

Profile in Mercy: Sister Joanne Lappetito

Sister Joanne Lappetito's Mercy journey began when she was a teen at Our Lady of Mercy High School in Rochester, New York. Characteristically, she found the school overwhelmingly positive. She remembers, "The teachers were really wonderful and seemed to be having a lot of fun." She began to consider religious life, but she wasn't ready. She said, "I panicked and went to college." The delay was only temporary.

When she entered the Mercy Community in 1957 after graduating with a bachelor's degree in philosophy from St. Michael's College in Toronto, Canada, she was assigned to teach at her alma mater, OLM. "I thought I had died and gone to heaven." From her entrance into the community throughout her life, she has been enthusiastic, but her enthusiasm sometimes brought complications. When the school principal at OLM mused that she needed a Latin teacher, Joanne blurted out, "Anybody ought to be able to teach Latin." Immediately, she was assigned to the class. The next year she was to teach Latin 1 and 2.

"After six years, I was missioned to start at a new high school, Cardinal Mooney High School in Rochester. I was teaching six classes of Latin 1." To overcome the monotony, she was able to cook with other faculty members. She saw it as an opportunity. "The school wasn't finished. There was no kitchen or lunchroom, but there was a coffee pot in one room and a frying pan in another. I hadn't learned to cook at home, but I learned at school under unique circumstances. We had a lot of fun."

"Somewhere along the line when I was teaching, I got a teaching assistantship at University of Dayton and a master's degree in theology in 1968. I returned to Cardinal Mooney and taught theology to senior girls until 1972. Later I was hired by the Diocese of Rochester in the department of religious education and eventually became responsible for overseeing religious education as the diocesan director."

Subsequently, she was asked by the Congregation of Rochester to join the formation team, as director of novices.

Her talents led to even broader responsibilities. In 1980 she was invited to apply for the position of executive director of the Federation of the Sisters of Mercy which had formed in 1965. She thoroughly enjoyed this dynamic ministry which led to the formation of the Institute. She loved the conversations, the forward visioning, and the creative processes of bringing the congregations together. Changes were underway for the entire Mercy Community, led by very courageous and creative leadership.

"I was working with some of the most creative sisters. It was a wonderful experience on a personal level. I learned so much from them. I'm a planner. I discovered a creative streak in myself. It was a wonderful experience for me. I absolutely loved it."

Sister Doris Goettemoeller, the former and first president of the Institute, remembers, “Joanne and I were practically in daily phone contact during the early years of Mercy Futures—1991 to 1995 or so, sending and collating questionnaires and scheduling meetings for task force representatives to visit the various communities and to meet together. She was always accessible and wonderful to work with.”

Another ministry Joanne relished was service at Bon Secours Health System in Richmond, Virginia, as director of ethics and subsequently vice-president for mission and senior vice-president for sponsorship. Her practical attitude toward ethics helped solve problems and create new programs. She created a shelter for abused women, a parish nursing program and a multi-faceted hospice program that reflected the charism of the Sisters of Bon Secours.

Joanne is thoroughly convinced that healthcare is a matter of justice, not just medical expertise. She is very clear about the problem. Her views come from the experience of serving patients of color. “Originally healthcare was geared for white men and did not consider care for women and minority populations. Looking at the whole picture of who needs to be served and their needs is key. Patients of color have very different health care needs,” she concluded.

Her next venture came out of a chance meeting with Sister Margaret Farley, another member of the former West Midwest Community. After a gathering of our sisters in Belmont where Margaret was the speaker, they caught up on an old friendship and what each had been doing. Margaret had already started the All-Africa Conference: Sister to Sister to address the on-going crisis of HIV/AIDS in Africa and invited Joanne to work with her as a staff person. Joanne was not able to be part of her staff but offered to write grants and secure funds for the organization.

These days at 87, she is busy. She teaches ESL to immigrant students two nights a week. Three times a week she plays pickle ball. She has a flower and vegetable garden at her residence in Beverly, Massachusetts. She grows dahlias. Famous as the local Tomato Queen, she keeps the neighbors in tomatoes and says she is in search of the perfect bacon, lettuce, and tomato (BLT) sandwich.

Her life has been full of diverse opportunities, much joy, and many connections. “Most important,” she said, “Is that these ministries led to life-long friendships that have enriched my life.”