

God leads ESL teacher to Sisters of Mercy, to Arkansas

written by Aprille Hanson Spivey |



Sister Anne Henehan, 61, has a love for mystery novels. In a unique way, the plot twists, intrigue and unknowns that fill the pages mirror her road to religious life which started when she was 45 years old, she said.

“I like the development of the characters and the situations they get into, how it unfolds that you don’t see. I suppose you could tie that into life — you don’t see all the pieces of your life at one time,” Sister Anne said. “You can see how God’s hand was playing out and you had no clue at the time.”

For almost three years, Sister Anne has been an academic mentor and English as a Second Language teacher to seminarians at the Diocese of Little Rock House of Formation.

“I thought, ‘I’m where I’m supposed to be and what God wants me to be doing.’”
Sister Anne Henehan, RSM

“I’ve enjoyed being not just an academic mentor; it’s definitely grounded in the spirituality of this house and my own, so I feel like I’m bringing my Mercy ‘sister-ness’ to this job,” Sister Anne said.

Growing up in Grand Rapids and then Kalamazoo, Mich., as one of seven children, Sister Anne said religious life was never on her “radar.” Though she attended Catholic schools and went to Mass, she felt no calling, she said. After taking Latin and Spanish classes in high school, she found her niche. She went on to study languages, majoring in Spanish and French at Aquinas College in Grand Rapids.

It took her overseas, to study and teach ESL in various places, including Spain, Slovenia as a

Fulbright scholar and Mexico.

Though she enjoyed her time abroad, the most rewarding experience came in her home state in 1981, teaching adult ESL at Western Michigan University for the next four years.

"I had between 20 and 22 nationalities I was working with," Sister Anne said. "I had Iranians, Iraqis, I had an Afghani family at that time, Mexicans, Venezuelans ... people from all over the globe."

Later, while working at Immaculate Conception Church in Denton, Texas, her friend, Jesuit Father John Koeplin asked her if she ever considered religious life.

"I couldn't believe it. I said, 'No, never,'" Sister Anne said.

A year later, God asked her the same question during a silent retreat at the Jesuit house in the fall of 1996.

"I was just very aware that something was happening and it began with this song that kept coming to my mind and lips ... the song was 'Do not be afraid. I am with you, I have called you each by name,' ('You Are Mine') by David Haas," Sister Anne said. "That just kept going over and over and over, I couldn't get it off my lips. I thought why am I singing this song?"

Father Koeplin told her to "let it be inside you and see where God is leading you," she said.

By January 1997, she began her two years of inquiry with Sisters of Mercy.

"I thought I didn't have anything to lose," she said. "I was comfortable in my life, I had my job, my apartment; I thought if it didn't work, I'd just go back to that."

She professed her final vows in July 2006. She later earned her master's degree in pastoral ministry from the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio.

"I think the hardest thing for me, perhaps for most women, is that open communication in sharing the troubles you're having," with the community, she said. "There's always a sense of I'm a grown woman and now I don't know how I should be proceeding in this new life. Be comfortable asking questions; a mentoring system is essential."

She worked in various ministries including at a transitional homeless center, but her work with the seminarians at Little Rock has a special place in her heart.

"I came and offered my abilities and my desire to be working in the diocese," she said, adding that diocesan vocations director Msgr. Scott Friend had the idea that someone should work with the seminarians on their studies.

"I thought, 'I'm where I'm supposed to be and what God wants me to be doing.'"

Sister Anne said she's enjoyed helping the seminarians.

"Whether it was writing or literature class or a class from the (Little Rock) Theology Institute, I would keep track of what papers were due, what assignments they had. A lot of it was talking about what they were doing and some wanted review of their papers," Sister Anne said.

Seminarian Alex Booth said it's the first time a Sister of Mercy has been at Our Lady of Good Counsel Church (where the House of Formation is located) for at least 20 years.

"She's helped us a lot and brought a different spirituality in the house," Booth said. "She likes basketball, she likes some sports, she'll watch it on occasion ... she's a coffee connoisseur, we always had the coffee pot ready for her ... We'd sit around and drink coffee with her. It's been fun."

When Sister Anne isn't teaching, she's practicing calligraphy or enjoying nature, often visiting the zoo.

"I always like to see the tigers and the penguins and the big apes, the gorillas and the chimpanzees. I know the guys think it's funny I like to go to the zoo. They tease me about it," she said smiling.

In August, she will move to St. Louis to work with the Sisters of Mercy as a mentor. However, her impact in Little Rock will live on in the lives of the seminarians, Booth said.

"She's helped us in our formation," he said.