



# Shedding the Habit

## New era finds nuns working for victims of economic and political oppression

It was 1945 when Mother Rosalie Hill and a small group of sisters from the Religious of the Sacred Heart first set foot on a chaparral-covered hill that would become USD. More than a half century later, 330 sisters from the same U.S. chapter gathered on campus, and it was hard to tell which had changed more: the university or the order of Catholic nuns that founded it.

“We used to be very isolated,” says Sister Pat Shaffer, who next spring will celebrate her 50th anniversary in the religious order known as RSCJ, which operates 54 primary and secondary schools worldwide. “Now we are focused on ways we can get out and work among the people who need us — the poor, victims of political and economic injustice, the HIV-positive population, alcoholics, the homeless. It is a 180-degree turn in the approach to our work.”

The theme of this summer’s three-day assembly at USD, “Living the Chapter: Globalization a Year Later,” followed up last

year’s worldwide meeting of nuns in France, and marked the first time since 1988 that the U.S. chapter met formally as a group.

“At the meeting in France, the focus was manifesting God’s presence in the world,” says Sister Virginia Rodee, assistant to the vice president of mission and ministry at USD. “This was a chance for us to measure our progress since then.”

How well have they done? So well that Mother Hill might not have recognized her colleagues or the order itself. In the early 1950s, the sisters who ran the College for Women (the precursor to USD) were semi-cloistered. Except for meeting with and teaching students, and Sunday afternoon visits from their families in the Founders Hall parlor, the nuns were relatively shut off from the outside world.

Shaffer says the order’s global perspective has roots in the Second Vatican Council, the series of landmark reforms that sought to preserve Catholic tradition while helping the

Church more effectively preach the gospel in the modern world. Nuns gradually emerged from their habits and cloistered lives to work among the world’s oppressed.

“The Church was looking for ways to make our lives and our work more fruitful,” Shaffer says. “That’s why most of us no longer wear the habit — it was a barrier between us and the people we were trying to reach.”

While for many Catholics Vatican II widened the appeal of the Church, for some it had the opposite effect. Rodee says when she joined the Sacred Heart order in 1957, there were almost 8,000 members worldwide. After Vatican II a significant number left the order, and now she estimates there are fewer than 4,000 members.

Rodee says the RSCJ still has a strong focus on education and has seen its ranks swell in the Congo, Zaire, Korea, Uganda and Kenya.

“We’ve been active in talking with young women, but it’s not recruiting in the traditional sense because in the end, it is a calling.”

ON THIS DATE IN...

1985

**Tuition was raised** to \$250 per unit, bringing the cost for a full-time student to \$7,500 per year. Full-time tuition in the 2001-02 academic year rings in at around \$19,000.

**“Scarface” and “The Breakfast Club”** were the main features at the “drive-in movie” on the soccer field. The event was B.Y.O.B.C. — bring your own beach chairs.

**The university launched** a quarterly alumni publication called *U Magazine*. “The ‘U’ is just getting started and has a long way to go,” said editor John Sutherland. The magazine today is called *USD Magazine*, and we like to think that it has come a long way.