

In the Name of the Father

Tri-City nuns quietly serving the community in many ways

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Sister Mary Ferguson approached an elderly woman reclining on an adjustable bed at Lourdes Medical Center in Pasco.

"Feeling better today?" she asked.

The patient, recovering from a bout of shingles, rattled off a list of complaints. Her right eye twitched. The television was too loud. She had an allergic reaction to a certain medication. She even lifted her sleeve to show a rash as rosy as her sweatshirt and pants.

"At least you're color coordinated," Sister Mary said, eliciting a laugh. For a moment, the patient had something to smile about.

As one of three chaplains at the Catholic hospital, Sister Mary, 81, has comforted the sick and injured there for 16 years.

"Some just want to talk, tell you their life story. Some people don't want to talk at all. But I've never had anyone turn a cold shoulder," she said.

Across the Columbia River in Kennewick, Sister Frances Watte, 51, critiqued her fourth-grade students as they calculated math problems on the blackboard.

"Make that 2 so it does not look like a zigzag, please. ... Good, that's fine. ... What's missing here? The answer's not just one-fifth."

Her attention to detail and good behavior have earned her a reputation as one of the stricter teachers at St. Joseph's Catholic School, a trait her students respect.

"I think it's good they're making it stricter on us because it's making us do better in school," said Brett Bergum, who has had four sisters as teachers.

Nine Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet (pronounced Ka RON da let) live communally in the Tri-Cities. They call themselves sisters, not nuns, to differentiate between their public lifestyle and cloistered orders, but share the same vows of chastity, poverty and obedience to God.

Their work includes teaching schoolchildren, counseling drug addicts and teen moms and ministering to the sick, elderly and poor.

"Patients love them," said Dr. Laurie Evans, a surgeon at the Pasco hospital for five years. "I just had a gal today comment on how nice it was that one of the sisters came and prayed with her before she left. ... It's just nice in this day and age to have someone in the hospital who will come and hold your hand and tell you it will be OK."

Movies such as *The Sound of Music* and *Sister Act* may have fostered stigmas of nuns as puritanical, comic and, perhaps, prone to bursting out in song. But the Sisters of Saint Joseph defy stereotypes.

"I feel some people have us in a little box," said Sister Kathleen Mary McCarthy, assistant administrator of the hospital's mission and community relations department.

Lift the lid of that little box, and what emerges is a diverse group drawn together by love for all things good and holy. They like to think of themselves as quiet reminders of faith and virtue in a troubled world.

"We want to make the invisible God visible," said Sister Kathleen.

The Sisters of St. Joseph congregation originated in 1650 in LePuy-Velay, France. Several sisters came to America in 1836 and opened a school for the deaf in St. Louis. Two convents were established, one in Cahokia, which closed in 1855, the other in Carondelet, a village on the outskirts of St. Louis. Early generations of sisters founded schools and hospitals throughout the country, including the Pasco hospital in 1916. Today, some 2,300 Sisters of St. Joseph live throughout the world.

Religious life has changed since most of the sisters working in the Tri-Cities took their vows.

Perhaps the most visible difference is the sisters' contemporary clothing: dresses, blouses paired with skirts or pants or suits. The order's traditional black-and-white habit - a style developed from the common dresses worn by widows in 17th-century France - has been history for about 30 years. Under Vatican Council II (1962-1965), habits became optional, sisters could keep or revert to their birth names and the code of silence for those in training was lifted.

Sister Robert Joseph, 75, came to Kennewick 25 years ago and visits the sick and elderly in their homes. She chose to keep her religious name, which was also her father's name, after Vatican II and has adhered more closely to the order's traditions than have many sisters.

While others don a palette of colors, Sister Robert wears only shades of navy, gray and black and covers her hair with a veil.

"I probably would still be in the habit if I hadn't thought all the sisters were changing," she said. "I still believe in being recognizable as a sister."

Other sisters are less nostalgic for the old ways.

Sister Mary became Sister Frances Joseph upon entering a convent in 1937. For 40 years, she was known by the same name as her father and brother. (Taking a traditionally male name was not uncommon.)

She recalls sewing her habits, which were about four yards around but "seemed like 40."

"You didn't buy them off the rack. And I wasn't a good seamstress," she said.

After Vatican II, Sister Mary switched back to her baptismal name and exchanged her habit for store-bought clothes.

"I'm the same person whether I'm in the habit or not," she said.

Still, she has some fond memories of the cloth. Once while visiting a poor neighborhood of San Diego, Sister Mary was approached by a young girl who had been playing in the street with her friends and took notice of the religious garments.

