

It's What We Do

A collection of stories about the Sisters of St. Benedict of Ferdinand, Indiana | 2011



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A Message From Our Prioress



Sure, we Ferdinand Benedictines pray a lot. Together. Alone. With others. If you saw all the prayer requests we receive every day, you clearly would know how much prayer is needed.

However, we do a lot more than pray. We minister to people in all sorts of ways you may not realize. And we smile a lot, too. And hopefully bring plenty of smiles to those people we're around every day. I think we do — just take a look at the pictures in this magazine. Better yet, immerse yourself in the stories of our ministries and you will get a better picture of what our community is all about.

That's the reason you are receiving this special issue. It's a bit different from the twice-a-year *Seek.Pray.Share.* publication you normally get. We wanted a piece that focuses entirely on what we do. Be it in classrooms, parish centers, hospitals, or at special retreats, programs, or celebrations. Or even on a soccer field, or believe it or not, in Uganda. We touch thousands of people in many more venues than these, but this will give you an inkling of just what we do.

We are constantly asked what we're up to, and we try to answer as best we can with frequent stories on our website (www.thedome.org) and in our various publications. But we thought it a good time to compile some of the best of our website stories from over the past year or so into a printed publication that's a little more permanent. And we thought the title to be so appropriate — *It's What We Do.*

We hope you enjoy reading about what we do as much as we enjoy doing what we do, every day, everywhere, and no matter who we are with.

As always, thanks for your interest and support.
Take care.

S. Kristine Anne Harpenau OSB

Sister Kristine Anne Harpenau, Prioress

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Articles by Greg Eckerle,
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Sister Sarah Yungwirth leads with her dance moves, and the children follow, at a Christian Song Sing-A-Long at St. Raphael School in Louisville.

On the cover: Sister Mary Francis shares a laugh with a student in her computer applications class.



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Sister gets her kicks as boys' soccer coach

Sister Kathy Cash knows it's a bit unusual to be the only female coach at Louisville's all-male Trinity High School.

And she expects a few of the kids at each summer's first freshman soccer practice to do a double-take and "look at me weird, thinking 'is she really the coach?'" Until they see her bust a move on a ball during a drill. Or hear her correcting a player immediately when he uses the wrong technique.

Sister Kathy, 28, fell in love with soccer in the 7th grade, played throughout high school and college, and was named an Academic All-American at Brescia University.

"When explaining a drill to my freshman players, I'll step in and demonstrate," she says, "so they'll know my skills are there. You can see the admiration, like 'oh, she really does know how to play this game.'"

And she knows how to coach it, too.

That was apparent during a recent home match against Covington Catholic. She was continually sharing instruction, encouragement, strategy, and sometimes frustration, as her squad started slowly but eventually rolled to a 4-0 victory.

"I'm losing my midfielders!"

"You're a forward – move up!"

"Settle that ball!"

"Open up your hips when kicking!"

"Hey, you two, get serious!"

"Beautiful through-ball!"

Above: Sister Kathy Cash, coach of the Louisville Trinity High School boys' freshman soccer team, leads the squad in prayer before a match.

She agonized on missed shots, knelt on the ground in exasperation at times, but easily high-fived players coming off the field or on the sidelines, and yelled a euphoric “yes!” with a fist pump after Trinity’s first goal.

She thought such soccer excitement was gone from her life after college graduation. She never thought she could be both a sister and a coach. But her formation director thought it possible.

After landing the job, Sister Kathy was concerned that her players wouldn’t treat her with the same respect as a male coach. It was really never a problem.

And the school didn’t have a second thought, either, about a female coach – since they recruited her for the position after learning of her soccer background.

“They thought it was pretty funny, actually,” laughs Sister Kathy. “They thought it was a great way to show diversity and that everybody’s equal.”

And even though most of her fellow sisters didn’t know much about soccer, they’ve been fully supportive, and inquisitive.

“They’ll ask what it’s like, how I do a certain thing, and how is the team doing,” she says. “They think it’s pretty cool. You know it’s just one more way for me to be out there ministering to these guys.”

Sister Kathy admits some players looked at her strange when she said we’re going to stop and pray first before a match. But it’s accepted, and expected, now.

“If I forget, one of them will say, ‘but we didn’t pray,’” she laughs. “They recognize there’s something important about that. If nothing else, at least I have 19 kids now thinking about praying.”

Her favorite part of coaching is watching players doing something they love.

“Even when I’m trying to correct them, it’s something

they’re choosing to do, so we’re always having a good time with it. The great moments are seeing kids who could barely kick the ball at first eventually dribble around somebody, or deliver a pass, or make a goal.”

