

## **Sister Michaela O'Connor, SHF: 'It's great to work for a God who loves to surprise you'**

*By Sharon Abercrombie, Staff writer **Oakland Voice** January 11, 2010 • VOL. 48, NO. 1 • Oakland, CA*

Fifty-one years into her life as a Sister of the Holy Family, Michaela O'Connor has no regrets about the decision she made. "I'm so happy with my vocation, I wouldn't trade it for anything. There have been many more ups than downs and I'd do it again at the drop of a hat."



Sister Michaela O'Connor

Her advice to women who might be considering a religious vocation? Honor the thought. "If God is directing you towards a certain work, it must need doing somewhere."

Sister Michaela's vocation story has its own unique twists. Her father was a fallen away Catholic and her mother had not been brought up in a specific religious tradition. However, when the couple and their first child, Geraldine Mary, moved to San Mateo, Mr. O'Connor enrolled his young daughter in a catechism class at St. Gregory Parish. "When kids hit age seven, it's Holy Communion time," explained Sister Michaela about her father's decision.

Here Geri "heard the story of Jesus for the first time." Along with listening to fascinating accounts of the little boy who grew up to heal and feed people, changing hearts along the way, she watched her new teachers, the Holy Family Sisters, as they made home visits in the neighborhood, bringing food and clothing to those in need.

### **A bit of latent grace**

Often, they walked past her father's dry cleaning business on their missions of mercy. Gradually, Mr. O'Connor began driving them back to their Burlingame convent. If he didn't see them coming, Geri would call out, "The Sisters are walking." Mr. O'Connor would then rev up the car engine.

Eventually the Sisters' faithful forays stirred up a bit of latent grace. By the time Geri was nine, her father had returned to the Church and her mother had been baptized Catholic.

When Geri — now Sister Michaela — had to say goodbye to one of her favorite teachers, Sister Venard Kane, she kept in touch by writing to the nun who'd been transferred to Nevada. "And she always answered me," Sister Michaela recalled. The youngster began envisioning herself visiting homes with food, clothing and stories of Jesus' kindness and compassion.

Amnesia concerning religious life set in when Geri was a young teen at Mercy High School in Burlingame. But it was only a temporary malaise. Following a nudge of grace, Geri revisited the notion of becoming a Sister. "But I didn't want to be in hospital work or teaching. I wanted to tell the stories" — like Sister Venard had done.

After graduating from high school in 1958, she entered the Sisters of the Holy Family at their motherhouse in San Francisco. The next year, the community moved to its present location in the Mission San Jose district of what is now Fremont.

She worked in the community's day care homes in San Francisco, Oakland, and San Jose, and served as assistant sacristan, then sacristan, at the new St. Mary's Cathedral in San Francisco. The cathedral experience remains one of her favorite assignments.

"My artistic side learned how to arrange flowers, a joy I still indulge in regularly. And I learned how to decorate, creating Bethlehem's cave out of rock paper, coat racks, oil drums, various sized boxes and a lot of hay."

She also enjoyed giving cathedral tours. "We had no docents then and the staff, priests included, took turns doing the honors."

But it was during her assignment as a catechism teacher with her community in Fresno that "I found my niche." She later served as a catechist in Los Angeles, Long Beach, and San Jose before coming to the Oakland Diocese where, in 1991, she went to work in the diocesan catechetical ministries department as a catechetical consultant, a position she held for the next seven years.

Along the way, she took on two additional assignments: archivist — the official story teller for the Holy Family Sisters — and part-time catechist for the Kmhmu Pastoral Center, a community of 125 Catholic families from the mountains of Laos who arrived in Richmond after the Vietnam War to escape the Communist rule of their country.

She began volunteering one night a week for prayer, discussion and support for the Kmhmu women while Redemptorist Father Don MacKinnon did likewise for the men.

Eventually with the blessings of their religious congregations, the nun and the priest began more extensive ministry among the Kmhmu, who had been baptized by French and Italian missionaries before the communist takeover or in Thai refugee camps.

### **Sacramental preparation**

Working with them “has been mainly a ministry of accompaniment,” said Sister Michaela. She provides sacramental preparation for the second- and third-generation baptisms and first communions, and a young adult and adult Confirmation class. Like Sister Venard Kane, she conducts these sessions in people’s homes.

She also makes hospital visits and guides the Kmhmu through the intricacies of immigration regulations, the social services system, and occasionally the courts.

A few years ago she began collecting everything she could about the Kmhmu culture — their oral history, folk tales, ceremonial rituals and traditions. She’s compiled them into an illustrated paperback, “The Kmhmu Story,” that includes original paintings and drawings depicting life in Laos, the story of the Kmhmu people in the Southeast Asian war and what their early years in the United States were like.

“Some people get upset at immigrants and insist that they are here to sponge off the government,” said Sister Michaela, “but the accusation isn’t true. The Laotian people were forced out of their own country by the communists who didn’t like Catholics and others who had fought with the Americans. A lot of them would be shot if they went back.”

In summing up her own story, she said, “I’m delighted to be reassured constantly that life is never dull. It’s

great to work for a God who loves to surprise you.”

