

Q. Why did you choose to become a Sister of Providence?

A. Being a Terre Haute native, the Sisters of Providence were the closest to me. I was taught by the Sisters of Providence in grade school and high school. I did think about other communities. I was interested in Glenmary. I don't know why, exactly. Home missions, I guess. Of course, the Carmelite Monastery (Terre Haute) opened when I was in high school. We went down there for the opening. I was in awe of how Spartan their lives were. I'm sure I thought about it for a while, but it wouldn't stick with me very long. The Sisters of Providence always were extremely good to me while I was growing up, so, it just seemed like a natural fit.

Q. From what you have said, it sounds like you knew that you wanted to become a sister.

A. Well, yes. I knew I wanted to help people. The sisters that I knew were happy and welcoming. I wanted to be part of that. They did a lot of good without blowing their own horns. I was comfortable with that. They were incredibly patient. I spent a lot of time hanging around the school. When I was in the upper grades, I would go help the first-grade teacher correct papers and things like that. They just welcomed me, and treated me so well. It was probably around eighth grade when I started thinking seriously about becoming a sister. My parents were divorced. The sisters never made me feel like a second-class citizen. In those days, to have your parents divorced was pretty unusual. I'm sure I was sensitive about it, but nobody ever made a big deal about it. I have one brother, who is four years younger. I was probably one of his main caregivers. He was always tagging along after me. The sisters were always saying, "He's so cute." My Grandmother McKenzie was one of the most stable influences in my life. She was always there for us. If my mother was able to have us, we lived with her. If she wasn't, we all moved in with Grandma. It all depended on if Mom had a job, or didn't have a job. That's what I mean. It was kind of a topsy-turvy time growing up. Whatever we needed, my grandmother would make whatever adjustments she had to. She would do anything for family.

Q. You were a teacher for a lot of years, then you became a caregiver, which you have said is important to you.

A. Yes, I have been taking care of people my whole life. It seems like in a family there is one person that everyone looks to do whatever needs doing. I don't know whether I got it from my grandmother or not, but that's just the way it was. In the beginning of my religious life, I wanted to be a Sister of Providence more than I wanted to be a nurse. I've always been interested in nursing. I had an aunt who was a nurse, so she was always kind of a role model for me. I helped in our Infirmary a lot during those years when I was a teacher. One year, I don't know when it was, I received a letter from the community asking if I would be willing to donate a year of service to the Infirmary, be an aide. I jumped at it and said yes, but I couldn't do it right away because I was getting my master's degree in education at Indiana State University. A couple of years later, my mother became very ill. I thought, well, I could do both things at once, be close to my mom and help out at the infirmary, so that's what I did. Mom was very sick. They called me in and said there wasn't anything else they could do. She had cancer. I was standing in the old part of Lourdes. Of course, I was having a cry. I was talking to Sister Rose Marita Riordan. Mother Mary Pius Regnier (general superior at the time) came by and said, "What the matter?" I told her. She said, "Just go." We didn't do that in those days. The next day, the men delivered a hospital bed and a table to my grandmother's house and we brought my mom home. I took care of her for six weeks. Sister Mary

Stella Morissey (RIP) called me every single day. The last day she called me, my aunt answered the phone. She said, "Mary Ann can't come to the phone right now, her mom is dying." I'll bet less than 15 minutes later, Mary Stella, Rose Marita and Mary Pius were at our front door. That kind of compassion can't be forgotten. That kind of converted me to really wanting to be a nurse. The next year, I went back to Chicago and Sister Loretta Schafer was the Illinois provincial at the time. I met with her and asked if I could go to nursing school. I almost fell off the couch when she said yes.

Q. You made the comment that during your early years in the Congregation you wanted to be a Sister of Providence more than a nurse. Can you talk a little more about that?

