Mid-Atlantic Sisters Make a Difference in Atlantic City, NJ

Four sisters from the Mid-Atlantic Community are bringing the mission of Mercy to 225 elementary school students, representing 50 countries and 36 dialects, who live in Atlantic City, NJ, a city plagued with poverty, crime, drugs and gangs.

Sister Mary Shamus Zehrer, RSM, the principal of Our Lady Star of the Sea for the past 35 years, started making a difference in 1968 when she started teaching eighth grade at the school. “At that time, the student population was 600 and primarily Irish,” says Sister Shamus. “The parents then and the parents now are very generous; they are cooperative people who are family-oriented. Most of our parents now are casino workers and many have been laid off or have had their hours cut.”

When Sister Christine Triggs, RSM, started teaching at Our Lady Star of the Sea 30 years ago, she followed the same class of children for four years, first teaching them in fifth, then sixth, then seventh and finally eighth grade. For the past 27 years she has taught eighth grade at the school. She also teaches sixth, seventh and eighth grade math, directs the school’s choir, and works with the Student Council. “Teaching is like gardening,” says Sister Christine. “In the lower grades you plant, prune and water the seeds, in the middle grades you cultivate the plants, and in eighth grade, you get to watch them bloom and become the best students they can be.”
“When I grew up in South Amboy, NJ, everybody at my school was white and Catholic,” says Sister Christine. “Our school is like the United Nations. Our children experience openness and the goodness in all different people. We have a variety of cultures and faiths. Our current eighth grade class of 29 students includes Catholics, Buddhists, Hindu, Muslims, and all varieties of Christians in one room. We teach the Catholic faith, no matter what name you call God by. Most of the families here, especially the immigrant families, still believe in the American dream that you can accomplish whatever you want by working and achieving. They inspire other students in the classrooms.”

After teaching for five years at Our Lady Star of the Sea, Sister Mary Ann Liddy, RSM, became the school’s guidance counselor, her ministry for the past 17 years. She works with children who have problems at home or at school. For 18 years prior to ministering at Our Lady Star of the Sea, she served as a principal at two other Catholic elementary schools in New Jersey.

“When I was principal, I didn’t have the time to deal in depth, one-on-one with the students who were having challenges. So, I went and got my education and certification in guidance. Now in this job, I do have the time.” Sister Mary Ann sponsors a 25 cents breakfast every morning for the students before school, so they have a safe place to wait for the school day to begin. It’s also a time for students to interact informally and get to know Sister Mary Ann better. “I meet with the children and parents as needed and take them from where they are now to help them work through their challenges. I am here to listen.”

“Sometimes, I feel that Catherine McAuley is sitting on my shoulder listening and offering me guidance. I think she would be thrilled with my ministry,” says Sister Mary Ann. “Catherine reached out to children who were less fortunate.”

Sister Debbie Vignuolo, RSM, the first grade teacher for the past 22 years and the girls’ varsity basketball coach, says when she first came to Our Lady Star of the Sea, the classes were much bigger and the students were primarily Caucasian and African-American. Now the students are mostly Asian and Hispanic. “We still do the work of Catherine McAuley. Education is a major part of our charism. Catherine educated children who are poor and we do, too.” The four sisters live together in the same convent with another Mid-Atlantic Sister of Mercy, Sister Joan McKeon, RSM, who recently retired from Catholic Social Services in Atlantic City, and Mable Lou, a bearded collie mix shelter dog. “We are in this together,” says Sister Christine. “You get the support that you need at home in the convent,” says Sister Mary Shamus. “I couldn’t imagine working in the school without the support of the sisters.”

“Catherine responded to the call of Jesus and integrated her life with faith and with people in need,” says Sister Christine. “The Sisters of Mercy at Our Lady Star of the Sea are women of faith who try to live it and see the goodness in the children to whom we minister.”