

CONNECTIONS

Newsletter



November 2023

BOLD STEPS AND GRATEFUL SERVICE: 150 YEARS IN TEXAS

From the earliest days of the Sisters of Saint Mary of Namur, the Sisters have had a God-given ability to see needs great and small and, no matter the risk or cost, find ways to meet them. Marking 150 years of service in Texas this year, they stood on the shoulders of those who came before them, to look back and commemorate all that the Sisters have accomplished in the state.

When the Congregation was formed in Namur, Belgium, in 1819, religious communities were outlawed. However, **Father Nicholas Joseph Minsart** provided two local women, **Josephine Sana** and **Elisabeth Berger**, a small house to teach sewing, reading and religious instruction to other young women from the area. Thirteen years later, when religious

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The last graduating class at St. Ignatius Academy in Fort Worth. Sister Louise Hays, the Principal (R). Court Louise, No. 209, of the Catholic Daughters of America in Fort Worth is named after her.

St. Ignatius Academy in Fort Worth shows the addition made in 1889 when the original building established in 1886 proved too small.



INTERTWINED HISTORIES: ROSA FONTENOT'S STORY WITH THE SISTERS

Rosa Fontenot began working for the Sisters of St. Mary in 1976 when she was 24 years old. Rosa worked in the grand old OLV building next door to the Center and remembers most of the Sisters there by name. When the new building opened in 1987 she moved



Rosa Fontenot

along with the Sisters and has faithfully and meticulously continued her house-keeping duties.

Rosa has some magnificent stories to tell. She was about nine years old when she first visited OLV where her mother worked. She is now 70 years old and recalls that her grandfather, Jesse Moron, planted trees on the 16-acre OLV property. Her mother Mary Laing, now deceased, worked as a housekeeper and also as a cook in the kitchen. Her sister Gloria worked for the Sisters for a time too.

Rosa has three children and she would go to work as pregnant as could be. All the Sisters celebrated when she gave birth. When Rosa's oldest child was 12 and she was 34, her husband died of cancer. The Sisters were a tremendous emotional support and helped Rosa to mourn her loss. **Sister**

Mary Augustine Matzner even babysat for her when needed. To Rosa, the Sisters are family and she loves them all.

Rosa developed a particularly close relationship with **Sister Catherine Marie Houston**, so much so, that she named her daughter after her. Sister Catherine Marie, and some of the other Sisters, often sat one-on-one with her children to help them with language or academic skills. Rosa is certain that the Sisters are responsible for her children's success in school and now, in their careers.

One of the best stories Rosa tells is how she met her current husband at OLV. As part of his work, he made regular deliveries and he and Rosa noticed each other on the job. One day they struck up a short conversation and the rest, as they say, is history.

REMEMBERING SISTER PAUL O'REILLY

- by Barbara Lamsens

I prepared for writing this article by reading through a stack of documents that included newspaper articles, awards and obituaries written about **Sister Paul O'Reilly**. I learned many new things about her even though I knew her personally. I learned that although she was Methodist, her mother moved her as a child from public school to Catholic school. Sister Paul's physical disability made stairs difficult for her and the Catholic school didn't have any stairs.

Sister Paul (Mary Elizabeth) graduated from Our Lady of Good Counsel (OLGC), then went to UNT and obtained a business administration degree. It was around that time she decided to become a Catholic herself.

Sister Paul worked for several years as an accountant before returning to her alma mater, OLGC, to teach.

Then it wasn't long when, at the age of 33, she entered religious life with the Sisters of St. Mary.

What stands out the most when reading about Sister Paul is not the number of students she taught during her 30 years at Nolan, the difficulties she endured or even her three college degrees. What stands out is the tremendous love Sister Paul had for her



students. They loved her, too, and that is clearly evident. In an appreciation assembly at Nolan in 1997, a parent, Dan Griffin, spoke and said, "They see you, Sister, as someone who has marked their lives forever. They see and watch a wonderful example of God doing His work through kindness, caring and discipline."

ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF HEAVEN

If you have spent any time at all in the Fort Worth Catholic community, then you have probably been privileged to meet **Bill and Mary Beth Otto**. The Ottos have been married for 48 years and during that time, they have been blessed with three children and two grandchildren. Bill is a past Grand Knight of the Saint Andrew Council of the Knights of Columbus. As they say, their lives are very full and rich.

Bill and Mary Beth each claim strong connections to the Sisters of Saint Mary of Namur. Mary Beth grew up in Fort Worth and began her Catholic education at St. Mary's. She and **Sister Miriam NeSmith** met the first day of first grade and became lifelong friends and remain so today. Our Lady of Victory School opened when Mary Beth started sixth grade and she was in the first class to attend. Mary remembers all of her teachers very fondly, especially **Sr. Mary Alberta Meyer, Sr. Mary Agnes Melançon** and **Sr. Marion Celeste Cimo. Sr. Rita Claire Davis** taught Mary Beth during her senior year. Mary Beth remembers her as kind and gentle with a sense of humor.

Bill is from Muenster, Texas and although he was not taught by the Sisters of Saint Mary, he grew up with several Sisters all living on adjacent farms. **Sr. Anselma Knabe, Sr. Mary Helen Fuhrmann, Sr. Francesca Walterscheid** and **Sr. Roberta Hesse** were all good childhood friends in that small tight-knit community.

The Ottos are proud to be SSMN *Doing a Little Good Partners* by



Bill and Mary Beth Otto

making monthly gifts to the Sisters. When asked about why they have continued to support the Sisters of Saint Mary for so long, both here and in Africa and Brazil, Bill loudly and firmly said, "Because they NEED it!" He and Mary Beth spoke about how much the Sisters have done for those in North Texas and abroad. Bill said, "Whenever I come to visit the Sisters, I always feel like I'm on the outskirts of heaven." Mary Beth laughed and said this is Bill's favorite thing to say and he tells everyone he meets.

Bill and Mary Beth love the Sisters and dream of a time that the Sisters might have financial freedom. In the meantime, they will continue to support them with at least one gift per month. The Ottos are truly a gift to the Sisters.

Stop and Smell the Roses

When the Sisters first moved into the OLV Center, the Ottos' son, Joe, and his Scout troop helped to plant the roses outside of each window. Joe even asked each Sister to pick her favorite color. In the end, spearheading the project and bringing some beauty to OLV enabled Joe to become an Eagle Scout.

SOLIDARITY WITH AFRICA-BRAZIL

The Sisters had a very sad incident that occurred in September at the orphanage of Djuma, Congo. The dormitory, which is home to the little children, caught fire and burned down. This is a great shock to our Sisters in Djuma who have maintained this orphanage for about 85 years, and where many children have been raised since infancy. We are extremely grateful to God that none of the children were injured.



In the midst of all the confusion, someone arrived with two-week-old twins. Their mother had died in giving birth. Then a message announced the arrival of another set of newborn twins, more tiny gifts from God at this tumultuous time!

Djuma is located in a heavily forested area very close to the Kwilu, a very large river. The children can bathe in the river and also wash their clothes. They are cared for continuously by several women and also by the Sisters.

If you are able to help them with any amount of money to assist with rebuilding this dormitory,



it would be greatly appreciated. Your contribution will go to Djuma for this purpose only. May God bless you abundantly for your generosity.

- **Sister Charles Marie**

Member of Solidarity with Africa-Brazil
Sisters of St. Mary of Namur

**P.S. - Please make all checks to:
Sisters of St. Mary; Memo: Orphanage
Djuma, Congo**

NOTABLE EVENTS IN THE SISTERS OF SAINT MARY OF NAMUR'S TEXAS HISTORY



Our Lady of Good Counsel

SEPT. 23, 1873: ESTABLISHED SACRED HEART ACADEMY IN WACO

Three Sisters arrived by train in Waco Village, which was a stop on the Chisholm Trail. One week later they announced the opening of their first Texas school, Sacred Heart Academy.