A. I guess it was a security thing. I felt this is where I should be. It was more or less expected then that you would be a teacher. So I was an obedient little, young sister and I did as I was told. I'm not saying I didn't enjoy teaching or enjoy the kids, because I did. I taught in big schools in Chicago. I had excellent school role models. Everybody helped. I learned a lot. I think I was an OK teacher. I wouldn't consider myself a great teacher. I met a lot of wonderful families. My best teaching experience was in Wilson, North Carolina. I was down there seven years with Sister Rose Marita. We were integrating our school. There was a black school and a white school. There were the black Oblate Sisters of Providence and the white Sisters of Providence teaching in the same city. We were sure they were going to burn a cross in our yard when we integrated the school. We had some tough times down there. That was my most rewarding teaching experience. I went down there in 1964, so we were there when Dr. Martin Luther King was shot. We went to the Baptist church for a memorial service. When we left the church, we were going to have a silent march to the city hall. We didn't think anything about it, but they said all the women and children walk on the inside. I thought, "Hmmm." When we walked out there was a Jeep parked right across the street with a mounted machine gun. The National Guard was on the rooftops of stores and buildings along the three or four blocks down the street. It got my attention. I went to summer school one year at the University of Georgia. A priest was teasing me. He said, "Now, Mary Ann, don't let Klan get you while you are down there. The bishop has been praying for years for a martyr, and it would be a crime to waste your blood on the soil of Georgia." When Sister Mary Rita Griffin came to replace Sister Rose Marita the last year I was there, she was very active. The school was already integrated, but she was more involved in the politics of it than we had been before. It was a wonderful thing. There was still a lot to be done. Our convent was integrated. The Oblates came to live with us.

Q. What was the culture like when you were there?

A. The people were very good to us, but it was amazing when we integrated the school how unpopular we became. We said no more angel food cakes. One lady used to bring us angel food cakes all the time. Well, all of a sudden, there were no more cakes. We lost a good number of students. Another thing the bishop did was there were two or three sisters and a couple of priests and we'd go around the diocese talking about integration and social justice, kind of like a workshop. Believe it or not, I would give talks. That's not me. But it was a chance to promote what was right.

Q. What did you talk about?

A. I don't remember. My part of it, I think, was how we integrated our school; the experiences we had, the planning we did and how we worked together with the Oblate Sisters of Providence. We would have discussion time to try to encourage more people to do the same thing.

Q. What do you value most about all of those ministry opportunities?

A. I think it would be the people I worked with. When I became a nurse, the first year I worked at Union Hospital to get more experience. I was in an accelerated program for nursing. Then I worked here for two years. I was really interested in working with oncology patients. I went to a workshop at Indiana University on how to care for adult cancer patients. While I was there I met some people, and I had an interview with three different hospitals. I picked Community Hospital in Indianapolis. I worked in the oncology unit for nine years. It was a wonderful experience. The staff was really dedicated. We worked together. We really worked with the doctors. They really listened to what we had to say. You could say to a doctor, "Something's wrong with so-and-so. I'm not sure what it is." They would go right down the hall and check it out. In my other experiences, some doctors would say, "I'll check on it later." I just had a lot of difficult, but wonderful, experiences there.

Q. Any particular ones come to mind?

A. You probably won't want to hear about it. I thought to myself, "If you stick around in this place, just about everything bad you can think of is going to happen." One night I helped a lady get out of bed so she could go to the commode. I broke her arm. I just touched it. She had bone cancer. It made me feel terrible, but she was so nice. She said, "Honey, you couldn't help it." We put it in a sling for the night and the next morning they took her to surgery and fixed it. We had a young woman who was a leukemia patient; just the courage. People would say to me, "Mary Ann, how could you do that?" I said, "You know, there are lot worse things than having cancer." For instance, a person who has been in a car accident and they are completely paralyzed. To me, that's a lot sadder than someone who has cancer. Now the treatments have changed so radically that there is a lot of surviving going on.

Q. Why do you say that there are worse things then cancer?

A. The things I have witnessed in the patients and their families, the courage people have. There is a determination to beat it. For instance, one woman said to me, "I'm sorry I had to get this sick to find out that people really care." Another woman said, "Mary Ann, no matter how long life is, it is still precious." I learned how to talk to people and how to value them. A lot of the time, people weren't so worried about whether you were going to do the right thing to take care of them. They wanted you to respect their life, that their life means something. I think that is what is important. I think I was able to do that. After I left there, I did hospice home care for two years and had some wonderful experiences.

Q. It's interesting that you define it that way, because a lot of people on the outside of cancer, family members, see it as something extremely tragic and can't make that separation of peacefulness and coveting the quality of life.