As a Ferdinand Benedictine, Sister Kathy thinks she’s “generally calmer, and probably more positive with my players because of that.” She sees many coaches screaming at players and blaming them for mistakes, but “I try to look at players as somebody who’s going to get better, and to look at a situation and figure out how to make it better rather than yelling at a kid and making him mad.”

So it’s not surprising players seek her out for needed words of kindness and encouragement. “I try to be tough but loving, and I think my players see that.”

Tomas Garza, a Trinity sophomore who played for Sister Kathy last year, says, “She’s worked harder for respect, and she stays on task. I learned discipline from her.

“I didn’t see her as a sister, but as a coach. As for the prayer, that’s sort of routine since this is a Catholic school, but it was more special in a way because she’s a sister.”



Sister Kathy Cash, a former collegiate soccer player, shows she still has the touch around the soccer ball.



Tena Karcher and Joni Pigg volunteer in the monastery bakery.

Volunteer hears heaven

Tena Karcher, part of a volunteer group from southern Illinois that's generously helped at the monastery a few times the past two years, loves to sing the praises of the sisters.

But maybe not as much as she loves to hear the sisters sing.

"I can't forget the morning prayers! WOW!" she wrote in an e-mail after their group of 22 adults and children volunteered at the monastery for two days. "When the sisters sing, that's what Heaven will sound like.

"We are all still floating in the clouds from our visit, we love it there!! Thank you for allowing us to come and offer our service."

Many thanks go out to the enthusiastic group, whose members volunteered in the bakery, the crypt, on the grounds, and in various places inside the monastery.

Sister Mary Philip Berger, volunteer director, said, "They did a lot of baking, cleaning, and yardwork. They love our place, and we certainly love having them here."

Writes Karcher, "Some of the reasons we love it there are the peace, joy, and love that radiates from each sister we speak to or pass in the hall or on the grounds. The monastery is such a peaceful place, one can't help but feel the presence of God there in the beauty of the grounds, the sisters, and the monastery itself.

"Each time we come to volunteer our relationships with the sisters deepen, and it feels like home to us. We are hooked! A lot of our youth have a prayer partner there, and those relationships are very precious

"Our daughter is 18, and when she receives a letter from her sister, Sister Mary Carmen Spayd, she is so excited and wants to keep that relationship going. One of the youth that went last time said on her Facebook page, "it was quite simply the best experience of my life, can't wait to go back!"

A volunteer group from John Paul the Great High School in Jasper, Indiana, also helped at the monastery for a couple of hours recently. Angie Fleck, a teacher, brought four students and her boy friend to help rake leaves and make cookies. Fleck, a former student at Marian Heights Academy, teaches religion and is in charge of student activities at the school.

Build stability, not walls or garbage

Sister Vivian Ramos, OSB, was a good choice to speak about stability at a recent Benedictine Oblate meeting at the monastery.

Her father was in military service when she grew up, so their family moved often. “I built walls, not roots,” said Sister Vivian, “because I didn’t want to be hurt when we moved again.”

But she’s learned that when she strays, God reels her back in.

“That’s how God manifests stability in my life,” she said. “Stability is about relationships – with God, with each other, and with myself. I can’t run and hide from myself.”

Sister Vivian fervently believes that we find God through each other. And that daily prayer is needed to maintain her relationship with God. “I can get through the day easier if I have prayer,” she said.

She also encouraged the audience of 28 to not to try to do

everything, saying that God comes first, then everything else will come, too.

Sister Vivian, a veterinarian in Evansville, Indiana, also shared a poignant tale of her encounter with a fellow Filipino, a homeless man struggling to find his way. After a brief conversation, the man said, “I am garbage,” and began to walk away. Sister Vivian immediately responded, no, we are brethren, and further comforted him. She said he stood up straighter, and walked away more positively.

In the end, it’s about reaching out to each other in the moment, being willing to start that relationship. The stability will follow. Sister Vivian admits it’s hard, it takes time, but says don’t be afraid of taking that first step.

Sister Vivian Ramos (far left), OSB, laughs while talking with an Oblate during a recent presentation at the monastery.





Praying without words

Sister Maria Tasto knows full well the challenges facing many of us lay people when it comes to prayer.

“Most of us don’t know how to pray,” she said at a recent workshop, An Introduction to Centering Prayer, attended by 15 at The Lodge in Jasper, Indiana. “We don’t know what to say. Centering Prayer is great for that. It’s simply consenting to give your prayer time over to God, and letting Him do the rest.”

In fact, the workshop agenda was titled “Praying without Words.”

“God gives us strength to let go of troubling thoughts. Part of this is consenting to be healed.”

