

A VERY FULFILLED LIFE

Five of us left Cobh, Cork on the U.S. United States bound for New York, May 1959. When we arrived in New York we spent a few days with members of Sisters' families. I spent the time with Mike Creegan and his family.

On arrival in California we went to Our Lady of Peace where Mary Aquinas helped with lesson planning etc. I think we were there three days when I was introduced to the fifth grade students to teach spelling, Sister Mary Concepta (Mary Kate Reilly) was not feeling well. Others of us were given the task of tutoring some other students.



In late August, I was assigned to Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Mill Valley, across the Golden Gate Bridge, outside San Francisco. I was assigned to teach fifth grade. I enjoyed the city of Mill Valley and really enjoyed teaching, except one Friday morning, while I was mid sentence; my students disappeared under the desks! When they returned to their desks they told me about the air raid drill every first Friday.

In 1959 a Catholic School in Chicago had a huge fire, many students and teachers were killed and this lead to the Archdiocese of Los Angeles mandating the reduction of class sizes. Our Lady of Peace embarked upon building an additional eight class rooms. This reduced class sizes to 50. We became the largest Catholic elementary school in the Archdiocese with 1,200 students.

The following year, 1960, I was assigned to Our Lady of Peace in the San Fernando Valley on the outskirts of Los Angeles. I was to teach second grade. My first class had 82 students. It's totally unimaginable now. Family population in the valley had increased at an alarming rate because of airplane industry development. The next year my class size was reduced to 75. It took four years to reduce class size to 50.

During those years we experienced the Cuban Crisis and the death of J.F.Kennedy. The students were aware of the possibility of war. One of my students asked me to turn on the radio to see if we were at war. These were second graders, so one would think they were not aware of what was happening in the world, but they were. We began air raid drills and fire drills on a regular basis.

In the midst of all the upheaval, building classrooms, and concern regarding Cuba; Our Lady of Peace managed to participate in many after school and weekend activities; speech contests, Irish Dancing, singing contests and sporting activities.

In 1964 I was assigned to Saint John Fisher in Palos Verdes. We were the founders of Saint John Fisher School which was comprised of four temporary classrooms built on our grounds. Later, after the Church and the School was completed we retained the four classrooms, which now are our meeting rooms. One of the first experiences I had was finding directions to treat a

snake bite, the pack that included a blade, gauze and directions to treat a bite in the bottom drawer of my desk! Thank God I did not have to suck venom from a bite.

Apparently the area was a habitat for rattle snakes. The Retreat House, Novitiate and Saint John Fisher were on constant alert for them.

After studying for one year I went to Our Lady the Rosary in Paramount. The community was comprised of many Dutch families; Van Haaster, Overzyl, Van Ruitin. It was a large dairy community. I taught one of the eighth grades. The term had no sooner begun than I was introduced to after school activity. We were learning to sing "the Pirates of Penzance". This program was performed for school community in March or April. Following the Pirates we did The Mikado, HMS Pinafore, Jesus Christ, Superstar, the History of American War Songs like "It's a long way to Tipperary," "Over There" and "Gee Mom I Want to Go Home!" To this day, I am amazed at the sophistication of the presentation of each one. I learned to do lighting and sound, and students to do set decoration for each annual program.

After one year at Pius X High School I became Principal of Saint Augustine in Culver City. This was our first foundation in California, 1926. Our pioneer sisters left a very large footprint in Culver City as evidenced by the number of graduates that would drop by to see who was teaching there and to reminisce about their school days, it was heart warming to hear about Sisters Mary Francis, Mary Stanislaus, Mary Aquinas and others.

The respect and appreciation for the education they received was heartwarming and challenging as I followed in their footsteps.

When I became principal it became evident that many of our children were going home to empty homes because both parents were working. I discussed the situation with parents and we decided we could support an After-School Program. We became one of the first in the diocese.

We were given Apple MACS to start "Writing to Read" in grades Kindergarten to Second Grade. It was amazing what the children wrote when they did not have to correct spelling. They printed what they heard. Some stories were fantastic.

As everyone knows, California is an earthquake country. In 1981 we had a major earthquake and it became clear that we needed major preparation for the "the Big One". To do so we needed to care for students for at least three days. (Many of our parents were first responders.) Therefore, they would not be able to come to the school to pick up children immediately.

