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Catholic education sparked health care lawyer's desire to make a difference

by Sr. Camille D'Arienzo

Conversations with Sr. Camille

Sr. Camille: Arizona holds great attraction for me, especially during our cold winter months. Have you lived there for all of your 38 years on this small planet?

Ann-Marie Donaldson Alameddin: I was born and raised in Arizona -- third-generation Arizonan, which is somewhat rare here! I attended college at Creighton University in Omaha, Neb., but after four hard winters and with my degree in hand, I was soon back home in Phoenix.

Did you have any relatives whom you especially admired -- perhaps who served as role models for you?

I admire so many family members for a variety of different reasons: service to our country, to their families, to their professions and communities. Perhaps most formative were my dad's siblings who took religious vows. Two of my aunts are Benedictine nuns and one uncle was a diocesan priest. All demonstrated great passion and commitment to social justice and the obligation to help those who are less fortunate. Two went on extended tours as missionaries -- one to Bolivia and Zimbabwe. I think just a general awareness that they were far away and committed to doing the work of the church and to helping people in a very radical way was formative. I grew up with a very strong sense that we're here in this world to make a difference in some sort of way -- not so much in words, but by example.

What schools helped educate you?

St. Francis Xavier Elementary, Xavier College Prep (an all-girls BVM school), Creighton University (undergrad), University of San Francisco (Master's in theology) and Arizona State University (Juris

Doctorate). As you can see from the institutions I attended, I was very much influenced by the Jesuits and Ignatian spirituality.

Did you have a favorite teacher, subject, interest?

Dr. Janet Burke. She was my European history teacher at Xavier. It never appeared as though she even looked at notes; her telling of history made it seem the most interesting of stories with an amazing cast of characters. Although she was young, we were sure she somehow lived in every era she taught. As a result of her influence, I got my college degree in history.

What is your current family like -- spouse (if married), children, extended family?

DJ and I have been married for 13 years and we have two girls, Sophia (10) and Camille (6). Because we live in my hometown, we're lucky to be surrounded by family: my mom and dad, my brother and his family and our extended family with aunts, uncles and lots of cousins.

How did you meet your husband?

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DJ (David John) came to a housewarming party I had. A college friend had given him my phone number after he came to Phoenix in search of a teaching job. Oddly enough, I thought I was doing "charity work" for my friend by inviting this newcomer to my party. It really worked out for both of us!

What values/concerns do you share with him?

We both share a deep Catholic faith, a commitment to each other and to our family. We value love, kindness and generosity, and a mutual enjoyment of the TV series "Mad Men." Contemplative prayer resonates with both of us. DJ prays the rosary regularly and I practice Christian meditation.

Do you have a favorite Scripture passage, Bible story or prayer?

Growing up, the passage "To whom much is given, much is expected" motivated me in different ways to be involved in different projects, to choose a career that would "make a difference" in some small way. However, now my favorite passage is "Be still and know that I am God." That was an "aha!" moment for me that prayer didn't need to be a recitation of desires or thankfulness, but simply an awareness of the ever-present spirit of God within. It was liberating in the sense that I didn't need necessarily to go outside of myself for materials, books, litanies, the Bible, etc. Although those can all be helpful in prayer, I discovered that I just need to turn my attention or my heart to the presence of God within and around me. I find this simple and powerful, knowing that God is always there.

Have you experienced an event that gave direction to your life -- a great joy or tragedy, perhaps?

My greatest joys were my marriage to DJ and the birth of our children. In terms of something that gave my life direction, I spent a semester abroad in college in the Dominican Republic. I lived in community and studied and taught English at an elementary school for poor children. It lacked the most basic of educational supplies, including pencils and paper.

What did you learn from it?

I learned that as an educated American, I come from a place of privilege and power in the world. With that privilege comes an obligation that, I suppose, goes back to my favorite Scripture passage: "To whom much is given much is expected."

It was very eye-opening to see the injustice that exists in another country, and it helped to bring that critical lens back home.

That experience also helped me discover what would be next in my life. I felt drawn to teach high school theology at my alma mater. My time in the Dominican Republic also informed my decision to go to law school and enkindled my desire to somehow be engaged in social justice issues in my own community.

Please describe your professional life -- work, accomplishments?

I'm currently a health care lawyer working for a nonprofit hospital in Phoenix. In addition to some of the business transactions, I head up the government relations efforts, looking at how health policy impacts our hospital. I help educate legislators about issues that affect hospitals. Most importantly, the legislature is considering whether to expand Medicaid in Arizona, and we are an important voice that we hope will lead to important, humane policy changes.

