Sister Anne Haarer

"Art in all its forms, from pencil sketches to sculptures, always holds for me an ever awakening sense of a share in God's creative spirit."

This statement by Sister Anne Haarer captures the essence of her artistic spirit and her faith. Sister Anne is an extraordinary artist who uses her gifts to serve God and who has ignited the creative spirit in innumerable young people blessed to call her teacher.

Anne Haarer grew up in Cliffside Park, near Palisades Amusement Park. Her active childhood included summer days swimming at the park's famous saltwater pool. She also spent many afternoons learning art from Mrs. Specht, who lived one block away. "Six other kids and I would meet with her on her back porch. I learned every single medium from her, from pencil all the way up to oil painting."

Anne worshiped with her family at the Church of the Epiphany in Cliffside Park. She attended public school for grade school and then went to St. Cecilia High School in Englewood.

"I feel like I got my vocation at "Saints." I became devoted to Saint Therese, the 'Little Flower.' St. Cecilia's Church had a special altar to St. Therese and I used to pop in there at lunch to pray about what I should do with my life."

Through prayer and with the encouragement of Sister Marie Imelda Hagan, who was the choir director at Epiphany, Anne decided to enter the Sisters of Charity directly after graduation from high school in 1956. Following her novitiate, she enrolled in the College of Saint Elizabeth intending to major in chemistry.

"I liked doing experiments and I wanted to do research, but I never would have made it in chemistry because my math is terrible," she laughs. "I met with the Dean of the College, and she said, 'Of course you'll go into art!'"

After Sister Anne graduated from college, she first taught third and fourth grades at St. Paul's School in Clifton. She especially enjoyed the fourth graders and still looks back on that period as a wonderful time in her life. She then spent six years at Immaculate Conception High School in Montclair, teaching art, English, and religion.

While teaching at the high school during the school terms, she spent four summers at the University of Notre Dame to earn a Masters Degree in Art. "I did so many great things there – calligraphy, ceramics, sculpture, stained glass …. It opened my mind." One of Sister Anne's proudest achievements while at Notre Dame was kicking a field goal from the 10 yard line in Notre Dame Stadium. "It was summer, and they let us walk right onto the field." A grainy picture captures the moment when Sister Anne, in full habit, added her own special chapter to the lore of Fighting Irish football.

In 1970, Sister Anne joined the faculty in the Art Department of the College of Saint Elizabeth. Over the years, Sister Anne has taught a wide array of courses in art and served as the Chairperson of the Art
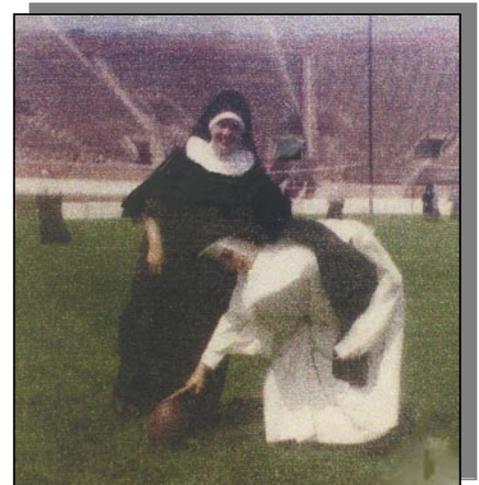
Department for eighteen years. "Whatever I have taught at the College, I have loved doing, whether it was oil painting, one of my favorite things, or sculpture, also one of my favorite things, or color or design. I loved whatever I was doing. And most of all, I loved the students!"

One of Sister Anne's most memorable experiences with her students was when she and Sister Agnes Vincent took a group of students to Europe. The students had the opportunity to study philosophy and art in absolutely exquisite settings in Greece and Italy and to experience some of the world's greatest art. Sister Anne remembers being profoundly moved when she saw Michelangelo's partially finished sculptures of slaves at the Academia in Florence. "You could see the figures that he was coaxing out of that marble. I felt like he had just put his chisels down to go off and get a cup of coffee. I started crying, for I was so overcome by that glimpse of being privy to his creation."

Sister Anne experiences the awe of the creative process in the works that she produces. To her, creating art is almost an out of body experience. "I think every artist, when a work is completed, senses as I do, surprise. Somehow the enormous expenditure of time, struggles with composition and color, etc., disappear. I have fashioned it. There it is. Yet it seems to have come into existence by itself! The process as well as the product echoes the mystery of creation."

Among Sister Anne's many works, some of the most meaningful pieces to her are carved plaster medallions she created to commemorate the founding of St. Joseph Hospital in Paterson, the three huge paintings entitled "The Seasons of Learning" at the Annunciation Center on the campus of the College of Saint Elizabeth, and the slate sculpture of Mother Mary Xavier Mehegan, the foundress of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth, in the entrance way of the College's Santa Rita Hall.

Though Sister Anne creates her art alone, she is an active member of the community of the Sisters of Charity. She joins sisters for evening prayer and morning Mass and draws strength and support from her sisters who journey with her in faith. She says, "I have a great love for the community. I am so grateful for my teachers who brought me to be at the place where I can be a fruitful, cooperative member of that community."

To many, Sister Anne is among the most visible sisters in the community as she tools around in her customized red golf cart titled "Van Gogh." Though it has been a few years since her success on the football field, she still stays fit and rides her bike.

Sister Anne enjoys quiet time creating art in what she calls her "studiola" under the dome in the Motherhouse. "The light is great, and I can be alone. When I'm creating, it's really like a prayerful experience. I never really turn people down when they ask me to do something. I always feel this is a gift I've been given. There's no way that I couldn't use it for the community."

The gifts of Sister Anne's art, her loving devotion to students, and her witness of a life that is continually awed by creation have abundantly blessed more people than Sister Anne will ever know.