

## MY JOURNEY WITH FRANCIS

My journey along the Franciscan Highway that eventually led me to Cardinal Stritch University and the Chairmanship of the Special Education Department began many years before. It all started in St. Francis, WI, when I became the second living child born to loving parents who had themselves been educated by the Sisters of St Francis of Assisi. The journey led through grade-school enrollment at Sacred Heart School in St. Francis, WI (taught by the OSF's) where many life-time relationships were formed and where daily after-school hours in eighth grade were happily spent collating papers, erasing blackboards, and preparing learning projects under the loving guidance of the second grade teacher, Sister Bernadette Zimmer, to a delightful experience immediately after high school graduation as a counselor at Mountain View Camp in Longmont, Colorado, run by the Sisters of St. Francis. It was here on the campus of St. Coletta School of the Rockies—the headquarters for the camp—that I had my first memorable and compelling contacts with exceptional children. The Franciscan charism of loving service to and with the underprivileged was both evident and inspiring, and ultimately influenced the direction of my journey.

Four years later, after having enjoyed an executive secretarial position in a Milwaukee business training school, the call to follow Francis became clearer and more insistent and led the path “home” to the OSF Congregation, where two years later, I professed as a Sister of St. Francis, changing my name from Mary Dolores to Sister Joanne Marie. My first mission was to St. Coletta of the Plains in Palos Park, IL, where I was once again reunited with “special” children. As a group mother, teacher, and later as principal of the school (then known as the U. Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. School for Exceptional Children), I was continually impressed by the love, simplicity and creativity of the Sisters, especially Sister Mary Inez Wagner, as they labored tirelessly in the business office, classrooms, laundry room, kitchen, dining room, cottages, and the great outdoors—always teaching and guiding those in their care.

It was evident during these fifteen “never-to-be-forgotten” years of practicum at Palos that the Sisters of St. Francis showed keen foresight in the future growth and development of Special Education at Stritch. Sisters were enabled to take college courses at various institutions of higher learning to prepare them for their future mission.

Here my journey, though circuitous, never veered from its goal. It led to a Bachelor's degree in Psychology from Loyola University in Chicago in 1954 and four summer sessions in New York to receive a Master's degree in Special Education from Columbia University in 1957. The following summer I taught two classes for Stritch and continued doing so each summer at campus sites in Boston and Hanover, MA, until joining the CSU faculty full time eight years later.

It seems every journey has its rough spots. Mine was leaving my beloved Palos Park to begin a three-year stint at the Loyola University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign (from 1963 to 1966) leading to a Ph.D. in Special Education and Early Childhood. Here unique experiences were provided for both instruction and the practicum opportunities.

that surfaced. Professional contacts with professors Samuel Kirk and Barbara Bateman—recognized leaders in special education—were enhanced by a practicum experience during a six-week program one summer, sponsored by the Kennedy Foundation, involving the testing and re-testing of special education students after a summer camp experience.

My Franciscan journey, while taking me to such far-away places as Central America, France, Belgium, and Poland for presentations at various special education seminars and conferences, was leading me back to the home port—Milwaukee and Stritch!

Here, at the College (as across the entire country!) Special Education blossomed in the late 60's, with the emergence of “learning disabilities” of foremost interest. The department at Stritch flourished, and the need for more faculty and practicum experiences for the students became evident. The journey continued but this was but a short trek across the expressway to Nicolet High School where the Wisconsin Society for Brain-Injured Children (WSBIC) was providing a weekly activity program for special children. Here each Sunday morning Special Ed students from Stritch would join the children and their parents in the swimming pool and gym activities—getting hands-on experience with children they would later see in their own classrooms. Here we met Eli Tash, a Jewish layman, whose handicapped son inspired him to become involved with other parents of special needs children and to seek proper services for them. Weekly discussions were held, but the lack of adequate programs was evident. Early childhood programs were unheard of in those days! But it was here that the germ of an idea began to grow—if services are needed and not provided, why not provide them ourselves?

This innovative idea grew and was presented to and approved by the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi to allow Stritch to lease 5 1/2 acres of their property to WSBIC for the construction of a center for exceptional children on the college campus. After five years in rented quarters at Congregation Sinai and Bayside Middle School, the fledgling program was officially welcomed to the Stritch site in a ceremonial dedication in August, 1974.

Serving as a model service and teacher training institution, the St. Francis Children's Center continues today its outstanding program for service to children and parents alike. A program begun with six children has grown to serving over 350 children each year in its state-of-the-art facility. Like their patron, St. Francis, who was able to embrace a leper, the Center staff provides hands-on loving care to special needs children from birth to age 12, many of whom are crack, cocaine youngsters with multiple problems for learning and life adjustment. The nursing staff at Stritch, as well as the Special Education personnel and students, provide welcome volunteer time to aid and assist the Center's ever growing and challenging services as they treat the multiple problems facing today's special children.

And so, my journey continues! While future sites and ports are unknown at this time, the pace has definitely slowed down! I am daily privileged and blessed to be able to live out these golden years in the familiar surroundings of my family home with my own sibling—and best friend!—Sister Camille.

Each day I offer my prayers for those Sisters of St. Francis and their colleagues who are able to continue the journey and labor for the poor, the lonely, the suffering and the underprivileged. May our patron saint bless and inspire them to carry on the OSF tradition of loving service into the next century, and may Cardinal Stritch University continue to reflect the Franciscan charism as it faces the new challenges and opportunities that lie ahead!

—*Sister Joanne Marie Kliebhan, OSF*