

Sister Deborah Humphreys



“It is good to be here.”

These words, which Peter spoke to Jesus on the mountain, were echoed by Sister Deborah Humphreys when asked to reflect on her ministry. Sister Deborah’s story is one firmly rooted in the here and now. She has a gift for appreciating the present moment and the people who share it with her as she listens, affirms, and embraces the challenges before her.

Deborah Humphreys grew up in South Jersey in the 1960’s. Thanks to a generous scholarship offer, she enrolled in the College of Saint Elizabeth, where she majored in sociology. One of Deborah’s projects while in college was to study the healthcare of migrant farm workers in South Jersey. Her discovery that many of these workers suffered from pesticide poisoning ignited her passion for social justice. During the summers between college semesters, Deborah worked directly with the migrant workers and came to know the Sisters of Charity not as her professors but as sisters who wanted to

become engaged in this ministry. With a strong desire to continue to work for social justice, Deborah entered the Sisters of Charity in 1972.

In almost 43 years as a Sister of Charity, Sister Deborah has served in several varied ministries to help people in need. She advocated for community housing development in New York’s Lower East Side, practiced clinical social work in the South Bronx, and worked as a legislative aide to a State Senator. In her ministries in Newark, she became especially close with and devoted to the people living in the Lincoln Park (at Saint Columba School) and Ironbound sections. For ten years, she worked with the Abbott Preschool Program in Newark and trained family workers to make connections between school and home.

Throughout all her experiences in ministry, Sister Deborah says “there are a million stories.” Sister Deborah connects with people first by listening, seeing her role not as a “fixer” but as someone who helps people to find their own solutions to their problems. In the faces of people struggling with poverty, illness, and injustice, Sister Deborah sees the face of God, and she is awed by the simple graces that come with sharing and trust. She recalls, “When I did in-home counseling, we would sit at the kitchen table. They would make Puerto Rican coffee and have bread from the bakery, and that would be Eucharist.”

Sister Deborah uses poetry and the arts to express her spirituality. She says, “To me, writing and artwork are praying.” Sister Deborah wrote her first book of poetry in 2003, and has written poetry in English, Spanish, and Irish Gaelic. She further developed her writing, as well as acrylic painting and other arts, by earning a Masters of Fine Arts in Interdisciplinary Arts from Goddard College. She has also studied drumming, which she used creatively to help women learn to discover writing through percussion at Josephine’s Place in Elizabeth.

Beginning in 2011, Sister Deborah serves on the Sisters of Charity Council. This position requires her to assume many different roles, from helping to decide matters of community governance and serving on corporate boards to providing counseling to dying sisters and grieving family members. She says, “I love meeting with the sisters, being present to them through bad times and good times.” She adds, “There are great women in our community, and we’re family. These are the people with whom I want to spend my life.”

Sister Deborah is especially excited to be part of the leadership team helping to move the mission of charity forward in changing times for religious women. She says, “I think we’re really at the point of something truly new. We are rediscovering our charism for what will be needed.” She recognizes that religious communities,

including the Sisters of Charity, have always faced great challenges and that God has always provided. “I strongly believe in the Providence of God. I think we’re going to find different ways to do things. Our presence may be more subtle, but our legacy will definitely be there. It will be because of who we are, and not just what we do.”

Sister Deborah knows that the Sisters of Charity will always be true to their heritage and will be “ready to do the hard things, to do things that other people don’t want to do, and to do things we never believed we could do.” To Sister Deborah, the mission of boundless charity is summed in these words from her poem in “Conventional Wisdom:”

*and hope moves among us
and hope moves us*

*women whose arms
bear a blessing of bread
hidden in fold of apron
running ahead into the day*