

KEEPING THE SPIRIT ALIVE

By Mary Enges-Maas



They represent the essence of the university, living lives dedicated to aiding others in the search for knowledge and truth. They're USD's Religious of the Sacred Heart.

Some 40-odd years have passed since Mother Rosalie Clifton Hill and other members of the Society of the Sacred Heart first breathed life into dreams to build a great university at Alcalá Park.

Yet that founding spirit — grounded in an unwavering dedication to education — has thrived through the years because of the women who have followed in Mother Hill's footsteps. Names like Bremmer, Rossi, Danz and Murphy echo from the past.

Today, the spirit still burns brightly. On the next few pages you'll discover three of the reasons why.

Three who carry on the legacy of the Religious of the Sacred Heart at USD: Sisters Helen Lorch, Betsy Walsh and Annette Schmeling.

Sr. Annette Schmeling

Annette Schmeling, with her lithe movements and twinkling eyes, looks like she would play a terrific shortstop.

That's what the high school students she taught said about her the first year after she entered with the Religious of the Sacred Heart.

"It's hard when people say, 'Oh, what a drag that you're a nun,'" she says, leaning forward with a smile. "The kids would say, 'What a waste. You're just too cool to be a nun.'"

"But I love the religious life. Being a religious is just different from what people's stereotypes are and that's a challenge."

In her sixth year as a religious, Sr. Schmeling, 32, likes to incorporate the traditions of the Sacred Heart into her work as student affairs special projects coordinator.

"My commitment is making known the love of God," she says. "And higher education is where I want to assert my commitment."

It wasn't always so easy to say those words. At 26, having finished her master's in communications at Marquette University, a Jesuit school, Sr. Schmeling felt ready to make a commitment. But the step toward the order was heavy with apprehension.

"I knew in my gut that I was called to religious life," she recalls, her speech laced with the vernacular of youth. "But I resisted because what I wanted was so different from what all my friends were doing. But I knew I needed something more."

After a careful search for the right order, Sr. Schmeling chose the Society of the Sacred Heart after meeting its students. "Their desire for knowledge, the recognition and development of their own gifts and the respect and dignity for themselves and others was what I saw in the students I was meeting."

Sr. Schmeling now not only experiences those influences every day, she works to perpetuate them with the students she meets.

"The society's basic mission, focus and energy is education," she says. "For me,

the most important message I can communicate to a student is telling them, that no matter what they are struggling with, they are loved by God.

"If that message takes hold, then the mission and the tradition of the society is perpetuated."

Sr. Schmeling sees that mission acted



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out by USD students who take communion each week to patients at Mercy Hospital. And similar feelings flow from the volunteers who have helped build houses for Tijuana's homeless.

"They feel they are receiving so much more than they are giving," Sr. Schmeling says about the students. "Which is an indication to me that they are experiencing what it feels to be loved by someone greater than themselves. That's what the society is all about."

In her third year at USD, Sr. Schmeling is sure that her decision to become a religious is not very different from making a commitment to what most call a typical

family. It's just that making any commitment in this age of ephemeral values is difficult, she analyzes.

"I think there's a lot of resistance to making a commitment because it is popular to think nothing is forever anymore," she says. "My choice feels counter-cultural at a time when there is so much focus on 'what I do, how much money I have, how large a house I own.' It's hard for me. I could easily get caught up in my achievements and successes and what I do. The challenge is to be able to step back and ask, 'but why?' My relationship with God and his claim on me is central to who I am and is the reason why."

Sr. Schmeling believes that all are called by God, but that each person responds differently. Her call was one of many she could have answered. Answering this one means she can still play shortstop. And show USD and the world God's love.

Sr. Helen Lorch

A heart-shaped gold pin accented the dark suit Sr. Helen Lorch wore as she sidestepped students rushing to class. Many of those students broke into grins and tossed her an affectionate "Hello, Sister!" as the gray-haired woman passed by.

Something in their step, their eyes, their voice, told Sr. Lorch she had touched their lives. Just as the Religious of the Sacred Heart have touched students at USD since its founding.

