

Sister Noreen Neary

In reflecting on her ministry as a Sister of Charity, Sister Noreen Neary describes herself as pragmatic and realistic. “I believe that your spirituality is best expressed by what you do.” Sister Noreen has been doing for others as a Sister of Charity for 35 years, cognizant that she continues the enduring legacy of Sisters who have lived out the mission of charity for more than 150 years.

Noreen grew up as the oldest of four children in an Irish immigrant family in Elizabeth, New Jersey. She attended Catholic elementary school in Elizabeth and then went on to study at Mother Seton Regional High School in Clark, where she first met Sisters of Charity. “The Sisters were all young and energetic, and they gave me a whole new view of what religious life could be.”

Although Noreen considered entering the Sisters of Charity immediately after high school, the needs of her family impacted her plans. Noreen’s father died during her senior year in high school and her mother died less than two years later. Noreen worked for a year after high school, then continued to live at home while attending Seton Hall University and taking care of her younger siblings.

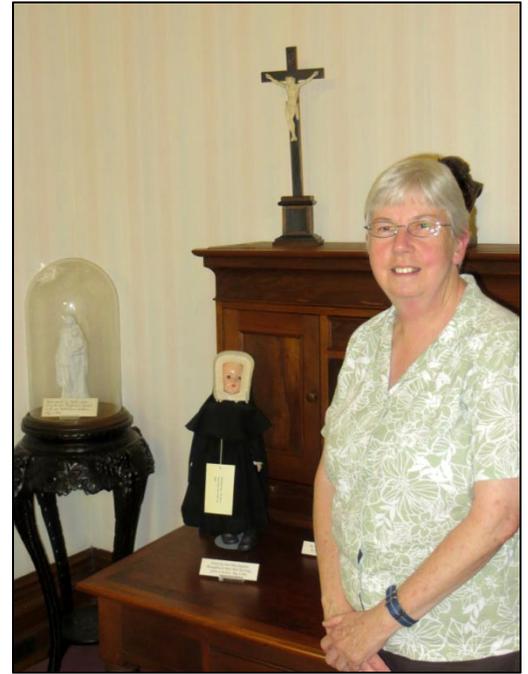
Upon graduation from Seton Hall, Noreen worked as a research chemist for Allied Chemical. She remained in close contact with the Sisters of Charity and she continued to sense that God may be calling her to join the Sisters of Charity. When Sister Ellen Joyce told her that she would be permitted to go home as often as she needed to take care of her brother, the only sibling then living at home, Noreen knew that it was time to respond to the call. She entered the Sisters of Charity in 1978.

Although Sister Noreen could have continued as a research chemist and had no prior interest in teaching, she decided to try teaching. She lived in the community as a postulant at Mother Seton Convent and joined the faculty of Mother Seton Regional High School. Looking back on it, she realizes that “I had so much to learn. I was not a good teacher that first year—adequate, but not good.”

After a year of canonical studies and two more years at Mother Seton, Sister Noreen had a desire to work in the inner city. In 1982, she accepted a position in the science department at St. Vincent Academy in Newark. Over the next 30 years at St. Vincent, she developed into a great teacher. As chairperson of the Science Department, she greatly expanded the science program, offering her students tremendous opportunities and challenges. She recognized and addressed the needs of her students and enabled them to succeed. “Teaching at St. Vincent was reaching out to among the poorest of the poor. Many of these students--the young, urban women-- came from very difficult situations. Some were homeless while they were students.”

Sister Noreen is adamant about the transformative impact of education. “I strongly believe that the ultimate act of social justice is education. When I see some of my former students now, it’s clear that their own children will have better lives because of the academic preparation and support these women received at St. Vincent’s.” Sister Noreen stays in touch with many former students and especially enjoys keeping up with their growing families and their professional achievements through Facebook. “It’s so nice to see how they are getting on with their lives, to hear about their families.”

While teaching at St. Vincent’s, Sister Noreen took on increased responsibilities both at the school and in other ministries, serving as a trustee at St. Joseph Healthcare System in Paterson. She also pursued her interest in scripture and ethics, earning a Masters of Divinity from New York Theological Seminary in 1993. “At that



time, I was the only Catholic student in the program. I met a lot of people different from me and got a broader view of the world and of the church.”

After 30 years at St. Vincent’s, Sister Noreen decided to take on a new challenge last year and accepted the position as Director of Archives for the Sisters of Charity. In this work, she applies her logical mind to the puzzles of history, piecing together stories of the Sisters and their ministries. “I get requests for genealogical information about a Sister once or twice a week, and I really get into it and try to get as much information as I can.” Sister Noreen is often able to find letters, pictures, and other records that provide family members with all kinds of information they never knew about an aunt, a cousin, or other relative. “People will say, ‘This is amazing!’ In my role, I become the face of the Congregation to the people making inquiries, and it’s a very positive relationship.”

Working as Director of Archives has given Sister Noreen renewed gratitude for all the women who preceded her as Sisters of Charity. “Even if I can find out only a little about a Sister, it’s still nice to know that her works are remembered not just in heaven but also here on earth.”

The more that Sister Noreen learns about the Sisters of Charity and their history, the more she appreciates how much good the Sisters have done in service to others. “What our sisters have done is awe inspiring. It touches me deeply.” She observes, “Serving poor people has clearly been the common thread throughout the whole history of the Sisters of Charity. Even the Sisters who didn’t work directly with poor people always tried to educate those they worked with, whether students or adults, about the needs of poor people and then helped others to respond to those needs.”

The deep appreciation for the history of the Sisters of Charity has also given Sister Noreen confidence about the future. “Though I don’t know exactly what the future will look like, I know that the mission of the Sisters of Charity and the work of Seton Associates will go forward.” Sister Noreen is committed to that future as she continues to uncover the stories and works of the many Sisters who have lived out the mission of charity through the years.