

## **Associates Reflect on Relationship with Sisters**

*For our Spring 2024 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue of Alive magazine, we asked associates to share ways that Associate Relationship with the School Sisters of St. Francis has enriched and added meaning to their spiritual life.*

### **Maureen Hellwig**

*Associate since 1972*

It is now more than 50 years ago that the School Sisters of St. Francis approved a new way of connecting with them in community and through mission. I was part of the group of sisters and others who asked for this “relationship,” and we were very firm about the idea that it not be called “a program.” I have been grateful all these years for their “Yes” to our proposal, as my relationship to the community has continued to enrich my life.

I pray with these sisters, play with them, and work on committees with them. Most recently, they honored me with their trust to write some of their stories. When they said, “We know you can write,” all I could think of was, “Of course, you were the ones who taught me.”

Even more important than that skill, was their witness to social justice. I have embraced that mission in my work with immigrants and refugees in Chicago. I give thanks for them every day for teaching me so well, from kindergarten through graduation from Alverno College.

### **Mary Ruzinski Smith**

*Associate since 1984*

Guided by the words of the Gospel and inspired by the lives of the School Sisters of St. Francis, I felt called to service. My commitment to Associate Relationship has deeply enriched and added meaning to my spiritual life through service and prayer. I consider myself an associate since before Associate Relationship formally existed.

Around 1969, I had a chance encounter at a guitar Mass with Sister Noel Le Claire. She welcomed me to join her, and we have been connected ever since. As she and other sisters established a mission in Kentucky, I followed her there as much as I could while choosing to teach in the Milwaukee Public Schools, be married, and raise a family.

Fifteen years later, I became an associate with Sister Noel as my contact. My commitment to Associate Relationship has deeply enriched and added meaning to my spiritual life through service and prayer. I met many sisters while volunteering for years at Maryhill, and that led to even greater involvement. Over the years, I have been an assistant to the Mutuality Area Community twice, wrote a poem/prayer for a Provincial Assembly, sang with the Chapel Singers, and wrote with the Greenleaf Writers. I have been volunteer chair for the Pancake Breakfast, and created children’s Easter Baskets with another associate. My most challenging honor was to be asked to respectfully help close The Last Stop Shop.

I belonged to a sisters' prayer group for decades, and my faith was deepened by these spiritual books and discussions. Now I am one of the two "Brat Babes" serving at the Sister Water Beer Gardens.

I am committed to my "ministry of availability" through all phases of my life. I consider it a gift and a blessing to celebrate my 40th Jubilee of Associate Relationship this year.

### **Jan Cosmos**

*Associate since 2017*

How do you thank the School Sisters for seeding your spiritual life, sculpting your moral compass, and imprinting you with a life of service? For me it was the osmosis of association.

The sisters "osmosis-ed" me at Alvernia High School, Alverno College, for ten years as a School Sister, during Peace Corps service, and throughout a long career in teaching. All that School Sister hovering rained on me like dew on thirsty grass.

Eventually I came to realize that it shaped my spiritual landscape, gave me a world view, and compelled me to seek interdependence and commitment to others, the planet, and all its creatures great and small. What are the needs? What can I do to make things better?

Association imprinted me with these core wonderings. Before my very eyes they walk the walk, light the path, and in the language of spirit, sing out, "Be joyful, come follow me..."

### **Kathleen Kovatovic**

*Associate since 2020*

My Associate Relationship with the School Sisters of St. Francis has brought me many blessings. If I had to pick the one that has the most impact, it is the sisters' willingness to share the meaning of their charism with me. I have been inspired by how the sisters have lived their charism by being fully present, and involved in the issues of today, whether that is education, social justice, or care of the planet.

The sisters have led me to understand that spirituality is not just the part of religion that focuses on the "inner life;" it can be found in everyday activities. As a result of their influence, I have been encouraged to become an active participant in ministries that have impact on the needs of the times we live in. Their example has encouraged me to educate myself on these needs, and given me the courage to get out of my comfort zone and do my part.

### **Tina Rawlins**

*Associate since 2014*

Franciscan spirituality breathes through me in who I am and what I do, the charism I learned through growing up around the School Sisters of St. Francis. The mentors who influenced me, and the experiences they offered me, helped guide me to become the person I am today.

My spirituality comes alive through the passion of my work. I admit that I don't attend church regularly and forget to pray formally, but despite this, my relationship to God is deeper and closer through my hands and heart. In my work in home care and hospice, I meet and care for many people in need. I relieve suffering for the dying, comfort the grieving, and celebrate with those who overcome illness. I am proud to be an associate, inspired by those who came before, and pray that my healing ministry will make a difference.

## **Mary Ellen Meyer**

*Associate since 1976*

The Franciscan charism of joy, hospitality, and simplicity has inspired and helped shape my lifestyle. Recently a young inmate in Solano (California) State Prison, where my husband Jim and I volunteer, asked me what type of car we drive. I explained how our Franciscan lifestyle affects our choice of car. He was fascinated.

Seeing his interest, I shared a page of inspiring Franciscan quotations that I found online and a bit about the life of St. Francis. He was particularly moved by Francis' reverence and care of the earth, which he shared with others in his housing unit, which is a building where service dogs are being trained. This led the group to clean up the yard around their building.

In our prison Centering Prayer group, an older man was moved to tears as he shared his awe for the greatness he found in St. Francis' life, especially his humility. These tears have led me to even greater gratitude.