

LORETTA HOPGOOD:

Celebrating 40 years as an SSND associate

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SSND Associates Anne Carey, Loretta Hopgood and Lois Vollmer joined hundreds of people in front of the Federal Court House in St. Louis for a peaceful rally and march to the Arch earlier this year.

It has been four decades, but **Loretta Hopgood** still remembers clearly the day of her associate covenanting – the light of the burning candle, the wellspring of emotions, the overwhelming realization that “Yes, I belong now. This is a commitment.”

As she celebrates the 40th anniversary of that commitment this year, Loretta holds the distinction of being the longest covenanted associate of the School Sisters of Notre Dame in North America. She was among the first women to enter into an associate relationship in St. Louis.

“This was a real commitment,” Loretta said. “This was not to be taken lightly. This was for the rest of my life. This was going to be a part of me now and beyond.”

Loretta’s love and admiration for the SSND community, sisters and associates has continued to deepen over the years, said **Anne Carey**, an associate and co-director of Associates for the Central Pacific Province.

“Whenever there is an SSND activity,” Anne said, Loretta is always among the first to respond, whether it is an associate meeting or work day for Habitat for Humanity or a march in support of immigrants and refugees. She rearranges her schedule in order to live out the associate relationship and the SSND charism.”

Loretta’s deep spirituality, commitment to service and energetic sense of adventure have guided her rich and varied experiences as an associate, nurse, community volunteer and Olympian. Her curiosity to try new things and love of life are evident at every turn.

A native of Du Quoin, Illinois, about 100 miles south of St. Louis, Loretta is the oldest of four children and was raised in the Baptist faith. She recalls a persistent interest in Catholicism, going back to her high school years. In junior college, she was taught by Ursuline nuns. After finishing nursing school, she worked at Memorial Medical Center in Springfield, Illinois, for several years.

Emboldened by her adventurous spirit and a desire to see more of the United States, Loretta decided to move to New York City in 1962. She and a friend, who

also was a nurse, loaded everything in a U-Haul truck and drove across the country, arriving on the East Coast in the middle of a snow storm. Roads were closed, and no one was being permitted to enter the city.

Undaunted, she turned her truck onto the Garden State Parkway, where she passed a sign for East Orange General Hospital in New Jersey. She took the exit, pulled into a service station, changed in the restroom and showed up at the hospital, asking for a job.

“I don’t think people would do that anymore,” she said with a laugh.

After three years in New Jersey, she returned to Effingham, Illinois. The first School Sisters of Notre Dame to enter Loretta’s life were patients at HSHS St. Anthony’s Memorial Hospital. Loretta enjoyed the conversations and made it a point to bring them milkshakes so that she would have an excuse to spend more time with them.

Influenced by those connections and others that she made at St. Anthony’s, Loretta converted to Catholicism in 1967.

She went back to school to earn bachelor’s and master’s degrees and became a certified pediatric nurse practitioner. Working as a school nurse in

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Southern Illinois, she often crossed paths with SSNDs. They would invite her to supper, and she got to know many of them very well.

Those friendships with the SSNDs continued. While the subject of becoming a nun occasionally did come up, it was about a decade before the subject of the Associates Program or associate relationship was raised.

She remembers that it was **S. Kathleen Wegman** who invited her to consider SSND's new associate relationship. The first meeting was in 1976.

"I felt comfortable with them," Loretta said. "You felt like you were joining in and you belonged to something. You belonged to a family. I felt like they listened and cared about what was going on in my life. I felt like they set an example, and I wanted to do what they were doing. It made me a better person."

As the relationship with SSND deepened, Loretta realized that her values and personal life already mirrored those of the sisters. The program's first covenanting was in 1977, and Loretta was in that group of first associates. She is the only one from that initial class who has continued the relationship for the past 40 years.

"It was about being together and sharing the things that the Notre Dames believe in," Loretta said. "Those are the things that count. It's about how you are living your life every day. They are touching a lot of lives by the things they do, and I want to be right there by them. I want to touch lives too."

Loretta has been doing exactly that her entire life. Her 54 years of nursing also included positions at the Franciscan Sisters of Mary convent infirmary in St. Louis, at the Holy Spirit Adoration Sisters infirmary in St. Louis and in assisted living and skilled care at the SSND Anna House in Bridgeton, Missouri.

"Loretta is a very positive person and is always happy to be with the associates and sisters," said **S. Lupe Valdez**, co-director of Associates in the Central Pacific Province. "Whenever I see her, she always brings a smile to my face. We are blessed by her and her commitment to Blessed Theresa and our community."

Her service ranges from joining in her neighborhood watch to participating in social justice marches.

She also volunteers for the Senior Olympics, where she has competed in javelin, discus, shotput,



Loretta Hopgood displays School Sisters of Notre Dame mementos prominently in her home.

softball and on the basketball team. She has so many medals – practically filling a room in her home – that she has lost count. In 2004, she was honored to carry the Olympic torch for about one-fourth of a mile on Arsenal Street in St. Louis.

As an associate today, Loretta meets three or four times a year with other associates in the St. Louis area, and she also is part of a smaller group that gathers for a monthly prayer service.

She appreciates the connections she has made with other SSND associates throughout the United States and recalls an opportunity when associates from West Virginia and Ohio were visiting St. Louis. She took them sightseeing, and they prayed and had supper together.

"We all fit together," Loretta said. "I felt a connection, like you have known them all of your life, like your family coming home and having a reunion. This is how it all comes together."

Her covenanting 40 years ago set the foundation for that deep connection. There were about six in that first class. Since then, the number of associates also has grown steadily, and there currently are approximately 292 men and women in the Central Pacific Province, which includes Guam and Japan, and 140 men and women in the Atlantic-Midwest Province.

"Now, when I think about my 40th anniversary, I'm thinking that I really do have a full commitment," Loretta said. "I kept my promise that I was going to be a better person and that I was going to be more observant of other persons' needs. I appreciate life a lot more. These past 40 years have brought out all the good in me." □