

Profile in Mercy: Sr Fran McManus - A young poet in a bus station

As a child in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, Fran McManus carried a typewriter to a nearby bus station to write poetry. It seemed like a good idea to the eight-year-old. The noise and bustle of the travelers helped her write. After years of writing and teaching, Sister Fran explains, “I like to work where there are voices in the background to create a first draft. It drowns the editor.”

Fran was encouraged by the Sisters of Mercy who taught her at St. Mary’s High School in Wilkes Barre, but solitary writing is only one thread of her vocation. She also was inspired by the sisters’ involvement in the civil rights movement in the 1960s. She saw them taking stands on social justice issues during the Beyond Prejudice Seminar, a traveling presentation that moved from church to church talking about Black arts, literature, and music. Before she entered as a senior at Misericordia College, in Dallas, Pennsylvania, she was part of a YWCA international anti-racism program in Washington D.C.

After making temporary vows in 1974, she found her way to the publication Inform, a newsletter for the Dallas province of the Sisters of Mercy. As editor, she worked on public relations for community events, created news reports, and found herself talking informally to sisters about writing. Giving advice to them was a pathway to teaching.

She graduated from Misericordia with a double major in sociology and English. Along the way she has accumulated two Masters of Arts degrees, one in liberal arts and humanities and another in English with a specialty in creative writing.

She was sending out resumes for teaching, even considering a commute to New Jersey from the upper west side of Manhattan where she lived, to teach, when what she terms a “A God Moment” occurred. The chair of the English Department at John Jay College of Criminal Justice called. It was a crisis. The teacher for an English class had had a heart attack. Could Fran come in a half hour and be reasonably coherent? If so, she could have the teaching job.

She passed the coherence test with flying colors and was hired, teaching there for 33 years. In many ways the role has been ideal for Fran’s talents, blending her interest in social justice and writing. She serves students who are in the main minority. Many are immigrants. Some enter to go into careers with the police and others want to change and transform the police. “The challenge was, how do we make everyone feel included?” she remembers.

She’s thrived on the challenges—helping those with opposing views talk to each other, teaching them basic composition and stimulating creative writing. A few students who changed their majors to English have said they were inspired by Fran because she said, “I seemed to have so much fun teaching them.”

She’s long since transferred her work from a typewriter in a bus station to a computer in her room, but the image of a solitary determined soul has been part of her identity throughout her

life. She's moved from being surrounded by the noise of a bus station to connecting to the Mercy community and lively classrooms.

Her life has been a balancing act of part-time pieces. For 10 years, she's taught adult education at St Francis of Assisi parish in Manhattan. Her courses included novels, poetry and writing poetry as prayer. She has presented poetry workshops at the Mariandale Retreat Center and the Maryknoll summer institute. She leads an ongoing poetry group on Zoom. This spring she taught courses about Joy Harjo's poetry and the Bronte sisters' novels. This fall will be teaching courses on Robert Frost's poetry and Tolstoy's fiction through St. Francis Adult Education program.

She's been amazingly busy with her own work. Fran has written prose devotionals for St. Anthony's Guild and several plays, including "Hunting Crows", published in Catholic University of America's anthology of short plays, Sacred Circles. She's published poetry regularly. "The Catch" is published in the 2023 edition of Presence: A journal of Catholic Poetry. An essay on "The Revelation of Poetry" will be published as a part of Forming Franciscan Minds and Hearts by Franciscan Publishing Company. Her poem "The Bent Woman" was included as part of the National Poetry Month series on Merced.

How do you balance all these pieces? She said, "I don't require much sleep. Writing poetry is intense and solitary, but I need my lively social connections with the community and other writers."

In her essay "The Revelation of Poetry," she describes the core of her work: "Writing a poem requires both work and grace; it is an open-hearted and open-minded response to an image or sight or sound or event, whether awe-inspiring or horrifying."

Bringing an open-hearted and open-minded response describes Fran's approach to the Mercy community, her teaching, and her abundant poetry.

Poems by Sister Fran:

"Whethering the Season" and "Reading Leaves" ([Click Here to view](#))

"Seasoned Greetings and Other Poems" ([Click Here to view](#))