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Former corporate drone finds new life, inspiration in teaching

by Sr. Camille D'Arienzo

Conversations with Sr. Camille

Tom Sites of Dumont, N.J., spent 38 years working for a company that made it possible to support his family before embracing a profession he says nourishes his spirit and allows him to make a difference in the lives of others. After five years in that role, he's happy to share his experience.

Sr. Camille: Tom, what is this about?

Sites: For many years, I worked in a corporate environment to support a wife and family. That was important, an essential part of my vocation as husband and father. I worked with and for some great people (OK, sometimes not-so-great), but I was using only a part of myself -- enough to get the job done. I felt I had gifts I was not using to full potential.

Did anyone or anything influence you to become a teacher? If so, how long ago was that?

I had some wonderful teachers at Fordham Prep and Fordham College during the Second Vatican Council. There was a sense alive in the Jesuit community I experienced back then that we could really change the world to create communities of peace and justice in communion with the worldwide community of the Catholic church. As a history teacher at Cristo Rey New York High School, I have rediscovered an experience that lives that spirit in very concrete ways.

What do you mean by concrete ways?

Part of my job is to provide students with what I call "cultural literacy." There's a set of terms and events that college students and successful professionals are expected to be familiar with -- the canon, if you

will, of American history. It's imperative that I teach this content. But it's also my job to challenge students to question the content. Is the conventional story respectful of Native Americans, women, and the fight for justice by all marginalized people? Every day, in every class, a history teacher worth a damn has got to facilitate these seemingly opposite values. Justice demands it. Our students need it. And they demonstrate remarkable results on standardized tests. I provide the tools. They set the world on fire!

Describe the student population you instruct.

All schools in our national Cristo Rey Network seek to provide a college preparatory education of the quality I knew at Fordham Prep to kids that come from poor backgrounds. Most of the students at our New York school are Latino and African-American. In order to defray tuition costs, each student commits not only to a rigorous academic load, but to work one day per week as part of a job team set up with a corporate partner through our Work Study Program.

Please give an example of this partnership.

I've been involved with the "Street Law" program, along with other faculty members and lawyers from White and Case, a major Manhattan law firm and a corporate partner where a number of our students work. This will be the third year that lawyers will come to Cristo Rey to teach students about various legal issues. Students and teachers then go to the White and Case offices, where lawyers present actual cases concerning privacy rights, contract law, etc. They facilitate discussions by students about the issues involved. Both the kids and the lawyers really get into the cases, often engaging in lively debate. The hope is that our kids will not only learn about the law, but that some will get interested in the profession. The legal profession is not well represented by kids from poor, Latino or African-American backgrounds. The Street Law foundation, White and Case, and Cristo Rey all have a stake in changing that. It's a great example of how a corporate partner becomes involved with us and our kids in the cause of social justice. Our partners really buy into our mission.

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Why do you think you're drawn to these students?

Our students face daily challenges that make getting by hard enough. But they work and study very hard. Usually they're the first of their family to go to college. One hundred percent of our kids are accepted into at least one college. I respect their commitment to their family, their school, their work and to a wider community. Our oft-stated goal is that our students will become professionals for others. At each step in the process, we emphasize that none of us is here for ourselves alone. We are a family in the service of others. My students are an extraordinary bunch!

What was your own childhood like?

I was born on Long Island into a family that had just moved from Brooklyn. When I was 7, our parish church -- St. Agnes in Rockville Centre -- became the seat of our very own diocese. They had a big parade for the new bishop the year I made my first Communion. I don't know about the bishop, but I sure felt like a big shot! It helped cement my Catholic identity. We were part of something very big, very important and very good.

How did your family help mold your character?

While it's true that many of the teachers I knew at various levels of school brought a strong sense of justice into my worldview, the first lessons I learned in this regard came from my parents. I never heard a word of hate for any person or any group at our dinner table. I remember watching the news about conflict concerning integration and civil rights with my family. My dad was very outspoken about justice for all. In fact, he took me on my first protest march shortly after the death of three voting rights activists in Mississippi in 1964.

Did you have role models?

I was blessed to experience Martin Luther King Jr. in real time, to be alive and, in a small way, a part as he planned strategy, confronted opposition from all sides, and continued to speak out in a measured yet powerful manner. I have never heard anyone express the Gospel of Christ more simply, more clearly or more effectively. He taught many of us the power of nonviolence. He proved that peace is not only moral -- it's effective.

Do you recall any outstanding teachers?

My oldest sister, Martha, was my sixth-grade teacher at Immaculate Conception School in Irvington, N.Y., one year after we moved up from Long Island. We decided at the beginning of the year that we wouldn't let on that we were brother and sister. The subterfuge was great fun. We really pulled it off. And she was a great teacher. In her classroom, we learned respect for each other along with respect for math, science and English. That sense of mutual respect is a model for me today. And hey, I really did have a sister as teacher in Catholic school!

What is your own family like?

My wife, Helen, and I have been married for 44 years. More than anyone, she gave me the not-so-gentle nudge to become a teacher. We co-taught CCD classes together for many years. She said I had a gift and that I should use it. I think teachers and all who work hard in service to others often take for granted the support we receive from loved ones. She makes my work possible.

Our two daughters are grown and out on their own. But thankfully, they live nearby, and we get together often. I'm proud that each of them has the truest sense of justice of anyone I know. They're a constant challenge in the best sense, raising my awareness to matters of concern great and small.