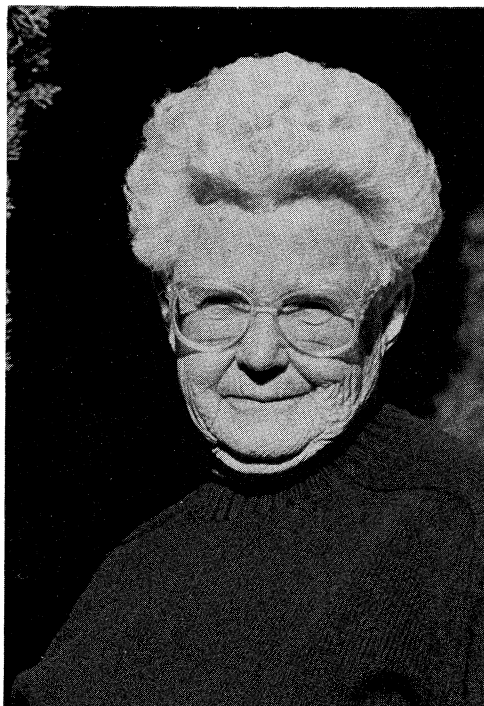
Sr. Lorch was there in 1954, then a married laywoman, a teacher, helping young Hispanic women learn English as they were taught history. "I've always liked the teaching, even when it wasn't thought of as such a great profession," she chuckles.

When her husband fell terminally ill, Sr. Lorch left the campus on the mesa. And when she returned, her husband gone, it was with a resolution and a single hope: to become a Religious of the Sacred Heart.

It was the natural choice, she remembers, even though she had been married and was considered older than most religious at the time. But with a single-minded devotion to Christ and the Church, she began a new life...it was 1963.

She relates how the Sacred Heart presence helped shape the USD persona, through religious dedication and discipline and love. And especially education. Although Sr. Lorch now is an administrator, she continues to instruct western civilization classes.

"It is easier . . . to teach all the disci-



"I have a certain amount of perseverance and don't give up when the going gets tough," says Sr. Lorch, a USD institution since 1954.

plines if you have a background that is Catholic and Christian," she says. "People act the way they believe, if they firmly believe it. That's how our religious beliefs are reflected. . . It is thought that the Religious of the Sacred Heart is one of the best teaching orders."

It is that love of teaching and students the religious perpetuate today. Until Vatican II, the primary thrust of the order was the basic education of young women, Lorch notes. "After that, we began to allow people to go into the nursing fields, to go into the business world. Now we have lawyers in the society. We have scientists."

But even with the diversity, the deep commitment to the liberal arts never waned. It only laid the foundation for excellence in other disciplines, in academics, administration and leadership.

Such are the traits that characterize Sr. Lorch. As resident director for Camino

and Founders Halls, she is entrusted with the lives of more than 300 freshman girls. And when asked which of St. Philippine Duchesne's many traits she reflects in her work with those young women, she responds without hesitation: perseverance.

"I have a certain amount of perseverance and don't give up when the going gets tough," she says, her gritty words seeming to belie her delicacy. She recalls how the hardships and obstacles St. Philippine faced were always conquered, an example that other religious have followed.

"I admire all of the Religious of the Sacred Heart that I have met. They are outstanding examples of educated women who are doing their best to give of themselves to others."

The obstacles Sr. Lorch faces today may not include establishing missions in the wilderness, but she does claim her own mission at Camino Hall.

"They know I'm always there," she says from her small apartment tucked into a corner of the hall. "I have an ideal of service to the students, so that in this society, which admires and almost worships youth, I feel that there are great advantages in not being a young person anymore. Because for all my various decrepities, I have the wisdom of years. And I'm so thankful I can give it."

Even with the years of sacrifice and dedication, which she says have had their own reward, Sr. Lorch would choose no other life.

"I thank God every day that I was smart enough to do what I did," she laughs. Then, lowering her voice in a conspiratorial tone, she adds, "I was kind of inspired to do this. Because I am associated with youth, it does keep you young."

Sr. Betsy Walsh

Like a wise parent who forever shapes her child with a tender hand, the influence of the Religious of the Sacred Heart has burnished upon USD a lasting face.

And although the number of Sacred Heart on campus has dwindled today to a handful, the order's influence and spirit remain a vital part of the university's identity.

