

Profile in Mercy: Sister Cabrini Koelsch

Sister Cabrini Koelsch has been an elementary school teacher, director of religious education, director and vice president of Mission Services and a member of the former St. Louis Regional Leadership Team. But she says, "I'm at heart a teacher."

When Cabrini was seventeen, she and her best friend (who was interested in religious life) traveled from Oklahoma City where she grew up to a "Come and See" in St. Louis. Cabrini was not really interested. She had a boyfriend, but as she says, "After the trip I could not get rid of the idea of becoming a sister. I was going to get married and have a bunch of kids, but God had other plans for me."

During her childhood, her family was close to the sisters and were there for them whenever needed. Cabrini spent many hours with sisters, while her mother drove them to errands and grocery shopping. Unlike her dad who wasn't excited about Cabrini entering the convent, her mother was supportive, saying that Cabrini should do whatever she felt God was asking. Wisely, knowing her fun-loving daughter, her mother didn't tell her until after she made final vows that she had prayed for her to become a sister from the day she was born.

Cabrini was pretty sure she wouldn't make it through formation. "I was going to check it out. I wasn't going to stay. I was a free spirit. We did crazy pranks as teens do. I kept trying to think of things to do that would make them send me home," she said with a smile. "I'm still trying. They haven't sent me home yet."

She's been too busy and too essential to be sent home. Sister Joan Schwager, who has worked side-by-side with Cabrini in Joplin, observes, "She is joyful person who fits in wherever she goes and whatever job she is doing." Sister Cabrini taught in elementary schools in Texas and Missouri from 1969 to 1978. She then worked as director of religious education in Lubbock and Mission, Texas. In 1996 she began working in Mission Services at Mercy Memorial Hospital in Ardmore, Oklahoma and St. John's in Lebanon, Missouri where she was happy to teach people about the mission of the sisters. "I love to share God's love. Everything I have done is teaching in some way or the other."

May 22, 2011, the day the tornado hit Joplin, Missouri, marked perhaps her most important mission. She was at home six miles away from Mercy Hospital. "I could hear it. It was such devastation. The hospital was damaged beyond repair. The sisters (Joan Margaret, Donata and Angelene) were trapped in the convent...the only communication was by text. I was worried about how to get help for them. Big trees were down in the yard. The convent was severely damaged. We needed a place for the sisters to live. It seems like a nightmare now. After the tornado, the departments of the hospital were scattered around Joplin."

"I went around with a basket of chocolates and visited with the coworkers. They had seen horrible things, and this gave them a chance to talk. I was just being a Sister of Mercy. People

needed a means to share what was happening, just someone to listen to them, to hear about what was bothering them and their fears.”

Cabrini retired in 2016 to a busy ministry at the Outreach House at St. Peter’s Parish in Joplin, feeding the people in the neighborhood—people who were poor and unhoused. She volunteers there Monday, Wednesdays, and Fridays. “I hand them their meals and visit with them. I know their names and stories.” On Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Sundays she bakes, creatively using whatever donations come in.

What does she do on her time off? She loves to entertain, especially sisters who drop by and may stay a few days. “I used to fish a lot more when I was working and had time,” she sighs a bit at the irony. “I’m pretty good at catching any kind of fish.” She goes with friends and family to fish at Table Rock Lake or Grand Lake in Oklahoma. And, when possible, Gulf Shores, her haven of sun, walking the beach, fishing, cooking, and eating seafood with ‘sister friends’.

To sum up, “I’m a pretty ordinary person who enjoys life. I have been so blessed.” She’s brought that blessing to those she has served with a sense of mission and the gift of chocolates.