Her co-presenter was Jim Birk, who is a cancer survivor, a member of the Indiana University Simon Cancer Center board of directors, and a Centering Prayer practitioner. He is becoming a certified presenter of Centering Prayer and will facilitate the follow-up sessions of the workshop.

“I had cancer twice,” said Birk. “Meditation calmed me, but a relationship with God was missing.”

Through Centering Prayer, Birk found that relationship, as Sister Maria did long ago. The two explained the method, then gave the group two opportunities to practice.

Centering Prayer is a quiet, reflective, non-denominational prayer form grounded in the Christian tradition.

“It’s a prayer of faith, that God is within us,” said Sister Maria. “It’s a prayer of intention, to consent to God’s presence and action in our lives. That is what changes us. We don’t know how God will transform us. But if we’re open, it will happen.”

Birk feels he has become more tolerant, more deliberate, and calmer in his decision-making since he started practicing Centering Prayer daily over two years ago.

“There is a power in Centering Prayer that can be tapped into. All we have to do is consent.”

Sister Maria says a key part of the practice is letting go of one’s thoughts, although it’s a misconception that one has to eliminate our thoughts. So we can listen to God in the silence, she says, we let our thoughts come and go. We do not become engaged with our thoughts for this short time of prayer. Indeed, as thoughts surface during your quiet Centering Prayer time, she says there “is a healing process going on.”

“God gives us strength to let go of troubling thoughts. Part of this is consenting to be healed.”

Gladys Johanning of Jasper, who has practiced Centering Prayer periodically for years, said it was a “dream and a prayer come true” to be at the workshop.

She said, “Centering Prayer is truly a healing prayer. One change it has brought in my life – as past experiences come up in my mind, especially if they are hurtful ones, I don’t dwell on them, I give them to the Lord. I ask the Lord to take it.

“The workshop was excellent. With Sister Maria, it’s just her presence, you can tell she’s close to God. She’s a wonderful example of Christ. She is spoken highly of. And I was very impressed with Jim Birk. He is very down-to-earth.”

In their calm, reassuring voices, Sister Maria and Birk naturally put the listener at ease.

When they say part of our hurdle in life is putting so much negative pressure on ourselves, I know they’re right.

When they say we know God is within us, but we don’t take it seriously, I know they’re right.

And when they say we as humans so often forget our basic goodness, and that when we accept our basic goodness, we will make a quantum leap in our spiritual journeys, I know they’re right.

You can see it in their eyes. And you can feel it in their words.

It’s as simple as the basis for Centering Prayer, which is the wisdom saying of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount:

“When you pray, go to your inner room, close the door and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you.” (Mt. 6:6)



Singing is believing for Sister Catherine and her students

There's probably not a better music teacher for the song "When I Believe" than Sister Catherine Duenne.

Because she's a living example of the truth in the song's main lyric, "When I believe, I can do anything I try." The real irony is that she "wouldn't have ever thought I could be a music teacher." She admits it's the last thing she would've thought possible. Sister Catherine, in her seventh year at Notre Dame Academy grade school in Louisville, says she wouldn't be a music teacher if she hadn't joined the Ferdinand Benedictines in 2001.

With arms outstretched, Sister Catherine leads Louisville grade school students in the song "When I Believe."

"I had an interest in studying music," she says, "but I didn't think I had the ability to be a music teacher." She took piano and organ lessons from Sister Theresita Schenk, and soon played regularly for community prayer and Mass. Many sisters encouraged her to pursue a music ministry, telling her 'you can do it.'

Just like Sister Catherine keeps telling her grade school students they can learn the song "When I Believe," along with its accompanying sign language movements.

When one of the 16 fourth-graders in a recent class moaned, "This is hard," Sister Catherine beamed when a classmate replied loud enough for all to hear, "We have to believe in ourselves." And she kept up the encouragement, saying, "You can't say I can't do this. You need to try."

“I use my gifts to help kids have fun and be creative. And in turn, it’s rewarding to help kids use their gifts.”

After some more practice, the students’ puzzlement turned into full-fledged smiles and continued giggles. “That’s the most enjoyable part of my job,” says Sister Catherine, “when kids have fun, and they show what they’ve learned.”

She works with over 400 children at the school, from age three through the eighth grade.

“I thrive on being creative in the classroom,” she says. “I love being in an environment where I can use my gifts and the knowledge I have learned from the sisters.”

Her attitude and enthusiasm transfers quickly to the students. School librarian Daivie Kay says, “The students love her classes, where they express themselves by moving, singing, and dancing. They can explore their creative outlets.”