"I don't see the spirit waning at all," says Sr. Betsy Walsh, a professor in the



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English department who in January celebrated her 25th year as a religious. "Certainly all of the faculty who teach here reflect that spirit and those traditions. In addition, all those whom we teach carry on the Sacred Heart legacy."

That legacy has played an integral role

The emphasis now is on transforming society, creating a world of justice and peace.

in shaping USD's character during the past four decades. It's a legacy which emphasizes development of the whole person: body and spirit, mind and psyche, Sr. Walsh explains.

"There is a very strong emphasis on social justice as well," she points out, her pale blue eyes serious and strong. "We sincerely believe that getting actively involved is one of the answers to helping the oppressed and less fortunate."

The task of raising students' awareness is carried out by introducing them to the classics as well as to contemporary developments in science and psychology, she says. That's also the goal of the university's core curriculum, which mandates nine units in religious studies and three classes in philosophy, including ethics.

"In a sense, I think the academic requirements reflect the value system and the traditions of the society," she adds.

As an educator, Sr. Walsh is an integral part of those traditions. "My central responsibility is to be a teacher," she notes. And yet, she does much more than

lecture on medieval literature and Chaucer and teach drama to graduate and undergraduate students. She initiated a program in which USD students tutor Southeast San Diego schoolchildren. She is the director of the master's

program in English. And she is active in Campus Ministry, showing always the relationship between education and faith.

Sr. Walsh came to USD well prepared for her duties. She earned undergraduate and master's degrees at Manhattanville College, and a doctorate at Harvard.

But don't feel intimidated by those credentials. The tiny nun is approachable, a keen listener who gently insists on being called "Betsy" instead of her more formal given name of Elizabeth.

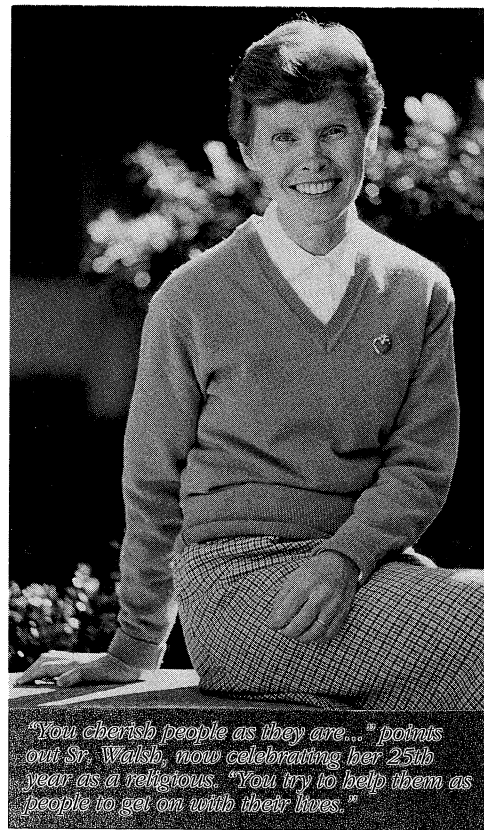
Asked to compare herself to St. Philippine, the foundress of the Sacred Heart order in America, Sr. Walsh reacts with surprise, calling the saint a "very huge person" in terms of her humility, devotion to the Church and personal sacrifices for the good of others.

"Our whole purpose as religious is to communicate love," she says, her fragile face exuding a reflection of that belief. "You cherish people as they are. . . You try to help them as people to get on with their lives."

"I know students who have said to me, 'You're not interested only in whether we learn a poem or whether we learn the material of the course; you're interested in us as people.'"

Sr. Walsh identifies the profound changes occurring in America's values and spirituality as one of her biggest challenges as a religious and an educator. The emphasis now is on transforming society, creating a world of justice and peace.

"There is a heavy burden we carry today," Sr. Walsh says of the world's suffering, the materialistic bent of society, the endless array of choices that confront every individual. "But I like to think that the commitment of our religious is a sign of God's care and concern. Wherever we are we work for the coming of His kingdom."



"You cherish people as they are..." points out Sr. Walsh, now celebrating her 25th year as a religious. "You try to help them as people to get on with their lives."