

Sister Marguerite O'Beirne has covered some considerable distance in her life and journeyed far greater than the 3,176 miles it took to get from Cloonloo, County Sligo, to Neumann University in Aston, Pennsylvania. But at the heart and soul of every step taken has been both the presence of faith and her dedication to the importance of education.

Born in 1942 to Joseph O'Beirne and Margaret Mullen, in a time not so long ago, but when electricity had not yet arrived in the rural areas of Ireland, Sister Marguerite was one of six children. Part of a close and loving family, her office at Neumann, where she has been Vice President for Mission and Ministry since 1997, is adorned with photos of siblings, nieces and nephews and her home back in Sligo.

After her days as a student at St. Ronan's National School in Cloonloo (the Irish spelling is "Cluain Lough" meaning "Meadow by the Lake" which in this case is Lough Gara), she attended the Convent of Mercy Secondary School in Boyle. It was there that her opportunity to continue her own education availed itself. Representatives from several religious congregations visited the school to invite the young women to join them. Sister Marguerite was drawn to the mission of the The Sisters of St. Francis, and in 1958 she went to Mallow in County Cork for six months of studying there. She learned that she was going to the Sisters of St. Francis in Philadelphia, and in January of 1959 she was one of a group to start a new life in the United States.

Sister Marguerite explained that the life of the Franciscan nuns is one of simplicity, yet at a time when education for women had none of the opportunities available today, they were committed to furthering higher studies among the women in the order as well as enabling students throughout the world to continue to learn. Sister Marguerite went into teaching and her assignments took her throughout the greater Philadelphia area. Her first job was teaching elementary students at Corpus Christi School in Willingboro, NJ, and from there she went to St. Anthony School in Trenton, NJ, where she taught junior high. From 1972 to 1978 she was Principal at Holy Trinity School in Columbia, PA, a new challenge she faced and excelled at. From there she became Coordinator of Education for the Sisters of St. Francis until 1983 when she served as Principal at McCorristin Catholic High School in Trenton, NJ. She was called to the position of Administrative Intern to the President at Neumann in 1996, and a year later she was appointed Vice President for Mission and Ministry, the position she holds today.

Her presence at Neumann is felt everywhere. She is Chaplain to the field hockey team and the Club Ice Hockey team, and sees to it that young people who are athletes are able to spend time in reflection. She hosts regular teas (the proper way, brewing the drink in a silver teapot and served with scones) for faculty and staff where the discussion centers around the integration of Franciscan values in everyday life on the university campus.

Among her many job descriptions are supervising the staff and helping them to incorporate the Franciscan mission into their curriculum; organizing retreats, new staff orientations and advising student groups. And at all times, her presence is a warm and welcome one to all who come in contact with her. Sister Marguerite, as I saw firsthand, is always available and ready to connect with those who seek her out. She is beloved.

And while she has been awarded and recognized along the way, she mentions none of these distinctions to me; they never come up. But I did a little digging and discovered that this remarkable woman has been named as a Top 100 Irish American Educator, been named Woman of the Year by the Ancient Order of Hibernians, has served as the Grand Marshal of the Hamilton St. Patrick's Day Parade, is actively involved in The Society of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick and the Irish American Business Chamber and Network (who in 2013 presented her with an award given to her by then Irish Ambassador Michael Collins), and she has been honored by her alma mater, St. Ronan's National School in Cloonloo.

In her 2012 acceptance letter to St. Ronan's, Sister Marguerite credits her early education with providing her the foundation for all she would later go on to accomplish. The woman who purports to "represent the graduates of another era" explains best in her own words how she has been able to be on the modern edge of education:

"My life as an educator had its beginnings in the two-room schoolhouse...It was there under the compassionate care and expert educational direction of the school mistress, Mrs. Una Crummy, that the early foundation of an education that would serve as a model for my own teaching career was laid. Later, I would learn about good classroom management, about meeting the individual learning needs of students and about the significance of peer-to-peer learning. All of these characteristics were present in the small classroom environment that Mrs. Crummy managed. Each student was known in a uniquely personal manner. The individual learning needs were diagnosed and the needs of individual families were also recognized. These are qualities so very necessary for the learning needs of today's children. Qualities that have been lost or are in danger of being lost within a larger learning environment."

Sister Marguerite has been an illuminating light in the lives of all the many students she has taught, as well as everyone she has met on her journey, and she is being honored by the Delaware Valley Irish Hall of Fame on Sunday, November 17, 2019, at the Commodore Barry Arts and Cultural Center.