

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

A. I chose to become a Sister of Providence to serve God's people. It was out of love and appreciation for the example given to me from grade school through high school and the first year in college by the sisters that I grew to love. I was attracted to their lifestyle. They could help so many people in so many different ways. I went to first grade in the Chicago area, Rogers Park, and I was taught by the Benedictine sisters. In January my family moved to Wilmette, Illinois, and I was introduced to the Sisters of Providence. Sister Alice Marie was my first-grade teacher. I was in her class and I really had not a clue as to what they were doing. At the end of the year, she invited my parents over to the convent and she said, "I know you have a lovely daughter and I know she is very bright, but I think it would be wise if we held her back a year because she has not grasped phonics and that's going to be a mainstay for the rest of her life. So, I wonder how you feel about that." My parents said, "If that's what you recommend that's what we'll do." I thought, "That's great, I'll meet new kids." It didn't bother me. I am probably the only Sister of Providence who flunked first grade. I tell everybody that story. It was the best thing that ever happened to me. I made lifetime friends in that class. I thought then, "These people are so wonderful, sensitive and positive." They were pretty neat. As I moved on in grade school, I was quite successful in almost everything I did. And we had brilliant teachers, particularly in Literature and English. And, to this day, it has given me such a firm foundation in writing and doing any type of public speaking. I am forever grateful and indebted to the Sisters of Providence. But I also had a lot of fun. My parents were very active in the parish. We were a rather large family with six boys and three girls. My father was president of the Holy Name Society. The family did a lot of work and we got to know the sisters really well. They were like an extended family. When I was in high school we had excellent teachers also. I went to Marywood High School in Evanston, Illinois. It was a private girls' school that belonged to the Sisters of Providence. Toward the end of my junior year in high school, one of the sisters approached me and said, "Did you ever think about looking into being a Sister of Providence?" And I said, "Oh, that wouldn't be any problem. I already think God wants me there anyway." My sister and I were about a year apart. After school, she'd go directly home to practice piano, and I'd show up about 5 or 5:30 because I would have to stop and visit all of the elderly people on the way home. That's when I became very fond of helping people. I always told Mom I wanted to be somebody's maid. I wanted to take care of people. They always knew where to find me: somewhere on the third floor of an apartment building. Maybe somebody would need groceries. If they needed something, I'd go get it for them. And it has continued throughout my whole life. I have been an advocate for the elderly since I was a senior in high school.

Q. What do you value most about the ministry opportunities that you have had?

A. When I entered the Sisters of Providence, I wanted to be a cook. I knew I couldn't be enclosed in the four walls of a classroom. I am a multi-task person. I need to have space. I loved to cook. So, when I asked to be a cook, the sisters were not very pleased because I had graduated from Marywood and went to Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College. At the time I entered in 1956, because I had already been in college, they felt it was inappropriate because the sisters who worked in the kitchen were known as "domestics." There were certain things you could or could not do as a domestic. Anyway, I said, "That's no problem; I don't care." They wanted to know what my parents would think. I said, "Oh, they won't mind at all." Boy, was I wrong. One of the general officers was Sister Catherine Celine. She had been the principal at Wilmette the whole time we were there. She had known my parents very well. So, Mother Gertrude Clare said, "Why don't you get ahold of her family and let them know what sister has asked." She did. My mother went ballistic. She didn't think that was why I entered community. They came down, and we met in the parlor and it was finally agreed they would let me try it out, but they were pretty sure it wouldn't last. Well, 50 years later, I lasted a long time. I was cook in the community for about 20 years. In the

summer time I would cook at Foley Hall, 800 sisters, three meals a day with five people helping. We got it done. During the year, I was in Providence and Owens (halls). Sometimes in the summer, I'd get sent to one of the high school as a replacement cook. I had a lot of fun. I went to Ladywood in Indianapolis as my first mission. I was in charge of food service. It was a residency school. We had two kitchens, the school cafeteria and then the dining room. That was a great experience.

Then, I came back home to Saint Mary-of-the-Woods. I worked in the kitchen and also in the office in the Express Hall. Eventually, we hired Saga food service, who asked that I train them in the three kitchens. I was in management with them part-time, and continued working in the Express Hall. I was responsible for housekeeping, laundry, cannery and purchasing of supplies. I also helped out in the business office on payroll and did all the budgets for supplies.

