

Wardsville native Sr. Margaret Mertens CDP ministering to refugees at the border

This is part of a series of articles for the Year of Consecrated Life.

By Eddie O'Neill

At age 76, and with more than 60 years of religious life to her name, Sister Margaret Mertens, a native of Wardsville has no plans of slowing down.

She still has work to do for the Lord.

In January, the Sister of Divine Providence was honored by her alma mater, St. Stanislaus School in Wardsville, with a distinguished-graduate award. The award was part of the school's celebration of Catholic Schools Week.

"It was very humbling and touching what the principal and teachers were saying about me," Sr. Margaret said. "The students did a special project to raise money to send to my ministry in Texas also. The whole event was very moving."

She has only the fondest of memories of being a student at St. Stanislaus in the 1940s.

She is the second-oldest of nine brothers and sisters who grew up on a nearby farm. Whether it was milking cows or tending the garden, she and her siblings learned to work hard.

"My parents had such a great respect for the

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When second quake hit, fear filled those waiting for relief materials

See **Page 20** for information about how to help

By Anto Akkara

Namjung, Nepal

As the magnitude-7.3 quake hit, screaming and shouting filled the mountain village of Namjung, where approximately 600 people had gathered to collect relief material being distributed by Catholic Relief Services (CRS).

When the quake ended

May 12, the people were anxiously looking at dust rising from the nearby villages, with the collapse of houses and other buildings.

"We don't know what is happening. It has become too frequent," said Bishnu Kapri, a schoolteacher whose cracked house was being used by CRS as a storehouse.

Jennifer Hardy, CRS com-

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SISTER

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priest and the Sisters of Divine Providence who ran the school at the time," she shared. "We would bring vegetables to them or some meat if we butchered a cow. We had so much fun with the sisters."

Sudsy water

Sr. Margaret recalled her last day of school in eighth grade when she and the only two other girls in her class were invited to go into the sisters' convent and wash dishes for them.

"It was just so exciting to go into that part of the building where we were never allowed," she said. "When I told my mom, she said, 'Well, you never get excited about washing dishes here at home!'"

After graduating from St. Stanislaus, she knew that she wanted to be a Sister of Divine Providence.

"The sisters had a great love for us and they were great teachers and I wanted to be



Sister Margaret Mertens of the Sisters of Divine Providence gives a "riding mower 101

Saraa's journey began in her home country of Ethiopia, where she and her family faced political persecution. After saving thousands of dollars for the journey, Saraa and her husband spent months traveling from Ethiopia through 10 other countries, including Sudan, Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico, with a single-minded goal — finding hope for a better life, free of oppression.

"The word is out that the United States is a good place," Sr. Margaret noted. "We have people who meet each other along the way (to the U.S.), and when they arrive at our place it is like a family reunion."

Where God wants her

Whether it has been working with immigrants, helping serve the older sisters in

my-bags and head to St. Louis and join them.”

However, her plans were delayed due to the fact that her father was sick. She had to stay home and keep the farm going and to take care of her four youngest brothers and sisters.

Eventually, with her father's blessing, she made it to St. Louis and professed first vows of poverty, chastity and obedience at age 17.

“The love of Christ impels us!”

The Sisters of Divine Providence were established in Europe in the 1850s by a visionary German bishop, Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler and a French laywoman, Marie de la Roche (Mother Marie).

The bishop called Mother Marie to begin a community that would teach and care for poor children, especially girls, in rural areas, and nurse indigent sick persons.

The growing congregation made its way to the United States in the 1870 and settled in Pittsburgh, Penn. The sisters answered their bishop's call to teach by staffing paro-

chial schools.

That was still the case in 1956 when Sr. Margaret received her first teaching assignment at the old Annunciation School in California.

She taught for close to 30



Sister Margaret Mertens, a Sister of Divine Providence gives a talk in St. Louis in 2012. — Photo by

Lisa Johnston, *St. Louis Review*

years in a variety of assignments in Missouri and Illinois.

Ministering to refugees

Sr. Margaret's current work is as the director of La Posada Providencia in San Benito,

Texas, located roughly 10 miles from the Mexican border.

The emergency shelter for men, women and families, which celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2014, serves people who are fleeing to the United States due to political oppression, natural disasters and other life-threatening actions in their native countries.

Sr. Margaret, who has been involved in the shelter off and on since 1995, said she could write a book on the stories she hears day-in and day-out from the refugees who arrive at the shelter's doorstep.

She estimates that the shelter's staff has helped individuals and families from more than 75 countries.

“They come from all over the world,” she said. “We work with people who have been released from (immigration) detention and are seeking asylum. Some are here for one night, others are here for six months. It just depends on their case.”

Interestingly, La Posada Providencia which house between 16 and 30 people at any

one time, sees very few people from Mexico, despite being so close to the border. Sr. Margaret related that the United States does not grant asylum to Mexican nationals. These days, she sees many Africans due to an increase in violence in a number of countries.

One of her favorite stories is that of a young mom named Saraa.

Margaret knows that she was meant to be a Sister of Divine Providence.

“After Vatican II, I saw many of my sisters leave the community, and I asked myself why was I still here,” she said. “While the journey hasn't always been easy, I know this is where God wants me. I love our community, prayer has kept me going, and I love being of service to God's people.”

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TRAVELING TIPS WHEN FLYING

Use special ear plugs to relieve pressure. Use a hand towel as a neck roll or lumbar support or fold towel and place under buttock on the side of back pain to relieve pain.



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