A. I've seen a lot of people who died, but I experience very few of those who were in terrible pain or despair. That has not been my experience. Most people that I've worked with have been peaceful, comfortable. It scares me. Will I be as good at accepting it as they have been if it should happen to me? I certainly have had plenty of models. In fact, a lot of our sisters have walked this way before and I hope I can do the same. Even my own mother, even though she did not have an easy life, she faced her death calmly. I've just had a wealth of very personal experiences like that. One of our sisters was very ill, and we met with the doctor as we were trying to get her to come home. She had been in the hospital for weeks and weeks and weeks. He came in, we talked about it, and everything got settled. She was a Terre Haute girl too. She was a couple of years older. She said, "Mary Ann, when we were in high school

together, we never would have thought that we would do what we have done today.” I thought that was a profound thing to say.

Q. Why would a woman be attracted to living life as a religious, being part of a community like the Sisters of Providence?

A. What attracted me was their joy. You could tell they liked each other. I think the same thing today. When you see a group of Sisters of Providence together, you can tell they are happy to be together, that they are engaged in what they are doing, that they want to make things better for people. We are welcoming in many different circumstances, people at the food pantry, people at the health clinic. No matter where they are, I think we, as a group, are very welcoming, even in our neighborhood. People who live around us know that we are there and they can call upon us if they need something. We will pitch in if there is a need. Those are the kinds of things that I think would be attractive to anyone. You feel as if you can make a difference to make the world a better place, such as working with the environment. I’ve always been very happy to say that we have the White Violet Center for Eco-Justice, but I’ve never done anything there. But last year I was in a spinning workshop. The people who came, I was just amazed. They were there from many different places in the United States. They were people who, in their own lives, were committed to making the world a better place. The sharing that went on! We were there to learn how to spin and weave, but there was so much more that went on.

Q. How has the Congregation changed since the time when you joined?

A. Externally, quite a bit, as far as the habit and all of that. But, I went to Taiwan for the Asian experience. One of the days we were there we went to the Buddhist monastery. Before we went, I thought what purpose is this? Well, it shows what you don’t know. That turned out to be one of the most challenging days I spent there. A sister had to translate, of course, but we were sitting there talking to the main superior and she seemed to be such a wise and peaceful person. She said, “Well, you changed the outside, but not the inside.” I thought here is this woman, thousands of miles away, not even a Christian woman, but she understands. The habit is not what makes us Sisters of Providence, even though she wore a habit. I learned a lot that day. It was a day I’ll never forget. When I was working at Union Hospital, a nurse’s cap was optional. Our manager liked for us to wear it. She was of the old school. She was a lovely person. One day I went to work and started right in. We were so busy I didn’t even think about putting my cap on. Some time during the morning she happened to mention that I didn’t have a cap on. I said, “Oh, OK.” So, we went to lunch together. I said, “You know, I’ve already been through this once. To me wearing the habit, it’s a sign, yes, but that’s not what makes me a good Sister of Providence. I feel the same way here, a nurse’s cap is not what makes me a good nurse.” She looked at me and said, “I never thought of it that way.” After that, she really stopped mentioning it that way and she stopped wearing it. I didn’t consider it a victory. I didn’t care whether people wore it or not. It’s just that idea.

Q. Complete this sentence, Sister Mary Ann is ...

A. I am a loyal friend. I am a compassionate, caring person. I want my life to help other people to make the world a better place.

Q. What role does prayer have in your life?

A. I truly enjoy having a lot of different prayer experiences. I feel like it's the foundation of my life. Sometimes things pop up spontaneously for me, more than formal prayer. Of course, I love the wonderful liturgies we have here, and also the prayer services that we have, the chance to share, in a deeper way, with other people, and that helps me share, I hope, in a deeper way with God.