Q. What do you value most about those opportunities?

A. It all feeds into what I do now. Every time a door closes, another one opens. The Lord has blessed me in so many ways. My background experience with the Sisters of Providence feeds into every ministry I take on. I left Saint Mary-of-the-Woods. I resigned in 1988 so that I could come back and retire sometime. I had been here since 1968. I was hired by Saga Food service which became the Marriott Corporation. I was sent to Kalamazoo, Mich., to get my management training and then I was asked to be a supervisor at Borgess Medical Center in Kalamazoo which was having a big problem with a union. So, they sent me there to straighten it out, and I did. They hated to see me leave. When I accepted the position with the company, I told them I did not want to be in hospitals. I wanted to be in a retirement community where you could affect the quality of life. The company sent me to Kansas City, a very large, upscale retirement community. I developed a restaurant-style dining service for them. They loved it. Then they pulled me out of Kansas City and sent me to Riverview Hospital in Noblesville, Indiana. I have loved everything I do. I always incorporate working with the poor, the elderly. When I left Saint Mary's, the superior general at the time told me, "I've never met anyone who can feel so comfortable at any level of society." I said, "Who are you talking about?" She said, "You are out there with the yard men, helping guys move furniture, and then in the evening you're catering a dinner party for the National Development Council and you feel comfortable." I said, "They are all the same people." It's just how I was raised. I have been magnificently blessed by God with a lot of talent. The greatest gift God has given me is to be a Sister of Providence. I thank God for it every day.

Q. How has the Congregation changed since you entered?

A. By light years, dramatically, but very positive. When I entered, the Second Vatican Council had not finished its work yet, and we were heading into the transition years. It was a very challenging and interesting time. That's what is so beautiful about community, you keep growing. There are opportunities to grow and develop, but you have to choose to do it. You can't get comfortable.

Q. What opportunities are here for women today?

A. There is opportunity for growth in your spiritual life, your professional life and your social life. You get exposure to keeping yourself updated and in touch with the real world. You can be spiritually and intellectually challenged all the time. Once people get to know us, they understand we have a serious lifestyle, but in a very pleasant way that gives you a lot of peace of heart. But, it isn't always easy. You work through it.

Q. Complete this sentence, please. Sister Cathy is ...

A. Sister Cathy is a poised, mature, well-balanced woman religious who works hard, plays hard and has a lot of fun. My life has been very fulfilling. And I've been blessed with many, many dear friends.

Q. What role does prayer have in your life today?

A. Primary. I get up at 3:30 or 4 every morning so I can get myself ready for the day and have at least an hour and a half to pray. In my present ministry, I go to daily Mass. I treasure it because for years I couldn't go because of my jobs. For six and a half years, I worked at the Diocese of Venice in the real estate department and I had to be at the office at 7:30. I didn't get to go to church even though I was working for the Catholic Church. But that's OK. My morning prayer often turned into night prayer which I often slept through. I am very grateful that I'm on a reverse schedule. If I didn't have my faith, I wouldn't have anything. If I didn't have my prayer time, I couldn't do what I do.

Q. How important is community lifestyle for you?

A. It is primary to be an active participant in community lifestyle. Currently, I'm living alone. But, I'm very much in touch with other sisters in Florida as time allows. For many years I lived in big institutions, then I lived at Rosary Hill (a Congregation residential community). I was in a large community setting in Indiana and Evanston (Illinois). It was a bit of an adjustment when I lived at Rosary Hill with four other sisters, but then I became a caregiver to a former member of the community and there were just the two of us but we often gathered with the others who lived in the same area. After she passed away, I became a consultant and worked out of my apartment. My community life has been a little more limited because I have had some very time-consuming jobs. But, I always gather with other sisters on major feasts or weekends, or when everyone can get together. I try to come to Saint Mary-of-the-Woods four times a year, plus the annual meeting and the area meetings that I have helped host. I think I'm very active within the community and I think it's very important.

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

A. Tremendous. First thing I learned about Mother Theodore was her saying that "after prayer and mortification, first comes common sense." I truly believe that. She has been a guiding light in my life since I entered the community. I was very excited and very much involved in her beatification and canonization. She has influenced a great deal what I do currently with the poor and the elderly because she ministered to the needs of both groups. I am a developer of farm-worker housing for farm workers and migrant families. I just finished coordinating the building of a 31-unit sustainable housing apartment complex for young mothers with infants who are transitioning from homeless shelters and for young working families who are in entry-level positions in their transition from living in the shelter.

Q. You mentioned that recently you were involved in a rather large building project. Can you share some more information about that project?

A. It's called Marian Manor. I developed a grant for rental assistance to help people move in and remain stable. We have a whole training program to assist them. They have to sign an agreement that they will participate in the whole program and become self-sufficient or have a desire to become self-sufficient. We can help them get their GED, or become documented citizens, if necessary. They can't just sit in the apartments. They either have to work or go to school. We have made arrangements with local establishments to help them with entry-level positions like hospitals where they can become housekeepers, cooks, maintenance workers, where they can be gainfully employed. We want them to become financially independent. Banks work with us, too, on how to take care of a checkbook and other everyday tasks. We also just received approval from the United States Department of Agriculture to start our farm-worker project. We will build 53 three- and four-bedroom homes starting in early February. I

worked on that for six years. There will be a community center and soccer field. This will be for “legally eligible” farm-worker families.

