

Woman inspires inmates with story of her 'Aunt Dorothy'

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |

FAYETTEVILLE — Sister Dorothy Stang was a soft-spoken, God-loving woman who spent decades living in the Brazilian rain forest. Her life's work was helping the poor and preserving the Amazon, in the process, riling outlaws who would strip the forest of valuable mahogany and other natural resources, leaving barren wastelands for the peasants who lived off the land.

Sister Dorothy died in 2005 in Brazil, shot to death by a couple of hired gunmen, and people throughout the world mourned the death of a nun they saw as an extraordinary woman.

To Anita Parisi, she was Aunt Dorothy, one of her mother's eight siblings. While her family knew Sister Dorothy was devoted to her work, it was only after her death that they realized its magnitude. Even now, Dorothy's story periodically pops up unexpectedly — most recently, Parisi's son found her picture in his confirmation text.

Parisi, her husband, Adam, and four sons (Joshua, 16; Matthew, 14; Zachary, 12; and Luke, 10) are parishioners at St. Joseph Parish in Fayetteville. Her mother, Mary Heil, is a parishioner at Christ the King Church in Little Rock, and Sister Dorothy visited the family in Arkansas a number of times through the years. Parisi recently shared the story of her famous aunt with inmates at the Northwest Arkansas Community Correction Center in Fayetteville. Her visit was part of the St. Joseph's prison ministry, a group of volunteers who visit weekly to meet with the women inmates who want to attend.

The 11 inmates who attended Parisi's Oct. 21 talk seemed fascinated by the story as did the half dozen ministry volunteers.

At age 16, Sister Dorothy entered the convent and in 1956, professed her final vows with the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, an order emphasizing education, especially for poor women and children.

She came to Arkansas several times to visit her sister and other family members. Sister Dorothy was apt to show up wearing hand-me-down T-shirts from her nephews with a skirt that didn't match, Parisi said.

"She was a non-conformist because she really didn't have time ... to follow social standards," Parisi said. "She didn't have time to fit into the social standards."

Sister Dorothy cared only about her work and God's work. "That's what mattered to her."

Sister Dorothy went to Brazil when she was 35, Parisi said. She said her aunt was successful in teaching many of the peasants how to co-exist with the rain forest and to preserve it. She won over at least part of the Brazilian government, which had begun giving land grants to the poor. But those who were profiting from illegal logging and destructive activities weren't happy with her work and she knew the danger was real.

Sister Dorothy was confronted by a couple of gunmen. Before they killed her, the nun began

searching in her bag, looking for her weapon — or so the gunmen thought. Parisi said she pulled out her Bible and began reading from St. Matthew: "Blessed are the poor in spirit ... for they shall inherit the earth."

A number of people have been convicted in her death, Parisi said, some more than once when their original convictions were overturned on appeal.

The death of Sister Dorothy has been hard on her mother, Parisi said, and a number of family members have traveled to Brazil in the years since. Sister Dorothy was buried in Brazil, the home she devoted so much of her life to, Parisi said.