

Flo Fitch started campus ministry in Searcy 32 years ago

written by Katie Zakrzewski |



Name: Florence “Flo” Kaplon Fitch

Age: 75

Parish: St. James Church in Searcy

City: Beebe

Family: Husband of 52 years, Don; two children; two stepchildren; seven grandchildren.

Why you want to know Flo: After 32 years in campus ministry, Flo Fitch is preparing to retire Oct. 31. In 1992, she started Catholic campus ministry at Harding University and did youth ministry through St. James Church, both in Searcy. She also worked with students at ASU Beebe.

IN HER OWN WORDS

What feeds you spiritually?

Knowing that I’ve had some input in keeping young people Catholic, as well as the Eucharist and reconciliation. God is so forgiving, regardless of what you do.

How did you get involved in campus ministry?

In 1992, a young man arrived at Harding and called Father John Barnes. He asked, "What is there for Catholic college kids?" Father Barnes immediately called me because he knew I had done some youth ministry events around that time. I made some phone calls to the diocese, and that's how it all got started.

What made the campus ministry program in Searcy unique?

These young people were Walton Foundation students. They come from Central America, and for most of them, this is their first time in the U.S. Anywhere from 13 to 18 students come in each year on the Sam Walton Scholarship Fund, and that scholarship was among the Christian colleges here in Arkansas. ... I've worked with Harding University all these years, and I've had a few students from Arkansas State University in Beebe, but it's mostly from Harding. And for the most part, they have been international students.

What were some of the challenges you faced?

Harding (which is affiliated with the Church of Christ) wouldn't allow dancing or certain festivities. We had a very hard time. We could not evangelize on campus. Everything we did was almost undercover, but we were able to reserve a room and call our gatherings devotionals. ...

How has campus ministry changed since you started?

Back then, we really formed a family. ... But now, there are so many more things going on on campus that it is really hard to keep them Catholic. We still do a pretty good job, but it's still not good enough for me. ...

We had a reunion at Harding to celebrate their 100 years this year. We had 20 or 30 of our former students come. ... We are still in contact with these young people after 20 or more years. ... We've had a priest come from our group — Father Daniel Velasco. He was part of our campus ministry and very active in the Church. Another student converted while she was in campus ministry and became a Carmelite nun. So, needless to say, we did a little bit of good.

— Katie Zakrzewski



Flo Fitch stands with her husband Don.