

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

A. I received a personal invitation from one of the teachers from Central Catholic High School (Fort Wayne, Ind.), Sister Mary Clare Fritsch. She was not my teacher. It was toward the end of my junior year. I can truthfully say I had really never thought of being a sister. Her little invitation was, "I think you would make a good sister. Come around and see me sometime." And so, I did, after school. I continued to drop in on her probably once a week, or once every two weeks, after class. I know this was toward the end of my junior year. Sometimes I would walk across the street with her to the convent. In my senior year, she continued to keep up this interest in me. It was really on her part. So, I gave it thought, and even though no one else in my family had considered religious life, or no one in my class that I knew was considering religious life, I really felt this is what God wanted me to do. It really wasn't what I wanted to do. In fact, I didn't tell my friends I was going to the convent. When they asked me what I was going to do after graduation. I would say, "Well, I may have to have my tonsils taken out." That was true. One doctor told me they needed to come out and one said they didn't. That's the way I would hedge the question about what I was going to do. I really did not share this with my friends. I hardly shared it with my big family. At one time at the table, my brother, Bud, said, "Well, Rita. Are you going to the convent or not?" I said, "I'd rather not talk about it." I did not come here enthusiastically. I did make a little bargain with God. In junior and senior year, I belonged to the Legion of Mary. In senior year, any of the girls that were in the Legion of Mary had a chance to crown the Blessed Mother on the first Friday of May. I was one of the three or four senior girls. I said, "God, if you really want me to be a Sister of Providence, let me get that slip and that will be a sure sign that this is what I'm supposed to do." And, I got the slip. It was like my fate was sealed. God spoke to me in that way. I guess God knew I was a hard nut to crack. And then, I had never been to Saint Mary-of-the-Woods. None of my family had ever been here. We were more acquainted with the School Sisters of Notre Dame. They are the ones who taught me in grades one through eight and I also had them in classes in high school. So we knew a lot more about them. I didn't want anyone in my family to bring me here. I felt if they did I probably would look at the place and turn right around and go back home with them. I came on the bus. I left Fort Wayne at 10 o'clock in the morning and I arrived in Terre Haute at 6 o'clock in the evening. Sister Mary Clare, who was studying at Marquette University that summer, asked Sister Mary Joan and Sister Maureen Therese to meet me at the bus station. They brought me over here to the Woods. When I came, it was a picnic night out in the Grove. I'll never forget, the first supper I enjoyed here was peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and lima beans. When we celebrated my 70th birthday and sort of "retirement," my family put on a little skit. Part of it was my arrival on that Friday and what we had for supper that night. Once I got here and was with all of the wonderful women who had entered, I never was homesick. There were people in my band who sat at the table and tears would be running down their cheeks because they were so homesick. That, to me, was another sure sign that this is where God wanted me to be. I came from a big family, 10 children. I had nieces and nephews. The last thing I did the day I left was to feed my little niece, Sandy, her breakfast.

Q. Whatever Sister Mary Clare said to you must have made an impression. Do you recall any of her message?

A. If I remember correctly, in those first meetings I think she asked me a lot about my family. She wanted to feel me out about how they would accept my entering the convent. I knew that neither Mom nor Dad would object. I'm sure I had lots of curious questions about this new life I was contemplating embracing. Sister Mary Clare was most helpful in getting all of the clothes that I needed (some things were hand-made). She even bought the 2 pairs of black oxfords that were on the clothing list. I said I was not going in to any shoe store to buy "old ladies' shoes." She told me I could ask her any question. One I wanted to ask and never did was, "Will I have to shave my head when I become a novice?" I could tell that she loved being a sister and teacher. She shared some stories of her community life, and she assured me I would be joined by other young women who would become my friends.