We have a granddaughter, Avalon, a senior in high school. She's the light of my life. With complete objectivity, I can say she is the smartest and most beautiful kid on the planet. Of course, I see with a grandfather's eyes. I think it gives me a special perspective on the kids that I teach, knowing that they're the same age as my grandchild. In them, as do all grandparents, I take immeasurable delight.

Does your life as a teacher influence your home life?

There's no doubt that planning and grading take a great deal of time. Teaching is hard work! For sure, I work much harder now than I did in my previous career. But my family understands the importance of what I do. We share a sense of mission. I couldn't do it without their understanding and support.

What do you hope to convey to your students?

At Cristo Rey, we take the goal "To become professionals for others" very seriously. I believe that my family and many of the teachers that influenced my life, especially at Fordham, instilled that sense in me.

I hope it will transfer to the people my students will touch. That, for me, is what being Catholic is all about. I was touched by people who received the gifts of countless generations before them. There'll be countless generations following us, and saints among them that will do great things. I'm honored to be a small part of the process. I was right the year I received my first Communion and we had a big parade for a new bishop: I really am part of something really big!

What do you learn from your students?

From my students I learn courage. They know challenges that I never knew. They work. They study. They amaze me. They call me to be more than I ever thought I could be. I hope I'm worthy of their example.

What in the Catholic faith is important to you?

It's all about justice and community. Justice gives me passion. Community keeps me on track. I fear going off on a tangent out of concern for justice. In community, I can do an ongoing reality check when faced with the impulse to act. Besides, none of us can do it alone. I have weaknesses as well as gifts. My Catholic faith reminds me to acknowledge each, to seek strength from others where I am weak, and to be strength for others when needed.

Do you have a favorite scripture passage?

I love John's account of the wedding feast at Cana. Jesus does what his mom wants, even though he has reservations: "My hour has not yet come." Of course a good boy is gonna do what Mom wants. It's all about family. I am particularly enthused about the prospect that "You have saved the best for last." I'm 63. I think there's great wisdom in a story that links a marriage feast with the best coming last. I can hardly wait!

How do pray?

I increasingly pray -- and pray a great deal -- in gratitude for small things. I was smashed by a hit-and-run driver four years ago while crossing the street. I survived. I can walk. I can tie my shoes. These are no small things. The older I get, the more grateful I am.

What is your faith community like?

Helen and I belong to a faith community called The Community for Bread and Justice. We meet for Eucharist and to plan service projects. Our good friends remind us of the call to justice and service at the heart of our faith. My school community has become an important faith community for me, as well.

How does it work?

We celebrate important milestones of our school community together at Mass. Being in the big old parish church -- St. Cecilia's in East Harlem -- makes the sense of community immediate and powerful. I also enjoy Mass in our school chapel, which was once the worship space for the Sisters of Mercy, who devoted their lives to teaching poor kids long ago. The sense of continuity, to past and future, is very powerful in that place.

Many of us can recognize some life-changing encounter or experience. Are there any that stand out in your experience?

I met my future wife on a blind date when I was 15 -- a junior in high school. I had not wanted to go on the date. But that night, while dancing to a record by the Rolling Stones, "I Can't Get No Satisfaction," I

decided to marry her. I eventually did. I'm grateful that I found my true path to joy at an early age, and pray for those who struggle to find their way.

What is your image of God? Has it changed with time?

My image of God is that of a loving parent, embracing all children, regardless of circumstance. As a child I imagined a severe judge and thought myself a terrible sinner with much to fear. I still see myself as a sinner, but one who has much to be hopeful for. God loves sinners -- enough to die for us.

How does Christianity challenge you?

The wedding feast of Cana is my favorite scripture. But I have another favorite as well, Luke 12:48. If from the one to whom much has been given, much is expected, I owe much indeed. I need think only of that blind date long ago, or the students I encounter each school day, to begin to assess my blessings. Then there are my children and my granddaughter. To me, much has been given!

Is there anything in Catholicism you would change?

I fear that the bishops -- or perhaps the media that carry their message -- present a face of intolerance, pushing people away. My sense of my church and of my God is that we are called to embrace all. We all need the mercy of a God who created and loves all.

What makes you happy?

I need to be around people. I like the give-and-take of a big city full of diverse people not always in complete agreement. I like the argument. And I believe that a key to holiness as well as happiness is a sense of humor. This I can say for sure: In my fifth year working in the noble halls of education, you'd better laugh at yourself. Laugh long and hard. And you'd better do it before your students do!

How do you relax?

I am addicted to reading, history mostly. I never cease to be fascinated by the genius or the folly of our ancestors. It is a wonder that we have survived. I choose to believe, as at the wedding feast at Cana, the best is yet to come!

Is there anything you wished I had asked?

I think you have asked enough. I am honored by your invitation to dialogue. There have been times I have questioned my faith, particularly my commitment to the church of Rome. But there are voices that call me to stay. Some come to me in dreams in the still of darkest night. And some come to me on the radio when I listen to your commentaries on 1010 WINS radio. What an invention!

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, narrates *Stories of Forgiveness*, a book about people whose experiences have caused them to consider the possibilities of extending or accepting forgiveness. The audiobook, renamed *Forgiveness: Stories of Redemption*, is available from Now You Know Media.]

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