents set great examples: my mom was frequently taking a plate of dinner to the elderly widow across the street and my dad regularly took oranges to one of his clients, because she loved them and she had very little. It's as if the Sisters and my parents were team teaching me the importance of caring for others, especially those who were poor and downtrodden. But, although my parents taught me to go to church on Sundays, it was the Sisters who helped me develop a spiritual life that continues to be very important to me.

After college I joined the Sisters and spent time in Houston working with people experiencing homelessness and mental illness. That was one of my favorite positions. I loved working with the people. I loved their simplicity, authenticity, and sense of gratitude.

After nine years as a Sister, I decided I needed to be on my own. I obtained my master's degree in social work,



L-R Helen Stewart, Barbara Lamsens and her mother, Catherine, Sister Josephine Stewart and Cynthia Lamsens on the OLV campus

which eventually led me to leadership positions in the nonprofit world, spending seven years in an emergency shelter for children who had been removed from their homes due to abuse and neglect.

Above it all, though, the most important thing I learned from the Sisters was to love. To truly love and be loved by another is to experience the grace of God.



Sr. Roberta Hesse and Barbara Lamsens, who volunteers for and frequently visits the Sisters

Sister Spotlight

Sister Patricia Ridgley, 81, never thought much about being a teacher, but she was attracted to the Sisters at Our Lady of Good Counsel in Dallas because they were smart, open, and had extraordinary spiritual depth. Soon after joining the Sisters, Sr. Patricia was sent to Belgium for a year where she was immersed in the community there, composed of young women like herself from Africa, Europe, England, Canada and the U.S. – all discerning their vocation.

They were living in French-speaking Belgium, and spent each day in prayer, study of scripture and theology, and plenty of labor as well. Afterwards

she was sent to the (then) Belgian Congo, where her head “exploded” with experiences that shaped her heart and worldview.

She came home after that year in Congo, and began teaching at Bishop Dunne Catholic High School. While there, she sought to expose her students to the various needs of people in the community, and in so doing came in touch, herself, to

facets of Dallas she had never seen before. Although she had been asking repeatedly to return to “the Missions,” she came to understand there was work to be done in the U.S. She was eventually sent to an underserved area of Oak Cliff to do parish work at Holy Cross Church. Sr. Patricia says, “I had no idea initially what we were doing, as Sisters had traditionally only taught!”

At Holy Cross she became part of a team of five: a Hispanic deacon,

Sister Patricia compares the Sisters today with the thousands around the world who suffer various kinds of Displacement. “All of us - Sisters and Refugees - are being called to give up much of what we have known as we go forward. That is a very real solidarity we can experience.”

an African American deacon, and three Caucasians: two Sisters, and the pastor. Together they mirrored the demographics of the evolving parish. Their goal was to shepherd and accompany a changing church.

In 1983, with the support of the parish membership, Holy Cross became a Sanctuary for Salvadoran refugee families who were fleeing violence in their countries. There



Sr. Patricia

was plenty of room in the convent so they had space for families who needed a place of temporary safety. One parishioner likened it to the Underground Railroad.

Sr. Patricia particularly loved the 15 years she spent as regional director for the Maryknoll Mission Education Office, doing educational work in schools and parishes, and annually accompanying small groups of adults to expose them to the dynamism of the Central American Church.

Presently, Sr. Patricia serves as the Regional Director for the SSMN Western Province. She is hopeful about the future of religious life, though she imagines it will look very different. She believes that the Sisters’ charism, “Simplicity and Joy in the Gift of Self” will continue in new ways altogether, if God so leads.



Sr. Patricia and her mother



Sr. Patricia and Linda Hajek

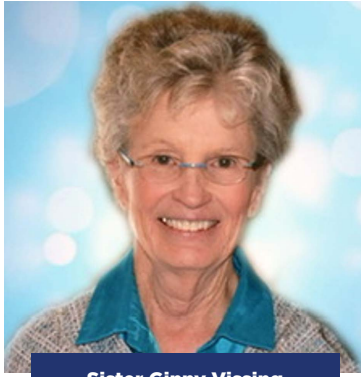
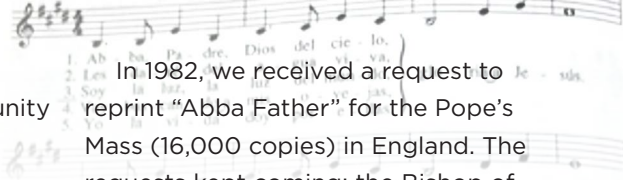
A SISTER'S MUSIC TRAVELS THE GLOBE

CANTOS DE ENTRADA

572

Abba, Padre

Estrofas



Sister Ginny Vissing

At the time, I belonged to Shalom Charismatic Community. The community loved the song and sang it in prayer meetings for years. Over time, many others heard it, including a couple from New Mexico. Through their use of it, prayer groups began to sing it in Spanish. It was so popular that it eventually was published by Oregon Catholic Press as a “traditional Spanish song, composer unknown.” Years later when I attended a Mass in Santa Fe, New Mexico at a mission church, the entrance song was “Abba Father.” I was so surprised!