Q. You said religious life is not what you wanted to do, but you believe it is what God wanted you to do, right?

A. I really felt that way. It held no attraction for me. Some people say they wanted to be a sister from the time they were in first grade or they knew. We used to help the nuns a lot, and I didn't dislike them, but I just thought their way of life was so very, very different. I didn't know how I would ever fit into that. I remember one of my uncles saying to me, "I think it's great, Rita, that you're going to the convent, but I don't know how you are going to wear all of those clothes." I didn't know that either! I can say that I really was happy and content from the very first weeks in the novitiate. The thought of going home never entered my mind. I never worried about being sent home. Some did. Like if they broke a rule or something, some thought they would get sent home. That didn't bother me, either. It was just like this is where God really wants me to be. My oldest brother and his wife took me to the bus station, and he said, "Well, Rita, I'll be down to get you in about six weeks." But I did not have any inclination to go back home. I cried the whole night long the night before I left. I was going to go say goodbye to the pastor at our small country parish. We knew him well. I was such a mess that I couldn't go. I was a basket case. You know the reason why? In those years we knew when we entered it was like a complete severance from family. We could not go home unless our mother or father would be seriously ill or had died. I thought, "What joy would there be in going home at a time like that?" I say that women who enter today give up cars and apartments and condos and all of that, but we gave up, in that era, our families. We thought we would never, ever, go home again. So that was a great sacrifice for me.

Q. When you said this is not what you had envisioned for yourself, what did you have in mind for yourself?

A. I figured I would get a job. I knew I wouldn't go on to college. We could not have afforded it. The time was just following The Depression. It was just hard enough to pay the \$20 tuition the four years (1940-1944) I was in high school at Central Catholic. We didn't pay any grade school tuition. I just assumed I would get a job and probably marry.

My six older siblings had all married. I really didn't think about that. I had gone out on dates, but I wasn't seriously dating anyone. I thought I would probably follow what my sisters and brothers had done.

Q. Based on your experience, why would a woman today find the Sisters of Providence an attractive choice?

A. There are countless opportunities if you are interested in doing good for others, if you're interested in making a difference in people's lives. I believe, in our community, people's gifts and talents are used to the best advantage. When I think about all of the different ministries right now, it makes me very happy that people can use their gifts. We have sisters involved with Hispanics, certainly with the financially challenged, people like Sister Helen Vinton down in Louisiana. There are countless opportunities. We still have sisters who are teachers in the traditional classroom, and that's great. Some are working in immigration, health care, as chaplains, as advocates. Any talent or gift could be used in our community, and people are encouraged to use their gifts. I think of all that we've done in the Terre Haute area and West Terre Haute for the financially challenged, a real outreach in the last 10 or 15 years, is making a difference in our own neighborhood.

Q. What do you value most about your ministry opportunities?

A. They're varied. Right now, as a retired sister, I can choose what I feel I am most interested in. When St. Ann Clinic was going to open in Terre Haute (Ind.), I became involved there and I have stayed on there. I volunteer every week. At first, I went twice a week. Now, I go once a week. I've seen it expand tremendously and I see all of the good it does for all of the people who are very poor and have no insurance, no Medicare or Medicaid. They are getting excellent care, they are getting medications. The volunteers there are marvelous. More recently, I've become involved in Helping Hands, an offshoot of something we started here, a clothing co-op, an ecumenical effort by the women and men in the West Terre Haute area. Again, all of the volunteers there do a tremendous job. I'm happy to be part of that. I was in elementary education and administration for 32 years. I can say that I enjoyed those years. Being a principal and a superior was very difficult. Under obedience, I was given that. I never would have chosen that, but I did it to the best of my ability. I still keep in touch with some of the students I taught. My teaching and my administrative experience were in Indiana and Illinois. I found the triple job of being principal, superior and teacher not an easy task. I did that in two places. The superior was in charge of the house, the convent. In those years, you had to ask permission for everything. The superior made all of the decisions: what you did, the schedules, doctor appointments, finding rides for sisters, finding companions for trips. There were a lot of small tasks. I cared for my mother for a year and a half before her death at age 92. Caring for my mom really prepared me for my future ministries. I also did pastoral work for eight and a half years in parishes, and then I worked in health care here as a coordinator of services for four years, and then I worked in Guerin College Preparatory School in River Grove, Ill., in the office for three years. I also was on the Peace with Justice Committee for a number of years.