What challenges you in any part of your life of relationships?

Time. I work full-time at an intense and rewarding job and have two active grade-schoolers. There doesn't seem to be a lot of down time to just be with my parents, extended family and friends.

What gives you satisfaction, joy?

My family, first and foremost. It's a joy to watch my daughters grow into (God willing) the people they're meant to be. I see it in small ways when I observe Sophia expressing her love and compassion for animals or Camille's great joy experiencing music. And she certainly does "experience music"! I caught her once playing "Mary had a Little Lamb" upside-down by lying on the piano bench.

Being engaged in meaningful work also gives me great satisfaction. I think we all want to leave this earth a little better than we found it and working in health care and in legal clinics for the underserved feels that way for me.

What are your greatest treasures (spiritual, material, emotional)?

Emotionally, a supportive husband and parents. Spiritually, a deep and constant faith. Materially, a safe home and neighborhood in which to raise our kids

Can you point to an experience that increased or challenged your faith?

The sexual abuse scandal. That those in the hierarchy of the church, who represent the church, who are ordained and preaching Christian love could participate in such heinous acts against children remains unfathomable. That those then in positions of power would choose to protect their "brothers" and reassign them to other parishes exposing more victims to abuse is beyond comprehension. That this was happening across the church worldwide seems to be more than one can bear. This isn't the church I know and love, and I struggle to understand how this harmful behavior could happen in such a pervasive way.

Do you have any reaction to Pope Benedict's resignation?

I thought his resignation was brave and a compassionate precedent to set for his successors.

What do you want from the Catholic church?

I want the church to be the best reflection possible of the Gospel, of God's unconditional love and compassion. I long for it to be more inclusive and relevant and ready to take on the challenges of our day in a meaningful way.

Is there anything you especially appreciate?

Great food and family and friends -- all in one place!

Anything you would change?

Lots of things: giving all children a quality education and meeting their basic needs; most immediately in Arizona, it would be access to health care, which is really the pressing issue of the day.

Are there societal issues that concern you?

My little corner of concerns offers people in need access to legal services, which can span so many justice issues, including homelessness and poverty.

Do you try to respond to them?

I've helped start free legal advice clinics in underserved areas in places like soup kitchens, low-income health clinics and a homeless shelter for pregnant women.

These programs help those who don't have access to justice, to free lawyers and legal resources. They provide a road map to better lives. It's also gratifying for lawyers to give practical real-world advice to people who desperately need it.

What do you want for your children, or the world's children?

To be the persons God intends them to be; to find meaning and joy in life.

What is your image of God?

God is spirit, which is hard to wrap my head around (but not my heart).

How do you pray?

I meditate or, as a family, we talk about where we've seen God in our lives that day. This draws from the Jesuit practice known as examen.

What is your image of God and has it changed?

I used to imagine God as a person. In college, I thought I was so progressive to realize that God was not a man, but reflected both feminine and masculine qualities. God is spirit.

What about your faith is most meaningful to you?

God's ever-present and unconditional love of each one of us; also the rich tradition of the church that

gives us so many forms of prayer, so many different examples of Christians living out the fullness of their faith.

How do you relax?

I enjoy hiking in the beautiful mountains in Phoenix and doing yoga when I have time.

Do you have a favorite TV program?

"Mad Men"

Movie?

"Shawshank Redemption"

This story about a banker named Andy Dufresne wrongfully accused of a double murder is a favorite of mine, too. He's quickly introduced to the harsh realities of prison life -- its dangers, sadistic guards and corrupt warden. But he doesn't crack. Instead, he uses his banking skills to win favor with the authorities as he finds ways to improve the prison library and bring some dignity back to many of the inmates, including another lifer, with whom he manages to escape.

Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman help make this a great story, but I wonder what makes it your favorite.

"Shawshank Redemption" is my favorite movie because it's a great story about goodness and friendship flourishing despite the most desperate and grim circumstances. It's an incredibly hopeful perspective on the light of the human spirit amidst darkness.

Who is your favorite author?

It's usually whomever I'm currently reading. I just finished Isabel Allende's book *Portrait in Sepia*. When I have some time on the beach, I love a big read like Leo Tolstoy or Fyodor Dostoyevsky. They really paint complete profiles of characters that make you appreciate their personalities from the inside out.

Favorite food?

My mom is an excellent Lebanese cook. Her grape leaves and koosa (stuffed zucchini) are a special treat and an act of love given the amount of time it takes to prepare them.

Anything else you'd like to say?

Thank you!

[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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