

MEMORIES OF MARY AND JOSEPH RETREAT CENTER BY SR. JULIA COSTELLO

My memories of our Retreat Center date back to 1975. I had returned from four years in Ireland working with our Irish novices. I fully expected to return to teaching, but God had other plans. One of our Sisters had just been assigned as Director of MJRC, and I was asked to be her assistant. So I moved in with her to La Casita, a lovely home on the property, given to us by Mr. & Mrs. Schwalenberg, parents of Srs. Therese Martin and Ruth.

After about a week, my companion informed me she was leaving the community, which she did in a couple of days. Luckily, a Sister from another Community wanted to move in with us as she was in discernment leave from her own Community. So Sr. Brona moved into La Casita with me. What a blessing! Brona was interested in retreat ministry, and she stayed for about a year. Another blessing was our dear Sr. Mary Rose, who drove up from Westwood every weekend that we had a retreat. She came faithfully when was not too busy with her first grade at St. Paul's School.

Life at MJRC was very simple then. Our staff consisted of a cook, a cleaning lady, and a part-time secretary. My position was to work on retreats and to find directors. I also kept accounts, did the grocery shopping and planned menus for the cook. We had a number of regular groups: Couples, Catholic groups such as Italian Catholic Federation, and student and faculty groups. Early in the 60's Alcoholics Anonymous found us and that group has been coming faithfully. Every Wednesday they had Alanon in the morning and AA men meetings in the evening. One of the directors who ministered to the groups was Fr. Terry Ritchie. He was very much loved. I helped on the retreats and was blessed in being able to help some of those struggling with sobriety issues.

Mary and Joseph Retreat Center has always been a welcoming place of solitude, rest and renewal for retreatants. They came from all walks of life to get away and find peace and to deepen their connection with God. They appreciated our hospitality and delicious meals.

We also had a variety of feathered and furry creatures. Over the years our property has hosted snakes and wiggly animals. But because of so much recent construction in our area, they have now disappeared. I remember walking through our dining room one mid-morning and finding a rattle snake coiled under a table!

Then there are the perennial peacocks...a delight to retreatants and other guests, but for some they are a noisy nuisance. Seasonally, their feathers are aglow with color which they fan out to attract their female "attendants." We must not forget the rabbits, squirrels, and skunks; and in late evenings come the raccoons and possums. It is never dull around here. In the mid-70's I left Palos Verdes for further study in spirituality, retreat work, and spiritual direction.

Fast forward to the 90's - I returned to Mary and Joseph Retreat Center in 1993. What a change! Our Center was active and busy, and newly incorporated. We had a Board of Directors and a wonderful Lay Director, our dear friend, Mary Kaighan.

At this point our directors and staff formed a Program Committee to facilitate retreats and other programs. I was very happy to be part of this Committee.

Living in La Casita at this time were Srs. Johanna Leahy, Margaret Helmes, and Bridget Johnston. They were all living out their final years of ministry before retirement. Sr. Johanna hosted Contemplative Prayer groups and offered Spiritual Direction. Sr. Margaret worked with AA and Al-Anon. And Sr. Bridget was RCIA Director at St. John Fisher Parish and she taught Scripture at MJRC.

In 1996, with the help of Fr. Alan Deck, SJ, we started an eight-day, silent, directed retreat based on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. I worked on the retreat until 2017. This retreat has taken place annually in August until 2020, when it was interrupted by the Pandemic. Presently the Retreat is back on our calendar again.

There is another cherished memory which is too long and too rich to do justice to here. That is the Kristelnaucht. This event initiated into faith activities at MJRC. Today, some twenty years later it is alive and active in our South Bay area. It includes participants from most of the Christian communities as well as Jewish, Muslim and Mormon.

My last memory and involvement was the construction of the labyrinth in honor of Sr. Johanna. It was planned, organized and constructed by the MJRC staff and friends. Every brick was laid in place with love. It was dedicated in 2016; a beautiful plaque with the dedication has Johanna's name. I have not been able to walk the labyrinth but I do enjoy watching so many people using it. It is a place of reflection, of peace and harmony.

It was at this point that I had a bad fall on the cement steps by the Retreat Center. I ended up in the hospital with a broken shoulder and other injuries. Then I had to spend two months in a nursing home. At this time I moved to Marian Residence, our lovely retirement home.

Today, I relive so many memories of my years at MJRC and our wonderful staff. And I thank God for this ministry where I spent almost forty years. It has been a rich period of my life. I focus my prayer on the mission and ministry of our Congregation here at MJRC.

May God be blessed and may our retreatants be enriched by our programs and services. I gratefully acknowledge our dedicated staff and Board members who lovingly continue our retreat ministry here in Palos Verdes. May it all be for the greater glory of God. Amen