Paige Brands, the school’s director of recruitment and development, says, “Sister Catherine gives her students an opportunity to showcase their talents. Her programs are high energy and everyone is eager to participate. They are the most unique and enjoyable I’ve seen. They are the smartest, funniest, and most interactive. Her masses are moving and reverent.

“Her music room is one of my favorite places to stop when I’m showing prospective families our school. The kids fall all over themselves to participate. She makes selling Notre Dame Academy easy.”

Sister Catherine is all about taking advantage of God’s gifts.

“I use my gifts to help kids have fun and be creative. And in turn, it’s rewarding to help kids use their gifts. I like performing meaningful songs with messages. Music unites us, helps people accept each other, and can make you feel really good about yourself. Children and music bring life to a parish.”

She’s particularly pleased by some of the parents’ feedback about her teaching. One said her son will not stop singing the song “Our God is an Awesome God” in the bathtub. Another remembers her daughter being visibly nervous before a dance performance. She saw Sister Catherine take the group aside to pray. The mother later sent an e-mail to Sister Catherine, to tell her how much that moment meant to her daughter and to her as a mother.

“I was really touched by that e-mail,” says Sister Catherine. “Our prayer was basically asking God to help us do our best.”

And soon they believed in themselves. And they could do anything.

Louisville student: “A life-changing experience”

Asked how they were helped by Sister Traci Stutz and the recent Christian Leadership Institute she co-directed in Louisville, the high school students fired out the compliments.

“She made a lot of good points on being a leader.”

“It changed each person for the better.”

“We grew stronger in our faith, and became more well-rounded in prayer.”

“I was scared coming here, but all were welcoming. It was a life-changing experience.”

“I feel a lot closer to God now.”

“I was apprehensive, but it’s one of the best things I’ve done in my life.”

Thirty-five young people, all from different parishes in the Archdiocese of Louisville, attended the five-day leadership development program at the Flaget Center.

Sister Traci, associate director for youth ministry for the Archdiocese of Louisville, said the most enjoyable part of her job is learning from the kids. “We forget that God works in them. Sometimes we think they don’t have anything to offer, and that’s a big mistake.

“So we empower them, and give them space to do things. Their generation is about serving people. The kids are very compassionate and observant about who needs help.”

Sister Traci loves watching kids realize their relationship with God doesn’t have to be hard, that it can be uncomplicated. In fact, seeing that spark of realization in their eyes usually brings tears of happiness to hers.

“It’s so good to see people excited about their faith,” she said. “For these kids, being around others here that have that

same excitement gives them the perspective that they’re OK, that they’re not the only ones that feel that way.”

At the end of the program, the youngsters shared some of the lessons they learned.

“I was shy before, but I learned to speak up.”

“Sometimes I just have to let myself be helped.”

“We need to express our ideas; all ideas matter.”

“Don’t label people. A lot of times we are wrong with those labels.”

“I learned not to stress out about every little thing.”

“I learned to listen, to appreciate differences, and how to build consensus.”

The students also got a kick out of the dancing energy displayed by Sister Sarah Yungwirth during the many songs played during the week. “She is just really enjoyable during those songs,” said one. “Music is a big part of this. It’s an easy way to bond.”

Then, as if on cue, the six students sitting at a table being interviewed for this story spontaneously started clapping and singing to a startled interviewer. Point proven. Sister Sarah would’ve been proud.

Sister Traci Stutz (at left) talks to high school students at a Christian Leadership Institute in Louisville about how they learned about their God-given gifts during the week, and how unique each of them really is. “Be grateful for the gifts you have, and appreciate others’ gifts,” she said. “God gave us all different ones.”





Sister Joan Scheller positions items that Hispanic children brought to a “Day of the Dead” altar to honor their deceased loved ones.

Sisters liven up “Day of Dead”

Sisters Karen Durliat and Joan Scheller know the importance of helping Hispanic immigrants continue their cultural traditions in a strange new land.

That’s why they recently spent a Saturday afternoon setting up and celebrating the “Day of the Dead” traditions for 27 Hispanics at the Guadalupe Center in Huntingburg, Indiana.

Seventeen children and 10 adults listened intently as Sister Joan explained how Latin American countries observe the annual “Day of the Dead” tradition, which coincides with the Catholic celebration of All Souls’ Day. Sister Joan is associate director of Hispanic Ministry of the Evansville Diocese; Sister Karen is the director.

The Hispanics gathered to pray for, and joyfully remember, their loved ones who have died. Part of the tradition is to build an altar, where offerings of food, flowers, toys, and pictures honor the deceased. There are also candles to represent the sacred element of fire, and Christ, and the eternal life of the dead.