1873-1913: ESTABLISHED SCHOOLS ALL OVER NORTH TEXAS

It's amazing how many schools were built and opened just as Texas was developing. With their dedication to education, the Sisters were woven into the fabric of Texas. As Bishop Dunne, the second Catholic bishop of Dallas once said, "The Sisters brought the faith to North Texas."

St. Ignatius Academy 1909 >



BOLD STEPS (CONT.)

groups were no longer outlawed, Rosalie Nizet, who is remembered as **Mother Claire**, made vows and became the first superior general a few years later. She was only 26 years old when she began presiding over the congregation. In 1863, Mother Claire made the decision to send Sisters to the United States. Most of the Sisters who went knew they would probably never see their families again. Even so, they set forward on their call to provide religious institutions for a young nation.

After a perilous journey across the Atlantic Ocean that nearly claimed their lives, the Sisters arrived in upper New York state and quickly started schools

for immigrant children, mainly from Irish and German communities. Ten years later, three Sisters pushed southward to

Texas and arrived in Waco Village in 1873. Their home wasn't ready and there was no one to greet them.

"I have deep gratitude and inspiration for our Sisters who left their country, their families, themselves for love of God and us, to share Jesus Christ and His LOVE for us."

- Sr. Guadalupe Aranda

Nevertheless, they rolled up their sleeves and got to work — announcing the opening of their school, Sacred Heart Academy, one week later.

The opening of Sacred Heart set off a 40-year

building program during which the Sisters followed dusty frontier trails to wherever they were sent. "I can't believe

how they did that," **Clarice Peninger**, whose family has been connected to SSMN for generations, said. "They'd open one, and then go on to the next one and mortgage the last one. I can hardly imagine the courage and faith that took."

In the late 1800s, the Texas public school system was in its infancy and the Sisters' commitment to education was extraordinary. Indeed, they opened their doors wide to students of all backgrounds and would risk concerns of not meeting their mortgage payments instead of refusing entry to



1910: OUR LADY OF VICTORY (OLV) OPENED IN FORT WORTH

The school opened as a day and boarding school for girls in the area (many lived too far away to travel back and forth every day). It would later include an elementary school and novitiate where young ladies studied to become Sisters and made vows.



SEPT. 16, 1953: OLV ELEMENTARY SCHOOL OPENED AS FORT WORTH'S FIRST FULLY INTEGRATED SCHOOL

At the height of the Jim Crow era, the Sisters opened Fort Worth's first fully integrated school. This caused quite a stir as pupils were lost and gained, but the Sisters were steadfast in their desire to open their doors to all.



Mother Teresa Weber with Bishop Gorman, Eugene Constantin, Jr, and Edward Maher

1956: OPENING OF THE UNIVERSITY OF DALLAS

A college was originally planned on OLV's campus, but Mother Teresa Weber soon realized the project was too big for the Fort Worth property. She enlisted the help of Fort Worth and Dallas businessmen to find the right property for the university.

a child whose parents were late with payment. Many families paid their tuition with chickens, eggs or other farm items. More than anything, the Sisters were determined to provide a place where children and adults alike could know and love the Lord.

The Sisters continued this policy when, in 1953, Our Lady of Victory

Elementary School opened in Fort Worth. At the height of the Jim Crow era, OLV Elementary became the city's first fully integrated school. Archivist **Sister Louise Smith** shared that the Sisters were determined to provide a school where all were welcomed equally.

Even in times when women had few

"[They were] ... women who preached the Gospel with their lives. I stand on the shoulders of all of the SSMN women who came before us."

– Ann Louise Smith, Oblate



Construction workers at OLV in 1910

legal rights, the Sisters were respected in their communities. When building the school in Wichita Falls in 1903, **Sister Mary Bernard Reilly** discovered that the wrong type of brick was being used in the construction. She promptly walked, brick in hand, to the bank which supervised the construction and asked to see the president. The error was quickly corrected.