Q. Let's talk about your involvement in prison ministry. That is really important to you. How did you get started?

A. I started in February 2000, so I am in my 11th year. This, too, was at the request of someone else. It's like God gets to me through other people. Sister Camille D'Arienzo, a Mercy sister from New York, was the first to visit with David Hammer in a prison in Pennsylvania. He had written a letter to the Cherish Life circle which she started. He didn't address it to anyone, but because she served as chairperson, the letter landed on her desk. He asked that someone would pray for him and for his victim and come and be able to visit him because he had an execution date that was just a few months away. She tried to get someone to go. It was around Christmas and no one could go. They were all too busy. She had a friend go with her to visit David after Christmas. She was ready to do a second visit with him but he been moved to a prison in Colorado. The night before she was to go, the chaplain called and said, "Don't come, he's been moved to Terre Haute (federal death row). That was in July of 1999. So, she met Sister Diane Ris (former General Superior), and she said, "I visited a prisoner once and he's going to be in your area. If I ever came, could I stay at your motherhouse? Sister Diane said certainly. She and a traveling companion stayed here. They came over for breakfast and were with Sister Dorothy Hucksoll at a table. She mentioned why she and her friend were visiting. She said she hoped there would be a Sister of Providence who would be willing to visit with David on a regular basis because she would not be able to make many trips here. Sister Dorothy got information from the prison chaplain about David Hammer and she called me in February, she could tell me a little about him. She said she wondered if I would visit him. I said I would have to think about that. I gave it a couple of days and said I would. I went before the month was out, February 2000.

Q. How many times have you been to the prison to visit with David?

A. He probably could tell us because he keeps track of those things. He said to me years ago, "You have visited me more than any person has ever visited, more than my mother ever visited me. David has been in prison more than half of his life, so he's had opportunity for visitors. Right now, I visit twice a month.

Q. He was within days of execution, right?

A. Oh, yes, several times. The last time was five days. At that time, we could visit all day long with him. Sister Camille came and stayed with us. We did spend a lot of time then.

Q. What kind of impact does this have on you?

A. It has certainly made me understand that all of these people who are in prison, especially the men and women on death row, all have the same basic needs that any human being does. I marvel at the strength they have to live under the harshest of conditions and restrictions. I also marvel at the way they really look out for one another, at least the men on death row look out for one another. That doesn't mean everyone does

that. But, they form some bonds of friendship with certain men and they do nice things, like celebrate birthdays. They are ingenious on how they can think of small things they can do for one another to make life a little more humane. And, I write to a number of prisoners and try to remember some of them on their birthdays. We have been able, also, to get other sisters to visit other men on death row. We also offer hospitality to prisoners' families at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods when we have room.

Q. You seem to have a strong commitment to justice issues. How did you acquire that?

A. My desire for justice comes from my dad. He was a man who could not see people treated unjustly. He was a hard worker. He farmed, and he also worked at International Harvester. At International Harvester, when he saw men being let go with many years of service and they hired others so they wouldn't have to pay them as much, when he saw safety regulations being violated, he decided along with about four other men that they needed a union there. Dad and these other guys were the ones who got a union organized at International Harvester in Fort Wayne. A lot of those things were cleared up, but those were very tough years. It was hard to get it going, but they didn't give up.

Q. Do have a defining moment as a Sister of Providence?

A. I think the fact that, once I came, I knew this is where I belonged because it was not something I really wanted to do. The fact that I've been in community 66 years and consider these years very happy years, good years, and that I wouldn't want it any differently, speaks to the fact that God's message to me was loud and clear.