Through the leadership of Father Beaumont, pastor of Shalom Community, our music ministry produced three cassette tapes and song books to match. They were distributed by Pecos Benedictine Monastery in New Mexico which has a global outreach. The songs traveled far and wide!

In 1982, we received a request to reprint “Abba Father” for the Pope’s Mass (16,000 copies) in England. The requests kept coming: the Bishop of Kuwait asked to print it for an event there; a woman living in Latvia who was trying to restore Catholic theology and music after the Communist rule asked to use it. We sent her the three songbooks and tapes and she included the songs, translated into Latvian, in a pilgrimage songbook.

“Abba Father” is now in Poland, South Africa, New Zealand, Scotland, France, England and beyond.

Sr. Ginny has composed many other songs that are sung here at OLV; when asked about “Abba Father,” she said: “I wanted to record the history of the song because it seems so incredible to me that the song traveled to so many parts of the world. It was the first song that the Spirit inspired me to have. And it seems the Spirit gave it “wings” to fly!

Most people who know **Sister Ginny** are aware of her many gifts — most especially her musicianship. What some may not be aware of is the fact that she composes music—some of which has traveled world-wide! This is the story she tells about one of those songs.

On Easter Sunday, 1972 I composed the song, “Abba Father.” I had no father growing up and always prayed that God would be my father. This song came in prayer.

BISHOP DUNNE GRADUATE NAMED JUNIOR HIGH TEACHER OF THE YEAR

The Sisters enjoy seeing their students achieve, especially when students become excellent educators.



Charnaë Jordan, a Bishop Dunne Catholic School graduate ('91), is Arlington ISD’s Junior High Teacher of the Year. She is Nichols Jr. High’s lead teacher for 7th-grade math and its volleyball, basketball, and track coach.

How did Catholic schooling influence your values?

Catholic schooling instilled in me a desire to keep a close relationship with God and taught me the value of

meaningful relationships. Also, I credit Bishop Dunne for my belief that anyone can be successful. Nichols Jr. High has never had a district-level Teacher of the Year, and African American district-level Teachers of the Year are rare.

Were you taught by any of the nuns?

I took Latin I, II and III with **Sister Justin Fox**. Our Latin classes were small, so every student connected with her. She had a story to go with everything in our readings. And she was a bit of a comedian! My senior year, **Sister Mary Brian Bole, SSND** was my English Language Arts teacher. She pushed me to apply to almost every college that was remotely on my radar. She pushed her senior English students to be great and took an interest in what we had going on outside the classroom

as well. She kept a poster in her room listing all the schools that we were accepted to and, ultimately, the one we chose to attend.

Are there examples of your own teaching and coaching that stem from how you were taught and coached?

I quote Sr. Mary Brian to my students: “Education is not a disposable commodity” because students need to problem solve and learn new concepts every day. When my mom, a single parent, passed away in December of my senior year, every teacher and administrator was there to support me and my sister with home visits, help with tuition, or anything else we needed. I aim to be there for my students in the same way.

WHEN THE ART STUDENT BECOMES ARTIST AND TEACHER

Our teaching Sisters are especially proud when their students also become educators. **David A. Wright**, Bishop Dunne class of '73, has taught at all levels including more than thirty years at University of Texas at Dallas (UTD).

What influenced you to become an educator?

I love teaching and want to leave the world a better place than I found it. The Sisters infected me with the joy of learning via their joy of teaching and enduring Catholic faith.

Which Sister(s) at BDHS most influenced you?

Sister Maria Clark had the most significant influence on me. She was my art teacher. She was joyful and created joy in her students. Besides being immensely creative, she was patient and kind—even when our art was not so accomplished. With her encouragement, I majored in art at the University of Dallas. Sr. Maria forged a confidence in me, beyond creating art, that accompanied me on multiple



Self-portrait, David A. Wright

career paths. Now semi-retired, I have returned to drawing in charcoal, mainly as a contemplative place to go.

For me, that one strict taskmaster was **Sister Mary Catherine Zacha**, who valiantly tried to teach me French. I think she knew Napoleon! And who could forget her pithy comments about declining social morals. I didn't do very well, but learning the puzzle of French

verb conjugations helped me learn Italian in Italy.

Outside the classroom, there was my aunt, **Sister Marie Therese Wright**. I remember her always being friendly, sweet, gentle, kind, and steadfast in her faith. In my youth, I visited Sr. Marie Therese in the huge, old, creaky, wood-floored (yet immaculately clean) SSMN convent in Ft. Worth, always an adventure.

Is there an example of your own teaching that stems from how you were taught?

Given the nature of acquiring information via the internet today, I believe critical thinking is THE most valuable skill. I strive to teach future professionals with the same passion and kindness shown by the good Sisters—and their tolerance of our having fun. Some of us may have had too much fun—which is a good argument for the existence of Guardian Angels.