Q. How important to you is the community lifestyle that the Sisters of Providence have to offer?

A. We are able to support each other. We are more and more scattered in some ways. For instance, when I was in North Carolina, there were very few Sisters of Providence there. We didn't get to gather all that much. Whenever any sisters got together, it was as if we were all one. The separate community life seemed to disintegrate, or become not so important. We were always happy to be together. Even if it is someone I don't know very well, I know there is some way they can help me. I know I can call on them. That's a wonderful thing that everyone doesn't have. We fill in and support one another. As one person said not long ago, we may not look alike, or act alike, but we're on the same page more. Our governance is a good example of change. Our General Chapter used to be very secretive. No one would know what was going on until it was over. Now, everyone in the community is engaged and trying to do the best we can for one another, the church and for the world. That's a wonderful experience, and who wouldn't want it?

Q. How much influence does Saint Mother Theodore Guerin have in your life?

A. We read the statement from her calendar every morning. Sometimes I say, "There's another zinger from our foundress." She really hits the nail on the head. She was such a warm and human person. It's so easy to want to embrace her. I think Teresa Clark (sculptor) made her just what we think she was, a warm person right there working with us, not just somebody standing there on a pedestal. She's always walking, going someplace, doing something. And, her daughters are trailing along doing the same. She is a wonderful role model, I would say.

Q. Has your life turned out like you might have imagined?

A. When I entered the community, I certainly never thought I would have had the wealth of experience that I have had. I certainly didn't know at 17 that I would have had all of these experiences in my life. But, I didn't become a sister to have a wonderful life.

Q. You just retired from active ministry (as director of Holistic Health Services).

A. Well, yes, as much as any Sister of Providence retires. I was just tired of all the traveling and being on call 24/7 for seven years. Not that I expect not knowing to change. It won't. At least I won't have to travel all over the country. Maybe I still will to a certain extent. I'd be willing to go help now and then. I thought it was about time to step back from all of that responsibility.

Q. What is the most important thing in your life right now?

A. Being helpful in whatever way I can. I'm still going to help the sisters. There is plenty to do right here. I told my successor that I would help her with taking care of the sisters here and around Terre Haute. I hope to have a little more time to do some spiritual reading, a little more time to pray, or spend with the sisters here.

Q. What were you like as a child?

A. I was a good student. I was the class valedictorian. My teachers depended on me in some ways. I would help other people. I had good friends to play with.

Q. What was going on in Terre Haute at that time?

A. My Grandmother McCauley was involved in politics. She used to work for the Democrat Party. Her house was a wonderful place. They had a big, round dining room table. It was always full of people talking about politics, eating, or playing cards. My grandfather would be sitting in his chair by the front door, smoking his pipe, but never having very much to say. He was the custodian at St. Joseph School and parish. He told me a little boy was standing downstairs in the basement of his workshop. He looked over and said, "Hi, Sonny. What can I do for you?" The little boy said, "Our teacher told us you were a saint and I just wanted to see what a saint looked like." I think he *was* a saint. He and my grandmother took care of my great-grandmother. My great-grandmother was still living when I entered community. She was probably 90-ish or more. My grandmother gave me her rosary. There house was a wonderful place to be. They had a big family. My Aunt Peggy McKenzie was more like a sister to me. She might as well have been a nun because she'd go out and earn money and take it home and give it to my grandmother. My grandmother would give her an allowance, even when she was 30 or 40 years old.

Q. You also have a well-known member of your family.

A. Yes, my one claim to fame is that I was related to Father John McKenzie. He was my uncle. This is a funny story. He gave the retreat the year I entered. I came in July and he gave the August retreat. In the novitiate, of course, we didn't make the whole retreat, but we would go for one talk a day. One day we went out for a walk. When we came back, Sister Mary Dominica said we could go back in and Father would hear confessions. We went inside and she said, "You probably don't want to go to confession with your uncle, do you?" I said, "No, not really." She said, "That's fine; we'll take you over to the crypt. Well that was worse. They took me over to the crypt to go confession and here I am, the only postulant in a white veil in this sea of black veils. I'm kneeling there and I'm thinking, "Oh, my." So, Father Goosens comes down and taps me on the shoulder and said, "I'll take you first." He probably knew that I couldn't wait to get out of there.

Q. What gives you your most pleasure or satisfaction?

A. I love to cook. Matilda (Sister Ann Matilda Holloran) will say when I pull a pie out of the oven, I will say, "Now that's a beautiful pie."