Q. What role does prayer have in your life?

A. It is my lifeblood. It keeps me going. I always have time in the morning for private prayer, then I pray with a small group after that for about a half hour, then in the afternoon I join the community in Owens Hall for vespers. I usually walk every morning too, and that kind of is an extension of my prayer. I pray for certain people who have asked for prayers. As I pass the Grotto, I remember all the sick and suffering, those in health care, and other people who have asked for special prayer. Other times during the day, I offer little prayers like "God, help me with this" or "be with this person." It's just like a nice, easy conversation with God throughout the day. It's not like I'm walking around praying all the time. There are certain times you are by yourself and your thoughts do turn to God, or turn to people who need help. I try to practice in the morning about 20 minutes of contemplative sitting, being in the presence of God.

Q. How important is the community lifestyle that religious congregations have?

A. I really would never, ever choose to live alone. Now, I know there are people who must live alone, but, to me, being part of a community is very, very important. I learn a lot from others. I enjoy being with others. I enjoy the support they give to me and I can give to them. I enjoy working on committees with people. I'm grateful for the wonderful

leadership I feel we've had throughout the years in our community. I'm grateful for the opportunities that have been given to me as a community member.

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

A. I have great devotion to Saint Mother Theodore. I say a prayer to her every day. David Hammer and I pray it together when I visit him. My sisters have really taken on this devotion to Saint Mother Theodore too. She's an important person, a great intercessor for us all. I love her very human way of reacting with the sisters when she was living and the wise advice that she passed on to us in her "Journals and Letters." She was so down to Earth. She was a woman for her time and for all time, certainly. Those are the titles of our two books about her. She went into Terre Haute and talked to the editor of the newspaper and did business. That was unheard of for women in those days to take that kind of role.

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

A. Well, I just try to live each day to the best of my ability. I just finished a retreat and I prayed for a renewed trust that God would give me what I need each day and for the remaining years of my life. To me, that means I'm getting older. I have aches and pains that I didn't have even a year ago. I know that things could happen to me that have happened to other people who are much younger than I. That could happen to me. I would love to die with my boots on. That might not be the plan that is mapped out for me. So, I pray that I will have enough trust or enough hope that God will give me what I need. Maybe not what I want, but for what I need for this day and for whatever will come in remaining years.

Q. Is there anything you might have done differently in your life if you would have known then what you know now?

A. Not really. I am not a person to look back and regret. I've had some really hard things to do and that brought out some gifts in me that I didn't know that I had. I am grateful for that. But, to say I would want to go back and change something, no. Of all of the things that I am grateful for, one of the most significant is the Second Vatican Council. It really impacted on how we live religious life today. I thought many of the things we did were stupid, but we went along with them. Everything had to go through the superior. You couldn't write a letter without permission. There were so many restrictions. The habit also: why swath us in so many layers? Why have 106 inches around our waist when we might be 26 inches? Vatican II was a wonderful breakthrough for religious women and for the whole church. I think we were liberated to become the kind of women we are today.

Q. Sister Rita Clare is ...

A. Friendly, dependable and loyal.

Q. What were you like as a child?

A. I think I was pretty docile. We were obedient. I loved to play outside. I had to help with house work because we were a big family. I loved to sing. I sang in the children's choir and then the adult choir. I hated to dust. I used to pay my sister to do the dusting I was supposed to do. I would give her 10 cents to dust the stairwell.

Q. Anything people would like to know about your family?

A. The person that I most admire in all of my life was my mom. She was an only child herself. She raised 10 children. She cared for her mother for a number of years who had memory loss at that time. She played the organ for 50 years and directed the adult choir at St. Louis Parish. We have a very large family and we're pretty close, all of us. I enjoy spending time with my family, especially at holiday times.

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

A. I think I learned the necessity to do the best I could with whatever I was given to do, to be honest, to treat people fairly, to have a good time.

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

A. Use the gifts and talents God has given you to the best of your ability and be content with who you are.

Q. What gives you hope?

A. The Sisters of Providence give me hope with all of the wonderful ministries in which they are involved. Just the variety of ways we are reaching out to people, especially reaching out to the poor.

Q. When do you feel most energized?

A. When I am with friends, or family, and we're either having a good time, or having a good discussion. I like to talk about issues in the community, and the church.