SPECIAL GUEST FOR DEMENTIA CARE



On Monday, June 26, 2023, **Hollie Glover**, with the James L. West Center for Dementia Care came to OLV and presented a program on dementia. The Sisters and Oblates, employees, especially the infirmary staff, volunteers, and a few friends attended. Her presentation covered the various types of dementia and characteristics of each one. She stressed that dementia is much more than a loss of memory. It affects cognition, behavior, judgement, ability to care for oneself, as well as many other symptoms, depending on which part of the brain is most affected.



It is a progressive disease and more areas of the brain succumb to the disease over time.

Ms. Glover was very interesting and included handouts and videos in her presentation. She held everyone's attention to the very end.

CATHOLIC EXTENSION SUPPORTS EMERGING LATINA LEADERS



Sister Yolanda Cruz

Catholic Extension works in solidarity with people to build vibrant and transformative Catholic faith communities among the poor in the poorest regions of America. Our **Sister Yolanda Cruz**, an instructor at the University of Dallas was a recent presenter at their “Mujeres Valientes” (Valiant Women) Conference at UD. The Spanish language program was designed for preselected emerging women leaders with the goal of creating a network of support and ongoing formation within many dioceses. The

main criteria for selecting participants was their love of the Catholic faith, their desire to deepen it, and their commitment to sharing it with others. The convening provided the Latina women with theological lectures, communal prayer, reflection, discussion, and networking. Ongoing support will be provided to help the women grow as catechetical leaders. Catholic Extension and the University of Dallas, Ann and Joe O. Neuhoff Institute for Ministry and Evangelization sponsored the program.

OREMUS - LET US PRAY

Sister Dorothy Powers

As Sisters of Saint Mary of Namur (S.S.M.N.) we look to the Blessed Virgin Mary as our patroness. She is, for us, the model of a “life well lived.” On August 15th, we celebrate her Assumption into heaven. It is a feast day dear to many Sisters of St. Mary, as that is the day vows were professed. September 8th, we celebrate Mary’s birth day. Thus, this seems a fitting time to reflect on Mary and our devotion to her. In almost all the images we have of Mary she is portrayed as a young, lovely woman. When I was much younger that portrayal inspired me. Now I am far advanced in years of life. I have even crossed the great divide of middle age and am on a path, hopefully, to eternal life! I wonder if you have ever prayed to the mature Mary. Have you talked to her about what life is like for you in the middle of life and/or in the ‘golden years’? Jesus died when he was 33 so Mary surely experienced mid-life, and maybe even years beyond that!

In the missalette, Give Us This Day, I came across this reflection by Amy Ekeh, director of the Little Rock Scripture Study:

“Blessed as she was among women, Mary’s day-to-day life was much like everyone else’s – a life that no doubt took its toll on the body. Scars, sunspots, wrinkles – she would not have escaped them. And why would she want to? Life tells its stories and leaves its beautiful marks on every body.

Like you, I’ve lived into every scar on my body. I’ve earned these wrinkles! Every sunspot is a part of my story – a story of long childhood days in the Texas sun, of every moment I can squeeze into my backyard garden. Every ache and pain is a reminder that I’ve birthed children, carried them on my hip long past when I should have, hauled baskets of laundry up and down basement steps for decades, bent my

knees infinity-plus one times for weeds, socks, and Legos.

My body hasn’t been through as much as Mary’s, working as she did in heat and sun, carrying water, walking great distances, toughing out pain. But it has its own good stories to tell.

Mary always goes before us – but not to show us how different she is. Sometimes the likenesses are what prod us forward, to know what it really means to be Marian. *Clothed with the sun, the moon at her feet, crowned with stars* – suntanned, vibrant, aging, loved – the body of a life well lived.

She goes before us, body and soul, and we will follow.”

I encourage you to set aside some time and enjoy a good visit with Mary, focusing on her story, on some images of her! Share some of your experiences with her. She is a good listener! You might want to pray and reflect on some of the mysteries of the rosary. Let her example strengthen and inspire you.

WHAT'S INSIDE?

A Sister's Music Travels the Globe

Sister Spotlight: Sr. Patricia Ridgley

Oremus — Let Us Pray

When the Art Student Becomes Artist and Teacher

Bishop Dunne Graduate Named Junior High Teacher of the Year

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Birthdays To Remember

August 14 – Sister Roberta Hesse

August 30 – Sister Joan Markey

August 31 – Sister Patricia Ridgley

September 5 – Sister Patricia Ste. Marie

September 6 – Sister Gabriela Martinez

October 4 – Sister Charles Marie Serafino

Speaking of birthdays – save the date for the SSMN 150th event! Nolan Catholic High School November 12, 2-4 p.m.



We celebrated Sister Clara Vo on June 14, Sister Ginny Vissing on June 19, Sister Mary Jean Warmuth on June 23 and Sister Jane Conway on June 24.