“Their spirit is still with us,” said Sister Joan.

“We do this because we don’t want the Hispanic families in transition to lose their spiritual cultural values. The parents are struggling at times to keep their families together.

“Hopefully this will help parents transmit to their children the religious symbolism they grew up with in their country. It’s meant to help them grow in their faith as a family.”

Sister Jeana's gift to students: To think. To care.

Sister Jeana Visel is intrigued daily by why we believe what we believe.

And she loves to challenge people to think about issues, particularly hot-button ones like the death penalty, abortion, workers' rights, immigration, and racism.

Sister Jeana, a theology teacher in her fifth year at Our Lady of Providence High School in Clarksville, Indiana, is in a unique spot to be one of those teachers her students will always remember.

And not just because she's the only sister in the school. More likely because it's easy to notice she believes so strongly in her classroom approach, cares so deeply about her students, and genuinely enjoys opening up their horizons.

Plus, she's open-minded enough to let students challenge her assumptions on social justice topics.

"We have some heated discussions," she admits. "It's like dancing through a minefield. But I think you have to let people wrestle with things, even with religion."

Sister Jeana is a champion of finding ways to keep students focused on what's important, on the proper values, on helping them negotiate on how to be Catholic, and on getting them to discover their own passion.

Her classes prod students to start thinking now about real-life issues they'll have to confront soon enough.

Sister Jeana Visel discusses a class project with a Clarksville (Ind.) Providence High School student.



Yet she also knows teenagers are busy and stressed with their whirlwind lives. That's why the 15-minute prayer reflection at the beginning of her class has become so popular, though it's a rare scene at a high school. Sister Jeana starts by reading from scripture, then asks some reflection questions. The students are encouraged to close their eyes, and lay their heads on their desks. She plays quiet music, and gives students time to just be in silence with God. She asks who to pray for, and they call out names. Students then write about the reflection questions in their journals.

"They really appreciate the time to just relax and be in the present moment," says Sister Jeana. "I hope they know how much I care about them. They say I sound like their mom sometimes, but I just don't want them to get hurt."

So it's little wonder a page taped on her classroom door by students proclaimed, "We love Sr. Jeana," or when she asked her pupils for a reporter what they liked most about the class, the quick reply was, "Sister Jeana." They cited the different learning environment she provides – the use of technology, her active style of walking around the classroom, and generating meaningful discussion about poverty, racial injustice, homelessness, and a host of other issues that get students to think. To really think. And to really care. Just like she does.

"I love it when they get involved in volunteer service projects, and do more than what's required," says Sister Jeana. They've worked at soup kitchens, collecting clothes, cleaning up after severe weather, and at the Providence Retirement Home.

And she also delights in the students challenging each

other and her to be as true as they can to the people they are called to be.

"I love teaching Sacraments and what it means to be initiated into the Christian life," she says. "When these kids are confirmed, it's a fantastic time to talk about what it means to be part of the Body of Christ. The Holy Spirit is within each one of us. As we consume the consecrated bread and wine, we become more fully what we receive, and what we are – the Body and Blood of Christ. What that means for our living is that we need to be animated by the same love that moved Jesus in his time on earth."

"We are given so many beautiful gifts by God in this faith, but it's up to us to unwrap them and use them."

"Every time I get involved with different groups, I feel I'm doing what I need to be doing. I hope and trust God is using me for some good."

Her students at Clarksville Providence High School would likely put her at the top of the class.

Sister Jeana interacts with students during her theology class at Clarksville Providence.





Sister Karen Joseph emphasizes the importance of personal awareness during a Compassionate Care presentation to Memorial Hospital employees.

Why is today a great day?

Sister Karen Joseph knows it's not easy to always live in the present moment. We too often re-live the past, and too often worry needlessly about the future.

"But God is in the present moment; that's why we want to be there," she told an audience of 17 employees from Memorial Hospital in Jasper, Indiana, at a recent program at Kordes Center in Ferdinand.

Makes perfect sense.

The program was a continuation of special staff retreats presented by the Sisters of St. Benedict Spirituality Ministry for Memorial Hospital's Lange-Fuhs Cancer Center. Employees from the hospital's cardiology department also attended for the first time.

The presentation, titled "Being Mindful: Living in the Present Moment," is part of an aptly-named Compassionate Care series designed specifically for the hospital.

Sister Karen admitted she loved to tell stories, then set the tone with the tale of a traveler looking for a word of wisdom from a revered teacher.

As it was a Day of Silence, the teacher simply wrote, "Awareness."

The traveler wrote, "That's far too brief."

The teacher wrote, "Awareness. Awareness. Awareness."