Q. Do you have a favorite vacation spot?

A. There are a lot of lakes in northern Indiana. I've been to many of them with family and friends. It's wonderful to be around water. I always enjoy that because it's relaxing, just a fine time. I've been there with Sisters of Providence and with family.

Q. Any particular crafts, hobbies or interests away from your ministries?

A. I like to read. I like to walk. Those are probably the two things I do the most. I read novels. I like biographies. I like movies too.

Q. If you could have three wishes granted to you, what might they be?

A. That we would have peace in our world, that hunger would be wiped out, and that the Sisters of Providence will be able to carry on with the work begun back in 1840, service to God's people.

Q. What is the kindest thing anyone has ever done for you?

A. There have been so many, I could not begin to single out one. All kinds of people reach out to help whenever I need help. When I am sick, there are people there to help me. When I forgot my check when I went to the grocery and had two big baskets full of groceries, the checkout gal was so sweet. With car trouble, having a person stop to help you. There are more people who are kind and willing to help than there ones who don't.

Q. If you could add two commandments to the original 10, what would they be?

A. To me, the great commandment love God and love your neighbor as yourself sums it all up. If everyone did that, we'd have a wonderful world.

Q. Would you do anything differently today if you just learned that Jesus would be returning later today?

A. I doubt it. I probably would get rid of some stuff that I keep saying ... I would just get a big black bag and materials that I have saved, I would just pitch it. I've always said, "God, give me two hours to clear out my room of unnecessary things."

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

A. Love.

Q. What energizes you spiritually?

A. Prayer, the good example of others, the history of the Sisters of Providence and all of the good that has been done through the years, the good example that I have seen in my own family of true compassion, love and care.

Quick thoughts ...

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

A. The beauty of this campus. I love being outdoors whenever I can just to enjoy nature.

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

A. Reading.

Q. On weekends, I love to ...

A. Sleep a little later.

Q. I am passionate about ...

A. Peace and justice.

Q. One thing most people don't know about you ...

A. That I once, in full habit, swung across a ravine on a thick rope to the other side, and then swung back.

Q. What the world needs now ...

A. More people who want to spend their lives in service to others.

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

A. Kids don't worry about stuff, being stress free.

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

A. I'm happy to see you.

Q. What is your biggest pet peeve?

A. People who don't clean up after themselves.

Q. Have you ever met anyone famous?

A. Yes, Father Roy Bourgeois, who started the School of the Americas Watch.

Q. What is your least favorite chore?

A. Dusting.

Favorites

Website: Sisters of Providence

Food: Pasta

Flower/plant: I love all flowers

Book: So many: Three Cups of Tea, Jan Karon series; Illuminated Life by Joan Chittister, OSB

Movie: Giant

TV show: Of the past: Mary Tyler Moore Show, Bob Newhart, Cosby Show, 60 Minutes

Vacation spot: Lakes in northern Indiana

Recreation: Reading, movies, Rummikubs, Walking

Hobby: Trying new recipes

Sport: Basketball

Music/song: Classical

Animal: Giraffe

Pizza topping: Cheese

Quote: "Be the change you wish to see." – Ghandi

Holiday: Christmas

Author: Joan Chittister, OSB

Scripture passage: Act justly, love tenderly, walk humbly with your God

Dessert: Ice cream

Time of day: Early morning

Season: Autumn

Actor/actress: Meryl Streep

Comic strip: Zits

Childhood activity: Playing school, singing at home as family on Friday nights

Hero/heroine: My mom, Lillian Ternet Gerardot; my dad, Henry E. Gerardot

Course in school: English/literature

Saint: Mother Theodore Guerin

Sinner: David Paul Hammer

My least favorite food: Parsnips

My least favorite course in school: Geometry

Worst movie I've ever seen: Tend to forget these or walk out before the end

If I weren't an SP, I'd be: Hopefully doing work to end world hunger

Other information

Years in ministry: 66

Current ministry: volunteer

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