When **Mother Teresa Weber** sought advice about building the University of Dallas in the 1950s, businessmen from both Fort Worth and Dallas were

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A NEW WAY OF RELIGIOUS LIFE: OBLATES CELEBRATE 25 YEARS

If it hadn't been for Clarice Peninger, the Sisters of St. Mary of Namur might not have Oblates among them. For many, many years Clarice felt connected to the Sisters and felt called by God to a different kind of religious life, but at the same time, one within the Sisters of St. Mary. She became an Associate, but Clarice had a desire to be more strongly linked to the spirituality and life of the Sisters.

Clarice asked **Sister Gabriela Martinez**, the Provincial at the time, to be allowed to make perpetual promises rather than renewing promises annually, which was the practice at the time. Sister Gabriela consulted the General Council, and Clarice was asked to meet with **Sister Marie Julianne**, the General Superior, and to put her desires in writing. Clarice developed the concept of *Simplicity of Lifestyle* whereby one would live simply (as opposed to poverty) and remain financially responsible for herself, live as a celibate (celibacy) and make herself available to assist the Sisters with a ministry or project if she was capable of doing it (rather than obedience).

Through open dialogue and revisions to the written description, the new way of living a new religious life was initiated and Clarice was able to make her perpetual promises. Clarice and the Congregation envisioned more women wanting to join in this type of religious life and they decided to refer to the



Oblates Reyna Castelan, Clarice Peninger, Ann Louise Smith

group as Oblates. Once this type of religious life was formally established, another woman asked to join, then another and another. "I think it is a natural progression of religious life," says Clarice.

Currently, there are 12 Oblates living in Fort Worth, Wichita Falls,

Mexico, Arkansas and Mississippi. They participate in spiritual development with one of the Sisters and engage in retreats and other events. The Oblates are now celebrating 25 years as part of the Sisters of St. Mary of Namur and are an integral part of the 150-year journey of the Sisters of St. Mary in Texas.

Learn More About the Oblate Life

Oblates of the Sisters of Saint Mary of Namur are single Catholic women who have discerned a specific vocation within the Congregation and believe they are called to make the Congregation their primary life commitment. After a period of prayer and formation, Oblates make simple promises to live in simplicity, celibacy and availability. These promises are initially made for one year, and may be renewed annually, then for three years and eventually for life (perpetual). Oblates participate in the charism of the Sisters, engaging in ministry, often with the Congregation, while living independently and maintaining individual financial responsibility.

They wear a medallion that is the seal of the Congregation with its motto: "In simplicity of heart, I have joyfully given all to God. If you would like to learn more about becoming an Oblate please contact Ann L. Smith, Oblate at annlouisesmith@outlook.com or call 940-781-8909.



SAFE PLACE AND SECOND HOME

When recently invited to meditate on a “grateful memory” of a place or time she felt safe and loved, **Helen Neilon Jauregui** shared, “The first thing that came to mind was walking into the OLV convent before school most days, either for a piano lesson or to practice. In the magic of the classic old building, and knowing who lived there, I felt exactly those things, like I was entering my second home.” Helen also remembers “singing for Mass in the convent chapel, using the Sisters’ translations of Lucien Deiss psalms and hymns, the Gelineau psalms and the People’s Mass Book.”

Helen attended both Our Lady of Victory Catholic School (OLV) and Nolan Catholic High School. Members of the community may remember her mother Irl Neilon who taught at St. Ignatius, St. Mary’s and Our Lady of Victory — or her sister Barbara Neilon who lived at the Sister Novitiate and House of Study at University of Dallas and served in various SSMN schools.