And Sister Karen slapped signs with the word Awareness

all over them in the front of the room.

"We live most of our lives unaware," she said. Which means not listening, or not being open, to God's presence.

She said if we wonder why God is not listening to us, maybe we should hit the Pause button on all the other messages competing for our attention — so we can listen to Him.

Sister Karen said that finding God in the present moment is so peace-filling, emphasizing that the only time we have is NOW, so stay in the NOW.

She also said that when the sisters hear the church bells ringing daily, summoning them to prayer, that it's like "God calling us." She asked the crowd what's going to be their bell, and the call of God, in their life.

It all came back to God's precious gift, of the present moment, to all of us.

"Today is a great day — why?" said Sister Karen.

"Because I liked what I had for lunch."

She smiled.

She could have picked countless other things to be thankful for. And that was the point.

"Find joy in the little things," she said.

They are all around us. Every day.

Makes perfect sense.

‘Your tears are holy water’

Each story of a personal loss was painful to hear as the 13 participants at the recent “Grieving Our Losses” program introduced themselves.

Tears came quickly as people talked of losing a spouse, a parent, or a child.

One asked between sniffles, with a brave smile, “Is there a crying table here?”

Sister Kathryn Huber smiled reassuringly in return, “Just remember the holiest of waters are tears and sweat. Your tears are holy water. And they are therapeutic. It’s safe to cry here.”

One lady who recently lost her husband added, “Use your tears, that’s what God made them for.”

Sister Kathy, the program’s presenter, set the tone by openly talking about the losses in her life – a brother who died of leukemia, a brother who died of Lou Gehrig’s Disease, a brother who died from complications of alcoholism, a brother who died after having his legs amputated because of poor circulation.

Sister Kathryn Huber speaks at a “Grieving Our Losses” program.

Such story-sharing made it easier for others to open up, and the program became filled with advice on coping with the loss of a loved one.

As experiences were shared, surrounding faces etched in sadness and tears slowly turned into small, knowing smiles. The mourning lingers, but we learn how to move on.

“You need to give your emotions free reign,” said Sister Kathy. “And to be patient and compassionate with yourself. Grief is the price we pay for loving. Death ends a stage of life, but not the relationship.

“You will go on living. And will confront the question ‘how do I want to live the rest of my life?’”

One attendee, Selma Backer, said, “I feel like I got a good feeling out of (the program).”

Another, Jerri Kramer, said, “Sister Kathryn was an excellent facilitator in allowing me the time to get out what I needed to say despite the fact I cried through most of it.”

Sister Kathy emphasized we all mourn differently, that there is no one ‘correct’ way. And that to move on, in your own way, is also your right.





Sister Mary Francis points the way to a computer solution.

No kidding: sister teaches teens about computers

In a technology-crazed world where teenagers routinely speed-operate the latest electronic gizmo like they were born with it in their hand, the daily scene in one Evansville Mater Dei High School computer classroom is about as rare as you'll ever find.

For there is Sister Mary Francis Williams, age 70, patiently walking around to help out one teenager after another sitting puzzled in front of a computer screen. While she explains how to work through a problem, invariably another student's hand will vault into the air, signifying they need help, too. Sister Mary Francis eventually makes her way to give savvy technological advice to all 22 freshmen and sophomores in her computer application class.

She entered the monastery in 1958, and has taught at Mater Dei since 1967. She teaches business and technology classes – computer technology, business foundations, accounting, and computer applications.

Sister Mary Francis has embraced computer instruction since it started at the high school in 1970. "I found it so fascinating. I always enjoyed it. It's been a challenge because I've only had one computer course."

She does whatever it takes to stay a step ahead of the students. And to let them subtly know she knows a thing or two about computers, even if today's teenagers think her generation doesn't have a clue.

In her first computer class, she asked the students if they knew what orphans and widows were. Back came the expected answer: an orphan is a child without parents. No, laughed Sister Mary Francis, I mean with computer typesetting. She gazed at their blank faces, then joked in shock, you mean you've had all this computer training, and you don't know that? She had their attention. Another time a student challenged her with a computer question, saying a friend was sure she wouldn't know the answer. She rattled it off without hesitation.

"They were kind of surprised," she laughed. "They thought I didn't know anything, and they knew everything. But

the students here are so friendly. You can meet them anywhere in town, and they'll greet you from across the street. We're family."

Assistant principal Darlene Quinlin, who has known Sister Mary Francis since graduating in 1983, said, "She's a cornerstone here. Students learn so much more from her than just what's in the textbook. The value of integrity and honesty. Respect and tolerance for classmates, and realizing you have to be able to work with them.

