Celebrating 420 Years of Service

Seven Sisters of the Holy Family celebrated Jubilees August 1st at St Joseph Mission San Jose

L to R: Sisters Aurora Perez, Mary Lange, Kathy Littrell, Carole Pesce, Sandra Ann Silva, Anne Gelles, Marie Stafford

Fremont has been blessed by the presence of Sisters of the Holy Family for over 75 years. Their influence and impact has extended far beyond the church. They have been advocates for under-served populations, affordable housing, social justice, and conservation. Through their generosity the Gardens at Palmdale are preserved in perpetuity. These caring, courageous women each made a decision years ago to devote their lives to God and service to others, their Jubilees are a celebration of that devotion.

Sister Carole Pesce - 75 Years

For 75 years, Sister Carole Pesce has been guiding and encouraging parishioners from Oakland to San Diego. While her ministry began with teaching religious education, she soon was developing programs, enlisting lay people to be teachers, and building community wherever she was.

Growing up her family often brought food to Sisters of the Holy Family to support their ministry. Seeing their compassion and dedication to people inspired her to join them, Sister Carole said, "It has been a wonderful journey. I have been privileged to share a common vision, devoted to building a better society, with other women religious."

Her advice: "Be gracious and ready to give of yourself, without being asked. People need affirmation, encouragement, and comfort."

Sister Marie Stafford - 75 Years

Sister Marie Stafford may be 94 years old, but she is still a lively woman, full of stories to tell, and love for everyone.

Sister Marie served at parishes all around the Bay Area. She says, "sometimes parishes didn't have proper facilities, but that didn't matter. We held classes in barns, an old bus garage, and scraped together whatever we needed to make a classroom."

Sister Marie has met Bishop Sheen, Mother Teresa, and Pope John Paul, but what thrills her the most is talking about how she has helped ordinary people.

Sister Marie said, "When you get old you can't do some things. You have to figure out new ways… that's when I got into Facebook." Today, Sister Marie nurtures people she has known for years and connects with new people through Facebook, where she has over 150 followers.

Sister Mary Lange - 60 years

Sister Mary Lange began her ministry taking care of 2-year-olds at day homes in San Francisco's Chinatown, then in Oakland, Las Vegas, and Reno.

In Hawaii she served in parishes and eventually became Director of Office of Worship for all the islands. She says "at each place it was important to understand and respect their culture, then find ways to incorporate their traditions into worship and celebrations of the church."

Coming back to California, Sister Mary became Director of Field Education at St Patrick's Seminary and then began counseling and helping refugees in Fremont. From teaching 2-year-olds to counseling adults, Sister Mary says each ministry prepared her for the next one. "It was a privilege to share life and faith with people from so many cultures." To each of them she says, "Thank you for teaching me."

Sister Sandra Ann Silva - 60 years

Sister Sandra Ann grew up on a farm in Lemore and "was really scared when I was first sent to San Francisco as a Sister." She soon conquered her fear and requested to go to East Palo Alto, then the murder capital of the country, because she felt comfortable with the multi-cultural community.

Her ministry has been filled with new experiences in dozens of locations, including Mexico. At each of them, Sister Sandra Ann fell in love with the people. She taught children, advocated for minorities, organized small groups, been a missionary, rode mules to bring food to people.

Sister Sandra Ann defines her ministry as doing whatever she can to help people, "taking care of the whole person, not just the religious person."

Sister Aurora Perez - 60 years

Sister Aurora Perez bubbles with enthusiasm talking about her decades of ministry as Director of SPRED (Special Religious Development) for the Oakland Diocese. A ministry she was drawn to because her brother had Downs Syndrome.

SPRED resonated with families, "It meant so much to the families, they would cry like my family did when my brother finally received his First Communion." Sister Aurora and her team established SPRED in 20+ parishes in the Oakland Diocese.

After 37 years Sister Aurora retired from SPRED knowing that hundreds of families had been blessed by SPRED and many more would be blessed the program.

After a little retirement Sister Aurora realized she was not done ministering and began volunteering at San Quentin State Prison, especially with inmates on death row. She says, "This was another special group of people, and I felt connected to them as I shared my faith."

Sister Ann Marie Gelles - 50 Years

In spite of many obstacles Sister Ann looks back an a life that has been all she hoped for. She was born prematurely and received too much oxygen in the incubator leaving her legally blind. In grade school she and other blind students were relegated to the furnace room. She was told she could not become a teacher, but she did. When she applied to be a Sister of the Holy Family many said it would be too hard for her. They were wrong.

Teaching and inspiring blind students became Sister Anne's passion. Since 1997, she and her guide dog have been part of the staff at the California School for the Blind, much of that time teaching Braille.

Sister Ann has lived by her advice to her students "take advantage of every opportunity and let love lead the way."

Sister Kathy Littrell - 40 Years

As the youngest Sister of the Holy Family, Sister Kathy Littrell was drawn to religious life both for ministry and for the communal life. Her ministry has been a checkerboard of parish work and leadership roles, both locally and through national organizations.

Last year, Sister Kathy joined the team at St. Joseph Mission San Jose where she works with adults to grow their faith. Sister Kathy says what drives her is the people, living out the mission given to Sisters of the Holy Family when they were founded, "Remember, you belong to the people, consider them first."

Sister Kathy looks to the future with confidence - open to whatever God has in store for her and trusting He will continue to guide her.