"She broke herself away from the group and planted herself in front of me and said, 'Are you God?' "

Even without their habits, the sisters are frequently recognized. They wear crosses, medallions or other accessories as symbols of their faith.

Sister Cristine Marie Robertson, 44, wears her father's wedding ring, a gold band inscribed with "'Til death to us part," on her left ring finger.

"It's a symbol that I'm married to God," said the first-grade teacher.

She recalled kneeling at a church altar when she was in the second grade. "I said, 'I vow I will be a sister of St. Joseph someday.' Little did I know."

Becoming closer to God meant leaving relatives and friends, and some sisters had no family support.

"I didn't expect to ever be able to go home again," said Sister Mary. She was relieved to find that periodic vacations and visits were allowed at the training convent in Los Angeles.

But five years passed before Sister Ann Josephine Boilard, 80, was allowed to return to her family's home in San Diego.

"I was quite homesick when I first left home," she remembered. "But you adjust. You make friends and get involved in study and the training."

Sisters Esther and Margaret Polacci, who moved to Pasco in September, are siblings. Sister Esther, 60, consoles patients at the hospital, while Sister Margaret, 62, teaches parenting classes in Pasco and Connell and counsels drug addicts.

Both have lived in the Tri-Cities before. Sister Esther was principal at St. Joseph's in the 1970s, and Sister Margaret worked as a nurse at Lourdes. But this is the first time they've lived in the same town at the same time. They have a third sister who lives in a convent in San Diego.

They worried how their mother would react to their decision to pursue spiritual life.

"Mama really wanted grandchildren," Sister Margaret explained. "She was a mama all the way."

But their mother stood by them and their brother ultimately gave her the grandchildren she desired.

None of the nine sisters ever regretted her decision to respond to the call.

"Once in a while, you get this 'Oh, I wish I were a mother,' " Sister Ann Constance, 60, said whimsically.

Each sister's salary goes to the order, which provides stipends for living provisions, clothing and other needs.

They share three convents. Each home has a small chapel and a different style.

Sisters Kathleen, the hospital missions leader, and Margaret live in an old-style convent next to St. Patrick's Catholic School in Pasco. The two-story brick building has 14 bedrooms, each with a single bed, dresser and nightstand. Years ago, all the rooms were occupied by sisters who taught at St. Patrick's. Sister Kathleen lived among them when she was principal in the 1960s. But the school hasn't had a sister on its staff since 1992. Off the main entrance are small parlors that were used to entertain visitors. The visitors weren't allowed in the living quarters. Today, guests are permitted wherever the sisters allow them, and the parlors collect dust.

The old-style convent's quaint chapel with stained glass windows depicting Jesus, Mary and four saints hasn't been used for services for years. Regimented prayers are also part of the past. Today, the sisters see prayer as a personal responsibility and no room is too formal or casual for worship.

Sisters Mary, Esther and Ann Josephine, who transfers hospital records to microfilm, live in a five-bedroom yellow house across the street from Lourdes Medical Center. It looks mostly like other houses in the neighborhood, but a room overlooking Volunteer Park has been converted into a small chapel where they sometimes read or pray.

A one-story brick building next to St. Joseph's Catholic School is home to sisters Frances, Ann Constance, Robert and Cristine.

"Alleluias" resonate through the attached chapel at 6:30 a.m. five days a week during the school year when the Rev. Richard Sedlacek, pastor of St. Joseph's Catholic Church, leads public Mass.

Dorothy Costello, 77, of Kennewick, has attended the early worship since sisters first occupied the convent in 1965. She's among a small group that prays with the sisters before Mass.

"There's an intimacy there. We've almost become a community ourselves," she said.

A rich perfume of roses and lilacs permeates the back yard, where songbirds feast on seed hung from birch branches. A 2-foot-high white statue of the Virgin Mary, one of many religious icons that decorate the convent, stands in a ring of rocks near a homemade greenhouse.

Inside, a long hallway leads to seven bedrooms. Each has a private bath - a nicety the Pasco convents lack.

Free time is usually spent in the community room, where five recliners are arranged facing a television. There they grade papers, do needle work, exercise or watch favorite shows like Jeopardy, Wheel of Fortune or 60 Minutes.

A rented video of You've Got Mail, a romantic comedy about two bookstore owners who build a relationship on the Internet, was next to the videocassette recorder. It was a subtle reminder that the pious can be up to date and down to earth.

"We're not saints, although we try to be like saints," Sister Ann Constance said. "We're just regular people. We have the same emotions and likes and dislikes as anybody else." Sister Kathleen concurred.

"I think some people are happily surprised when they see how human we are," she said. "I think when our humanity shows, we're a sign of hope."