Q. Specialties?

A. Pie, any kind of a casserole. I like to try new recipes. Often times I will do that when we are having company, and I'll stew over it, not sure whether it's going to turn out all right or not. I don't know why I don't try new things out when we're not expecting company. I like to do needle work and crocheting. Of course, I'd like to learn how to spin, but I'm far from that. I like to read, travel and just have quiet time.

Q. What gives you hope?

A. We just had a prayer service on hope. We were working with our associate. The young sisters that we have, just the energy and the support we have for each other give me hope. There are places where the Earth heals itself, almost, and that gives me hope as opposed to the scare you get so often with the manmade disasters, or that terrible oil spill. A few years later, flowers are blooming. Thank God the Earth knows how to heal itself. We need to stop injuring it so much.

Q. Do you have a favorite vacation place, or place you like to visit?

A. It's hard to say. I like the beach, or the mountains.

Q. What would be the one thing that you hope people might remember about you?

A. Sometimes I wonder about that. Sometimes I think, "What will they ever say when they write my eulogy?" I would hope that people would remember that I was a grateful person, loving, forgiving. When you look at your own life, you think it is pretty unremarkable. And yet, it's the only life you have, so I guess in that way is it remarkable for you.

Q. When you think of God, what is the first thing that comes to mind?

A. Creative, very creative, and God is still creating the world. I used to think of God as a judge when I was a kid, but I think of God now as more of a loving presence in my life and in the lives of everyone.

Q. What energizes you spiritually?

A. I would say a good liturgy for one thing. I think it would energize me spiritually to read a good book, but I haven't had time to do that. I'm hoping now I will have time. And, to be involved with the thinking, with those who are on target; even to read the National Catholic Reporter sometimes.

Q. If you could wake up tomorrow with one new ability or talent, what would it be?

A. Spinning!

Q. If you were to sit down and write this story, what would your focus be?

A. It would be that my life would encourage other people to understand the beauty of community life and having a chance to help the world. I have always been impressed that it doesn't take big, big things to change the world. Sometimes a very small thing, or simple thing, can be deep and meaningful to people if they have the time and space to experience it.

Quick connections

Q. What do you like best about Saint Mary-of-the-Woods?

A. It's beauty, peace.

Q. When I am not officially at work, or involved in ministry, you're most likely to see me ...

A. Taking a nap.

Q. On weekends, I love to ...

A. Do needlework.

Q. I am passionate about ...

A. Caring for animals; recycling too

Q. What the world needs now ...

A. Love sweet love; nurturing, recycling

Q. Name one thing you miss about being a kid.

A. I think I should have had a little more play time when I was a kid. I had to grow up early.

Q. What would you like to hear God say when you arrive in Heaven?

A. I love you. Welcome home.

Q. What is your biggest pet peeve?

A. Shopping carts left in the middle of the lot.

Q. What is the highlight of your week?

A. Spending time with friends, taking Communion to a local nursing home.

Q. What is your least favorite chore?

A. Paperwork, writing reports, charts, balancing budgets.

Favorites

Website: Animal rescue site.

Food: Italian or Mexican. I like spicy food.

Flower/plant: Christmas cactus.

Movie: Sherlock Holmes.

TV show: NCIS. They have a good team.

Vacation spot: The beach. I love the ocean waves.

Recreation: Sudoku, walking.

Hobby: Crocheting, knitting, cooking, recycling.

Music/song: Classical; Chopin.

Animal: Dogs. I have a dog named Guerin and a cat named Providence.

Pizza topping: Sausage, red onion, green pepper.

Holiday: Easter. I love Spring, the newness of life, resurrection.

Author: Joyce Rupp, spiritual.

Dessert: Lemon meringue pie.

Time of day: Morning, for its peace and quiet.

Season: Fall, beautiful colors and clear blue sky.

Actor/actress: Vanessa Redgrave.

Comic strip: Rose is Rose, Crankshaft.

Course in school: Latin.

Saint: Mother Theodore Guerin.

Sinner: Peter

Least favorite food: Canned spinach.

Least favorite course in school: Physics.

My best friend says: I'm stubborn.

If I weren't an SP, I'd be: A caregiver of some sort, hospice nurse.

Other

Years in ministry: 59

Current ministry: In transition

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