We had each child bring three days worth of food; we provided water by building a 5000 gallon tank. We had to have blankets and body bags. In addition, we needed to be able to do a walk through of school to determine damage. Children remained on school grounds until Joann and I gave the all clear.

Needless to say, we were grateful not to have needed to use them. I think it is every principal's greatest nightmare, hoping to miss an earthquake while the children are in school!

In 1990 I was asked by leadership to become Director of Development. We were beginning the process of building Marian Residence. It was a daunting task, but truly God was in charge! Over a period of three years we were able to raise enough to build the building. It is a monument to our retired sisters. Our graduates were extremely generous, our friends and people we hardly knew were so kind.

In addition to meeting with people to ask for their assistance I started a golf tournament. What a fantastic event! Graduates and friends helped me get started. It took a year to put together. As soon as we completed one, we began preparing for the next one. We were able to host the event for thirteen years.

In 2006 I became Executive Director of House of Hope in San Pedro. House of Hope is a Recovery House for women addicted to drugs and alcohol. There were twenty women in a primary care program and thirty women in sober living, a second phase of recovery.

My first day at HOH, the president of the Board of Directors took me across the alley to introduce me to the owners of a liquor store. Carol and Clarence were the owners. The first thing Clarence said to me was; you will buy this building won't you? I had no idea if that was on the table for the board. One year later we opened the Adams Center which included a meeting room, staff room, computer lab and offices.

As part of our program we offered information to incarcerated women whose offense included drugs and alcohol. Every three months, a group of Executive Directors or Program Directors went to CIW (California Institution for Women). We presented our programs and offered to come and bring them to our facility. The conversation is very interesting while traveling from CIW to San Pedro. Women share their story, how they got there and what it was like there. For some it was not a pretty story.

Every six months we traveled to Chowchilla in the center of California. We met with over seven hundred women. We made the same presentation. I asked one woman how many times she had been incarcerated, she replied, 'seven times!' I asked how come. She told me that they were put on a bus to Fresno and every time they got there, there were drug dealers waiting for them always willing to sell them a dime bag!

During my seven years at HOH I became involved in Crisis Response with the San Pedro Police Department. There were twenty of us. We were on-call twenty seven hours. Our task involved going to the scene of a crime and accidents, we acted as liaison with the police, medical personnel and with the coroner if needed. We were a support to the victims, families and friends and went along for family notification if needed. Many times we were able to relay information to the police that would help them with their inquiries.

Some of the most difficult times were when children were involved. One brother, seven years old, killing his brother of three. It was an accident, but his mother was upstairs in the hospital unable to come see either of her sons. I don't know whose pain was the worst, the mother or the seven year old.

For me, the most rewarding part of Crisis Response was being able to pray with families, pray the prayers of the dying while life support was being removed. Suicides were the most difficult, especially when it was a young person. So many of the incidents were heartbreaking, so needless to say it could take its toll, however, it was also a very special blessing to be able to comfort those who were grieving and heartbroken.

After seven years at HOH I became Program Director at Flossie Lewis Recovery Home. It was one of the few facilities that provided housing for women with children under five. Again, we had women in primary treatment and sober living.

During that time I began to have some physical difficulties, so I semi-retired. I became very involved in Awareness of Human Trafficking here in California as a member of the Southern California Partners of Global Justice which was comprised of members of nineteen Religious Communities. We had a large footprint here in Los Angeles, Orange County, San Diego and San Bernardino. It was an amazing shock when someone says, "We don't have problems like that here".

The highlight of my being part of Human Trafficking Awareness, was being asked by Sr. Helen Lane to join a group of our sisters from Belgium, Ireland, England, Africa and California to form our own support group. The highlight was our meeting in Howth. It was heart warming and humbling to hear how involved and aware our sisters are of this tragedy.

I continue to keep myself engaged in the ongoing efforts to attack the scourge of Human Trafficking.

I celebrated sixty years as DMJ last October. I can truly say that it has been my greatest joy to be a Daughter of Mary and Joseph and to be a member of a wonderful family of the Lynches, especially my wonderful parents, brothers and sisters.

Sister Sheila Lynch, DMJ