"Sister Mary Francis gets to know her students. She always wants them to do better. She is a very observant teacher, and changes with the times.

Recalling her days as a student, Quinlin said, "She is the teacher who motivated and inspired us, the one who is the center of our fondest high school memories and the one teacher we will never forget when we think of Mater Dei High School."

Such accolades are a big reason why Sister Mary Francis has received two prestigious awards during her 49-year teaching career – the 2009 Vanderburgh County Outstanding Educator of the Year Award in the high school division, and the 1993 Evansville Diocesan Teacher of the Year Award.

Typically, she shrugs off both honors.

"Maybe it was because of my longevity, I'm not sure. It was quite an honor, but I had no clue why I was picked."

The hundreds of students who've sought out her advice during the Computer Age likely have a clue.

But ask her what students like about her teaching style, and she'll laugh, saying they enjoy most giving presentations, so they don't have to listen to her.

But there are light bulbs going on in those teenagers. And it's a teacher a couple of generations ahead of them that is flipping the switch.



Carolyn Fuhs, a member of the Ferdinand monastery's Executive Advisory Council, loves adventure and loves children, and enjoyed plenty of both on her recent trip to Uganda, Africa.

Uganda trip an “awakening” of giving and getting

Both Sister Barbara C. Schmitz and Carolyn Fuhs say they received more than they gave during a recent visit with Benedictine sisters and the people they serve in Uganda, Africa.

The Ugandans they met might debate that, but nobody is counting. And that, after all, is the point.

Sister Barbara taught the sisters about the Rule of Benedict, the Benedictine way of life, the Enneagram, and even literally gave one sister the coat off her back.

Carolyn Fuhs, who is a member of the Ferdinand monastery's Executive Advisory Council along with her husband, Jerry, distributed a suitcase full of toys, candy, and goodies to the Ugandan children, gave a blanket to a newborn child, and has already put together another shipment of goodies since she returned home.

It was the first trip to Africa for both Sister Barbara and Carolyn. They saw immediately the challenges faced by the Ugandan people.

“A lot are very poor,” said Sister Barbara. “It’s a harder life. The conveniences we have here are not at their fingertips. It was truly an awakening for me.”

Yet she said people’s faith in God, and Benedictine prayer, is the same no matter where you go.

The trip’s purpose was to have American Benedictine sisters develop a relationship with the African people, and to support Benedictine sisters in developing countries. Sister Barbara and Carolyn were also accompanied by Sister Annie Thompson, OSB, from the Bahamas.

“I think we gained a true understanding and appreciation of the African culture,” said Sister Barbara. “Being with the other sisters, sharing our sisterhood and Benedictine life,

was wonderful. We are so much more alike than different, we are all people.

“And it was great to see how educated the Benedictine sisters are there. They are making a difference in the schools.”

But even as progress is being made, Carolyn noted the huge differences between Uganda and the U.S.

She talked of the hundred-plus people with AIDS, malaria, and other illnesses that line up daily at small health clinics, waiting patiently for hours to be seen. Sometimes they don’t get in, and simply return the next day.

“They are so humble, and so honorable,” said Carolyn. “But it’s a hard life for them.”

She spoke compassionately of the primitive conditions she witnessed. Of the starving children, many who come to Sunday school primarily to get a biscuit to eat. Of a monastery with no electricity. Of a \$50-a-year school that few can afford to go to.

“It’s a real privilege to get to go to school,” said Carolyn. “Many can’t. It’s a sad thing, it’s heart-wrenching.”

Which is why some children’s eyes lit up when Carolyn handed over a coloring book and crayons one day. They had never seen such things before, so it was a special treat. It was like passing out true hope and enthusiasm.

She said of the sisters in Africa, “It’s hard to explain how little they have, and yet how much they give. I think what sustains them is their love for the faith. It’s their solid ground, their first love.

“It’s so heartwarming to see how much they give to their communities, through their work in the clinics and schools. And they grow fruits and vegetables and share what they can.”

Sister Barbara C. Schmitz discusses Benedictine values with Mother Jacinta Okusaru, the superior at the Holy Trinity Monastery in Arua, Uganda.

It also warmed Carolyn’s heart to see Sister Barbara at her teaching finest.

“Sister Barbara gave so much,” said Carolyn. “Teaching the Rule of Benedict. And the sisters really enjoyed learning about themselves through the Enneagram. It brought a different perspective. The sisters were quite receptive to Sister Barbara. Just her presence and soft nature make it easy for people to feel open to discuss things with her.”

