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Attorney dedicates time, talent to housing for mentally dependent adults

by Sr. Camille D'Arienzo

Conversations with Sr. Camille

Ask John Castellano for his title at Mercy Haven, an agency that provides housing for mentally dependent adults, and his first response is: "Friend."

Only then does he add the one he earned through years of hard work, sacrifice and college tuition: "Attorney in charge of the Mercy advocacy program."



This extraordinary unassuming 62-year-old plays an important role in a

program that recently won a grant close to \$2.5 million from New York state as part of its Homeless and Assistance Program.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo approved this award, which will allow Mercy Haven to develop five additional units of government housing for families currently living in homeless shelters.

How would you describe the agency that has put you in charge of that program?

Two dear friends, Patricia Griffith and Kathy Nolan, both Sisters of Mercy, founded Mercy Haven in 1985. The agency was their faith-driven response to the plight of homeless persons, especially those

living with severe and persistent mental illness. They created Mercy Haven to provide safe, affordable and supportive housing for persons who were released from local state psychiatric hospitals.

Did Mercy Haven afford you your first experience of working with people in need of assistance?

No. I chose to practice law to be of service to the poor. I have been very blessed by being sustained in this vocation for 34 years in four not-for-profit organizations.

What brought you to your current position?

In 1996, the decision by a hostile Congress to restrict the types of legal interventions any federally funded legal services program could deliver to the poor. This decision severely hamstrung my practice of law for the mentally ill in the five boroughs of New York City. Conversations about these congressional restrictions with Pat, Kathy and John Rowan, a diocesan priest and attorney, led to my new legal life. Funding from The Brooklyn Regional Community along with its parent Institute of the Sisters of Mercy helped create the Mercy Advocacy Program ("MAP") in 1997.

How does Mercy Haven help you to live out your faith?

Mercy Haven is a place for me to live out compassion and mercy. It allows me to pursue economic justice by helping low-income people get access to meager public assistance and disability benefits, including crucial health care and basic nutrition. The practice of law offers me occasional opportunities to promote systemic change favorable to the poor.

Can you give an example of that?

MAP was envisioned as a three-year pilot program to provide free legal services to poor people enrolled in various programs of the Sisters of Mercy. Fourteen years later, MAP is a highly effective legal services program primarily serving the 250 persons housed by Mercy Haven. MAP has had over 2,100 cases, including two class actions, one of which resulted in New York state's being able to claim an additional \$150 million per year in federally funded food stamps since October 2008. This has increased food stamps by approximately \$112 per month for 115,000 households across New York state.

Was there a particular time and place that fortified the decision that led you to practice law?

My first job after graduation from Holy Cross College was teaching religion at Mercy High School in Baltimore. While there, I remembered a groundbreaking course I took as a 16-year-old junior at Chaminade High School on Long Island. It greatly enhanced my understanding of a personal God and made me consider a becoming a Marianist brother. As much as I wanted to pass my classroom experience on to my students, I gradually realized that I needed to live the beatitudes, not primarily through teaching, but through the practice of law for the poor.

What is your image of God?

God is the creator of the universe. God is my father and mother and my sustainer. Jesus is my brother and my partner. The Holy Spirit, through my relationship with God through other persons, living and dead, is the experience of grace, wisdom, solace and classic gifts.

Has your perception of God changed?

Very much so, since being born in 1949! It's developed from the days of the Baltimore Catechism through the levels of my understanding of Vatican II. It was impacted by my father's death in 1964 and my younger brother's death in 1952.

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Your image of God seems to mirror the divine quality of nonviolence. Were there specific spiritual

guideposts that bolstered that?

I had a very rich experience at Holy Cross College, including a theology paper titled "Christ the Suffering Servant and Nonviolence" for John Brooks, SJ, and two silent retreats based on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. In the summer of 1969 in Nevada, Mo., I underwent a leadership training program (Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity) during which, amidst many other experiences, I served as a volunteer friend to a young man who was an inpatient in the local state psychiatric hospital. During the Vietnam War, I applied for and was granted conscientious objector status, based on my belief in Jesus and nonviolence. My initial application was denied; however, on appeal, my claim was granted. In the end, my draft lottery number was one above the cutoff, so there was no need for this effort -- or was there? This was a very formative spiritual exercise.

What in your personal life gives you joy?

In 1975, I met Maggie McCartin. We were married in 1978, appropriately over Thanksgiving weekend. She is the gift of my life, on so many levels, and the primary experience through whom I encounter the Christ.

How have you lived your faith together?

Our struggles included years of infertility. After being told that we would never be able to conceive a child, we applied to the lay missionary program of Maryknoll to serve in Latin America only to have our applications denied. We lamented: God, how do you treat your friends like this?! Maggie's spirituality helped us realize that the call from our God was not to Latin America through Maryknoll, but rather to surrender our hearts, our dreams and our entire beings. The next year we conceived our first child, Peter. Two years later, Elizabeth was born. And two years later, Sarah was born. So, amidst the experience of brokenness, Amazing Grace continued. How unpredictably Our God creates our lives!

In addition to your commitment to the poor, what other spiritual value has influenced your choices?

For two years in the early '80s, Maggie and I resisted paying our federal income taxes. We saw President Reagan wasting economic and human resources on the military's Star Wars and on civil wars in Central America. We were summoned by an IRS examiner. After he declared our protest frivolous and ineffective, Maggie disarmed him with one very human question: "Are you mad at us?" "Oh, no," he said. Then he added, "I'll have to charge you interest, but I'll waive the penalty." That soft answer surely turned away wrath.

John, how do you pray?

From a combination of the daily scriptural readings and "The Monastic Way" by (Benedictine Sr.) Joan Chittister to a daily journal on transformation and male spirituality by (Franciscan Fr.) Richard Rohr. I also pray by absorbing the wonder of the ocean and sky. Most weekday mornings, I stop at Jones Beach to behold the ocean scape.

What is your favorite Scripture passage?

Psalm 23 reminds me that a banquet, not a ham sandwich, is what a loving God is preparing for me in the sight of my foes. And in Romans 8, St. Paul reminds me over and over that, amidst devastation, tragedy, suffering, loss and death, nothing is to diminish my relationship with Jesus.

What in contemporary Catholicism encourages you?

Small communities of believers joining together to pray, to love, to listen and to otherwise experience the God within and the God of the universe.

What distresses you?

Its clericalism with its systemic exclusion of women from full participation in the ministries of the church.

Particularly pathetic is the church's attempt to restrict conversation about the ordination of women. I deeply regret the sexual abuse crisis and failure of Catholic institutions to adequately respond to and acknowledge the profound dysfunction and brokenness within the church.

What causes you joy?

Encountering people with a vibrant faith in a loving and generous God ... being part of a vibrant loving marriage for 33 years ... raising three children into young adulthood
... practicing law within a community known as Mercy Haven ... catching a bluefish and sharing it in a meal ... celebrating two World Series victories for the Red Sox.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, has written a soon-to-be-published book titled *Stories of Forgiveness.*]

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