Now a liturgical musician and mentor, Helen is grateful for her SSMN



Helen Neilon Jauregui

teachers: “**Sister Mary Crockett**, my piano teacher in elementary school, was like my other grandmother. She called forth, affirmed and developed my musical abilities, self-confidence and emerging personhood. **Sister Mary [Stephen] McLarry** was my piano teacher all through high school and mentored me into a lifelong career as a liturgical music director in various cities. In her gentle way she literally changed the course of my life. (Oddly enough, she also conducted our sex education class!) I

consider them both my patron saints. **Sister Joanne Bifano** and **Sister Louise Smith** gave me writing skills (diagramming sentences!) which I am still using. Religion classes in high school raised my awareness of social justice (**Sister Patricia [Jeremy] Wilson**) and explored the idea of joy in the spiritual life (**Sister Mary Sharon Phelan**).”

The work and care of the Sisters’ community bears fruit in Helen’s work and family life: “It was expected that we would turn in our best work, on time, on every assignment and respect every other student, even those we weren’t great friends with. I suppose that has influenced my work ethic and made me shake my head at today’s divisive society. Besides working my whole life to enable worthy liturgical celebrations, I’ve tried to instill the love of learning, and particularly music, in my four children and 10 grandchildren. Many times, I have channeled the two ‘Sister Marys’ with my own piano students.”

BOLD STEPS (CONT.)

eager to help her and enlist others to do the same. **Sister Mary Mathilda**, who had first hoped to serve in the Belgian Congo, settled in Texas and served Mexican immigrant families for 40 years. In recent years, **Sister Rita Claire Davis** enabled over four thousand Mexican families in the region around Wichita Falls to become citizens of the United States.

There are thousands of individual stories of the Sisters loving and serving people in their communities — of visiting the elderly, the critically ill, the imprisoned, of teaching school and catechism. “I can’t imagine life without

“I wish I had met the very brave ones who first arrived in Waco 150 years ago, and with hard work, faith and trust in God extended their presence to new areas. They established schools, high schools, academies, even a university! The Sisters have been the educators, yes, but with their example have passed on all that cannot be seen and explained!”

- Reyna Castelan, Oblate

the Sisters of Saint Mary,” Clarice stated. Truth be told, it’s impossible to imagine what North Texas would be without the Sisters’ 150 years of faithful service here. “The Sisters now living are privileged to have joined this congregation,” Sister Louise said, “and we have all those marvelous women

ahead of us who were courageous enough to start it.”

Today the Sisters are well aware of the troubles and uncertainties people face in the world and they continue to do their work — serving where they can and praying. “There’s a book at the

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BOLD STEPS (CONT.)

entrance of the chapel which lies open and ready to accept people's prayer requests and intentions," Sister Louise said. "That seems to be our principal work now – to pray for those who are all around us."

"There are so many popular films and stories about Sisters being silly people, and they're not," Clarice shared. "They're incredibly strong and intelligent women. I wanted to be just like that and I think we all felt that way, that these were people who inspired confidence. They were women who could do anything. They were amazing – still are."

"If you have faith the size of a mustard seed," Jesus once told his disciples, "You will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move." With faith, the Sisters have moved mountains and, in their place

"I thank God for the courage and faith of our first Sisters in Texas. They endured the heat, sickness and poverty without feeling truly welcomed. However, they did not give up and continued to work diligently toward their purpose, to spread the faith in Jesus Christ."

- Sister Charles Marie Serafino

created opportunities for generations of Texans to learn, experience God's love and care, and build a faith of their own. We can't imagine Texas without them and for that, we are grateful.

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BIRTHDAYS TO REMEMBER

- Dec. 1** – Sister Miriam NeSmith
- Dec. 9** – Sister Louise Smith
- Dec. 18** – Sister Dorothy Powers
- Jan. 3** – Sister Camella Menotti
- Jan. 15** – Sister Mary Fulbright
- Jan. 26** – Sister Anselma Knabe



Kona Ice was a welcome treat to the Sisters during the record-breaking Texas heatwave of 2023.



THE SISTERS OF SAINT MARY OF NAMUR
THE WESTERN REGION

909 W. SHAW ST.
FORT WORTH, TX 76110

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