Sisters Barbara and Annie were at their best teaching Benedictine values and traditions to the 20 sisters in Arua, Uganda, who were transferring from the Sisters of Perpetual Adoration to the Benedictine way of life. They discussed Benedictine traits of listening, obedience, humility, and of keeping a healthy balance of prayer and work. The Ugandan sisters had loads of questions, and Sisters Barbara and Annie delighted in providing answers about the lifestyle they had chosen for themselves so long ago.

Since the African sisters don’t receive a lot of information of the outside world, they were like sponges soaking up everything they could get.

Kind of like the American visitors.

In the end, it was still all about faith. And how much you could give one another.

No matter where in the world you were.





Finding the truth on a college spring break

Sister Michelle Sinkhorn's recent spring break trip with nine Bellarmine University students accomplished much more than giving low-income residents of Lake Charles, Louisiana, a good start toward a better life.

Just two hours into the 16-hour drive, one of the students told her "you've blown my stereotype of sisters already." And in a good way, to be sure.

And Sister Michelle, the monastery's vocation director, was impressed that the Catholic students from Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky, would forego the usual spring break college beach party. Especially to raise money to fund their expenses to help the less fortunate.

"Spending time with college students like that was the highlight of the trip for me," said Sister Michelle. "They gave up their whole spring break. And essentially, they paid to work for somebody else. And hearing the depth of

their faith was inspiring to me. Young people get a bad rap from some – but they don't know these young people."

About like the college students didn't really know sisters.

Dr. Melanie-Prejean Sullivan, Bellarmine University's director of campus ministry, invited Sister Michelle to go on the trip, a repeat of a similar journey they took last year.

Sullivan said one student wrote in an essay for a Theology class that a "lot of stereotypes about sisters were destroyed on this trip."

Above: The young adult students from Bellarmine University, and Sister Michelle Sinkhorn (front row, second from right) hit the Louisiana state line.

"And it's amazing how many journal entries there are about misunderstandings about sisters being clarified," she said. "Students think sisters are very serious, and praying, all the time. They think they don't smile, or joke, or know about Facebook, that they don't swim, or ski, or walk on a slackline, or had a life before becoming a sister."

Sister Michelle turned around every one of those misperceptions. In a hurry.

"This was a chance for students to see sisters are people, too," said Sullivan. "Sister Michelle is adventurous, an extremely hard worker, and has a good instinct and understanding for working with the young. Plus she has a healthy respect for boundaries."

One of the students, Rachel Geracitano, said, "Sister Michelle not only brought her chipper attitude and determination to get the job done, but also her slackline. We worked hard, played hard, and learned hard. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience and I am very happy to have shared it with her."

The group helped build houses for a week for low-income families in an area still reeling from the damage of Hurricanes Rita and Katrina. They worked on flooring, landscaping, pulling weeds, and painting, all donated time for an organization called Project Build a Future.

"Several times Sister Michelle was teaching the Rule of Benedict without the students realizing what was happening," said Sullivan. "She would say, 'This is Benedictine, let's clean the tools, we must treat them as vessels of the altar.' She showed them how, and demonstrated a healthy respect for resources. That was very special."

A Louisiana lady (second from right) happily shows off her house painted by the Bellarmine University group last year. Sister Michelle is at the far left.

"And she taught a healthy balance of work and fun. She would create lively singing and conversations to pass the time."

Said Geracitano, "There were several discussions about religious life that broke many stereotypes often placed on Catholic vocations. What struck me most was the spirit and energy Sister Michelle had while explaining things to us. She was so open, honest, and welcoming, no matter how silly our questions may have been."

One special moment during the trip was when Sister Michelle and some others visited a house they had painted on last year's trip. A lady living there couldn't hide her excitement when she saw them.

"Her face just lit up," said Sister Michelle. "She said 'my house is the pride of the neighborhood, and I tell everybody the people from Louisville did this.' She was so happy to see us. It was sweet."

As the group worked on the new houses this year, many neighbors would drop by to thank them for their efforts. As did the city's mayor.

"They are so grateful," said Sister Michelle. "It just makes me feel good to help create something beautiful that people can afford. To see their joy and appreciation gives one a good feeling."



Monastery Immaculate Conception
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How you can be part of what we do to help others

- Visit Monastery Immaculate Conception – for Mass, a tour, community prayer, or a peaceful stroll on our grounds.
- Explore and renew your faith at a program hosted by our Spirituality Ministry.
- Volunteer your time and talents.
- Consider becoming an Oblate.
- Ask for our prayers. It's what we do, at least three times a day.
- Visit our gift shop, For Heaven's Sake, either in person or online. Our monastery-baked cookies are always available there.
- Or support our ministries with a gift.

However you wish to take part, we welcome you to our community with joy. Because hospitality is another thing that we do.