

## Sister Robert Clare Swarts

Gentle, soft spoken, compassionate, highly capable . . . these terms come to mind when describing Sister Robert Clare Swarts. Over the course of 58 years as a Sister of Charity, Sister Robert Clare has let her actions speak louder than her words as she dedicates her life to a ministry of healing and caring.

Sister Robert Clare was born in Jersey City, New Jersey. She was the second oldest of six children in her family. Her parents were active in their church and they made sure that the children attended Catholic schools. The importance of church was reinforced by an extended family that included several cousins who were nuns and an uncle who was a Monsignor. Sister Robert Clare says, "I've been around priests and nuns my whole life!"

Sister Robert Clare first became aware of her own calling to religious life at a very early age. Her first grade teacher at St. Patrick's School in Jersey City was Sister Thomas Mary Salerno, SC, who was then in her first year of teaching after leaving the novitiate. Sister Robert Clare says, "One day I was watching Sister Thomas and I decided that I, too, would be a Sister of Charity." She went home and told her mother, who responded, "Oh, that's nice."



Though her mother may have had an appropriately restrained response to a first grader's declaration of a religious vocation, in the case of Sister Robert Clare, the vocation was indeed the real thing. Her resolve to become a Sister of Charity persisted when the family moved from Jersey City to West Milford and she attended a much smaller Catholic elementary school.

Because of her continuing interest in religious life, Sister Robert Clare's parents allowed her to attend the Sisters of Charity Preparatory School. Sister Robert Clare enjoyed high school and looked forward to entering the Sisters of Charity following graduation. Her favorite subject was biology. "I loved the dissecting!" She decided that she would like to be a nurse when she became a Sister of Charity. Though her interest in nursing was partly based on her love of biology, Sister Robert Clare laughs, "Also probably it was vanity, because the sisters who were nurses wore white habits and I really liked the white habit!"

Following graduation from high school, Sister Robert Clare entered the Sisters of Charity in August, 1959. She was pleased to be selected to attend Nursing School at All Souls Hospital in Morristown, where she got an excellent foundation for the varied and challenging ministry in nursing ahead.

While serving as a staff nurse at All Souls Hospital, Sister Robert Clare earned her BSN from Seton Hall University. Her education continued after All Souls Hospital closed in 1970 when she earned a Masters Degree in Medical/Surgical Nursing from NYU.

The advanced education prepared Sister Robert Clare for increasing responsibilities when she moved to St. Joseph Hospital in Paterson. As a nurse and later in her different supervisory roles, she was committed to furthering the mission of charity and the Hospital's institutional commitment to helping everyone who entered the door, regardless of any ability to pay.

A chance encounter that occurred when she was at St. Joseph reinforced Sister Robert Clare's conviction that "you never know whose lives you touch." She explains, "We had a patient on the surgical floor who came from West Milford, where I lived growing up. I was talking with him about that on a Sunday afternoon when I was making my final rounds before going to Mass. They announced Mass on the loudspeaker. He mentioned Mass and I thought he was asking to go so I got a wheelchair and took him to Mass with me." About a month later, Sister Robert Clare learned that because the man was too embarrassed to correct Sister Robert Clare and tell her that no, he did not want to go to Mass, he ended up returning to the church and bringing his whole family with him. She laughs, "My mother thought I worked a miracle. In her mind, that's what I was there for, to do things like that. But it was totally the work of the Holy Spirit."

Sister Robert Clare's progressive roles at St. Joseph Hospital included Director of Medical/Surgical Nursing, Director of Maternal/Child Nursing and Director of a newly instituted Staffing Office. Through her innovative leadership of the Staffing

Office, the hospital reduced its reliance on agency nurses and saved costs by offering “Select-a-Shift” to accommodate nurses who could not work traditional schedules.

Sister Robert Clare’s capable leadership and caring demeanor made a lasting impact on St. Joseph Hospital and the people she served. A program that was especially meaningful to both the program participants and Sister Robert Clare personally was the childbirth education program she started. Sister Robert Clare became a certified Lamaze instructor and taught Lamaze classes for 20 years. She loved working with expectant women and their partners. “You met a lot of nice people at a time in their lives when they were very vulnerable. It was very satisfying to help them.” In recognition of her prominence in the field, Sister Robert Clare was named a fellow in the American College of Childbirth Educators. One benefit of this fellowship was the memorable opportunity to travel in a delegation to China to learn about Chinese childbirth practices at a time when China was just beginning to open its doors to visitors from the West.

In 1995, Sister Robert Clare left St. Joseph Hospital to continue her ministry at St. Vincent Nursing Home in Cedar Grove. She served as Assistant Administrator for six years and then was asked to start an adult day care program for people with Alzheimer’s. Participants in the program were transported by bus to St. Vincent’s, where they spent the day in a welcoming, familiar environment with supportive and caring staff. The family caregivers of the patients were very grateful for the break that the program afforded them. Many of these families later moved their loved one to reside in the nursing home when the progression of Alzheimer’s necessitated a higher level of care.

Sister Robert Clare currently serves as Director of Health and Lifestyle Transitions for the Sisters of Charity. She is gratified to be able to help sisters with a wide range of medical and practical needs. She is often called upon to assess elderly sisters who might need a change in residence or different medical care. She arranges doctors’ visits and surgeries and rehabilitation as needed and generally serves as a liaison between the sister and the medical community. Perhaps most importantly, she is a friend to sisters when they are vulnerable and anxious and is a kind listener and effective advocate when they need one the most.

Throughout her years in nursing ministry, Sister Robert Clare has always been motivated by the desire to advance the mission of the Sisters of Charity. “Our whole background leads us to take care of people who are poor and vulnerable. There are many different ways that you can serve people in need, and the Sisters of Charity seem to hit the nail on the head many times.”

Although she is measured and soft spoken, Sister Robert Clare has a quick sense of humor and an appreciation for having fun. She enjoys living with the other sisters at St. Joseph Hospital Convent, which has been her home for the past 46 years. “Everyone knows everyone else’s family. We eat together, pray together and have parties for all the holidays.”

Sister Robert Clare also enjoys being part of a large extended family and she stays close with her five siblings. “I’d say we’re a close knit family. We look alike, too!” Four of her siblings now live in the same over-50 community in Florida, a fact she says that her parents would find amusing. She laughs, “I can’t call anyone on Monday nights because they all go to Bingo!”

Sister Robert Clare greets each day with faith that God is guiding her and has a plan for the Sisters of Charity. With characteristic directness and resolve, she confidently looks to the future saying, “Make the best of whatever you can and keep going on. God’s going to show us the way!”