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

A. Much better. If I had planned it, it would never have happened. That’s the beauty of it. God has a plan for me and that is all I need to know. God has blessed me in so many ways with each opportunity that has come to me. Everywhere I work and everywhere I go, they know I am a Sister of Providence and they know my two tag lines: “Jesus never fails” and “God has a plan.”

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

A. My two families: the Sisters of Providence and my sister and brothers’ families. I used to be at the bottom of the line of nine, now I am at the top as of Nov. 7 when my brother passed away and my sister passed away in April.

Q. If you would have had an opportunity for a different lifestyle, what would it have been?

A. Probably get married and have a big family, but my nieces and nephews think that would be a tragedy because they refer to me as “Little Sarge.”

Q. What were you like as a child?

A. A devil. I was a tomboy. My sister was shy and retiring and I was the exact opposite.

Q. Of all the things you learned from your parents, what do you believe was the most valuable?

A. I think faith, love of God. My father was a daily communicant. We always begged him to get us up so we could go to church with him. We had a great family life. They gave us great values. My brothers’ and sister’s families are very, very close. We would do anything for one another.

Q. Do you have a particular philosophy about life that you could share?

A. I guess, love God and your neighbor and be sensitive and compassionate to each other.

Q. What gives you your most pleasure or satisfaction?

A. Making people happy, and caring for others. I love to entertain people in my home. I have a Christmas party. I cook dinner. We play cards. We sit down and talk. I am a Christmas person. The day after Thanksgiving the tree goes up, and it probably comes down in, oh, February.

Q. What gives you hope?

A. I have a lot of hope. Right now I hope and pray that people will become more realistic and sensitive to the needs of the poor. I do hope with this new Congress they will start getting realistic about the people they serve and not themselves. We have become a very selfish people. That’s pretty sad. But, I keep hoping and praying. I have a lot of hope for the Sisters of Providence. We have worked hard toward right relationships and I believe we have a future.

Q. When do you feel most alive?

A. Everyday! Whatever happens that day, I'm with it all the way. I don't get locked into a schedule.

Q. Any particular crafts, hobbies or interests outside of your ministries?

A. Oh, sure. Football, college and pros. My father was a big fan. At Christmas, when all the packages were open we would watch football all New Year's Day and on weekends. He loved golf. I tolerate golf, but I can't tolerate baseball. Too slow. Interestingly enough, I don't read a lot of books because I read so many things for work. Maybe when I retire, but that's not going to be for a while.

Q. What would be the one thing that you would most want people to remember about you?

A. That I was a loving, caring person, and just.

Q. What would you do if you didn't have to work?

A. Go crazy! My nieces and nephews asked my sister, "When is Aunt Cathy going to retire?" And, she said, "When she drops dead."

Q. Name two things you consider yourself to be good at.

A. Hard work and play. As I have said, I have been given many gifts and talents and, usually, if you ask me to do it, I can make it happen. One of my strengths is that I can organize very quickly, any kind of a project. I enjoy the challenge.

Q. What do you consider to be the most important event in your life so far?

A. Being a Sister of Providence. It's an ongoing event in many, many ways.

Q. What do you think is the secret to a good life?

A. Love of God, positive attitude, sensitivity to others' needs and enjoy many friendships.

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

A. Forget it! My focus would probably be one of gratitude for the many gifts in my life. It hasn't always been a piece of cake, but you go with the hills and valleys. You accept what you can, and you let go of what you can't change.

Quick thoughts:

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

A. The peace, quiet and the serenity of this holy ground.

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

A. Enjoying myself.

Q. On weekends, I love to ...

A. Play and pray. I'm rather active in my parish on the weekends.

Q. I'm passionate about ...

A. Cleanliness and order.

Q. Name one thing most people don't know about you.

A. Probably very little. I'm sort of an open book. If I have something on my mind, they know it.

Q. What the world needs now is ...

A. Love, mercy and justice.

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

A. I don't. I never grew up. I still have a lot of kid left in me.

Q. What is your biggest pet peeve?

A. People who don't clean up after themselves. It's almost an obsession with me.

Q. What is your least favorite chore?

A. Doing my nails.

Favorites

Food: Chicken and beef tenderloin.

TV show: Classic movies.

Recreation: Swimming, visiting with friends.

Hobby: Cooking.

Flowers and plants: Roses and geraniums.

Sport: College and NFL football.

Music/song: Classical/Let there be Peace on Earth.

Pizza topping: Supreme.

Holiday: Christmas.

Author: Joan Chittister, OSB.

Scripture passage: Let it be done to me according to your word.

Dessert: Chocolate anything.

Time of day: Early morning.

Season: Spring, new life.

Actor/actress: Kathryn Hepburn.

Saint: Mother Theodore Guerin

Least favorite food: Any food with garlic.

Least favorite course in school: Education.

Other

Current ministry: consultant

Years in community: 54

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