

As nurse and psychologist, Mercy sister creates peaceful, love-filled environments

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Apr. 29, 2014 Conversations with Sr. Camille

Mercy Sr. Mary McGrory

Age: 69

Profession: Nurse, clinical psychologist

Lives in: New York City

***Sr. Camille:* Mary, about 20 years ago, while I was our community's president, you called to update me on your professional situation. You said, "Camille, the doctor is a nurse." Please tell our readers what that meant.**

McGrory: I had completed a nursing degree, which was a second career, as I am also a clinical psychologist ("the doctor" part) for [Mercy Home for Children](#) [1].

How did that come about?

My mom was a nurse, and that profession always had an attraction for me, but I chose to be a Sister of Mercy in Brooklyn. We didn't have hospitals/health care ministries, so I put my attraction on the back burner and first taught and then went on for psychology. I was reintroduced to nursing when my mom became ill with cancer and needed palliative care in a hospital at the very end of her life. It was so inspirational to watch the nurses and aides care for my mom and for my family, as well. It resparked my interest, and my community encouraged me to go for it.

How do you work in each of those professions?

As a psychologist, I've worked at Mercy Home since 1980. Mercy Home is a great agency, sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy and specializing with children and adults with developmental challenges. When I began, it was with the children who were in residential care with us because they were too difficult for home care and really needed 24-hour supervision and a variety of programs that would help them socialize and communicate as non-challenged children do. Most could not use words to speak; most had great difficulty with minor changes in their routines. They would become highly anxious and hard to manage. We had a developmental therapy unit, and we worked with the children individually and in small groups to help them learn. The unit was made up of psychologists, art and music therapists, and gifted child care workers.

Mercy Home was unique in the New York City foster care system. As time went on, we added family recreation programs so parents could work with us and their children, and we introduced a special Saturday recreation program for the children who had little or no parent involvement. That program paired staff volunteers with those children for special activities and trips. Eventually, I became involved with grant writing to fund creative ideas. I also became an adjunct psychology professor on the side.

As a nurse, my sole desire was to work with patients with cancer, and I was able to do that in the cancer care

unit at Mercy Medical Center on Long Island and now in Calvary Hospital in the Bronx. I think my background in psychology helps me work not only with the patients, but with their families.

How do you evaluate your contributions to these separate medical fields?

I love what I do for Mercy Home. Working with so many gifted and dedicated people has enabled us to do some great things together. To help children with autism get interested in roller skating and dancing and rhythm instruments and art and to see them trying new things happened because we all worked together to create new kinds of programs and activities. To see them participate in community activities and enjoy New York sites and events would tell us that what we were doing was helping.

And as a nurse?

Patients and families are really the evaluators of their hospital experiences with me and with the Calvary staff. I know they appreciate the time we take to find out about the patient's preferences and to really try and make their stay as comfortable and comforting as we can make things. When death is close, there's nothing more important than creating a peace-filled and love-filled environment.

Please tell us about your previous ministries.

Well, I began as an elementary school teacher: first and second grades. I spent a few summers at our boys' home on Long Island and with summer programs in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. I started a program where I organized and trained parent volunteers to help children who had recently immigrated to the U.S. and needed some extra help in reading or math. As part of that program, I did home visits as needed to secure additional services for families in need.

When I finished my master's degree in psychology, I worked with Catholic Charities, first in its foster care department and later in a mental health clinic in Brooklyn, where I was able to start a play therapy program. I was fortunate to receive a teaching fellowship to complete my doctorate at St. John's University, and then I was an adjunct at LaGuardia Community College, teaching various courses in psychology for over 20 years. That was such a great experience because the students are from so many different cultural backgrounds!

Mary, you have a gift of expanding your services to meet a great variety of needs.

Over the past decade, I've had the great privilege of being part of Mercy Medical Mission and going to developing countries to help treat children who are poor and would otherwise not see a doctor. [Sr. Karen Schneider](#) [2], a doctor who runs this program, needs nurses, and I was more than happy to volunteer. I go to Haiti and Guyana each year and in the past have also gone to Peru.

Where and with whom did you grow up?

I grew up in Queens with my two older brothers and a mom and dad who had emigrated from Ireland.

Did you have role models?

I know I admired certain people, but I don't think I ever tried to model myself after them. It's a full-time job trying to figure out who you are and how to be your best self, I think

Who most influenced your belief system?

First and foremost, my parents. My mom was a quiet, funny, easy-going person who seemed to keep things in perspective, never getting overly excited about things that weren't really that important. She trusted us, and we

wanted to respond to that trust by living right. My dad was a very hard-working guy. He owned a grocery store that was open six days a week. But he never complained. He would bring one of us to work on Saturdays, and you could see how the people in the neighborhood liked to come into his store. They'd talk with him and his co-workers, sharing stories and happenings. He would let people get needed food on credit when things were tough for them. I think his generosity and caring influenced me.

The next influence was Sr. Virginia Walsh, with whom I have shared community for many years. She is amazing to me. An unflappable concern for people who are poor and hungry; a gift for reading folks; someone who always tells things as they are, even when that is not the safest thing to do. She has helped me be more honest and caring.

In the 1960s, the struggle of people of color and the struggle of poor people most influenced my thinking and my life. The dream of Martin Luther King Jr. and the life of Gandhi are important to me. Also, the many efforts to end the Vietnam War and the peace movement have been very influential. The Berrigans and Dorothy Day are all so inspirational.

What led you to the Sisters of Mercy?

I was thinking in grammar school about being a sister. I didn't meet the Mercies until I went to Bishop McDonnell Memorial High School. There were five different orders of sisters there, and the Mercies were in charge of the library and taught music and art. What I liked about them is that they just seemed down to earth. They had a good sense of humor and were friendly and seemed to care about the students. I guess I thought about them as caring about others, and that is what I wanted to do in a special way.

What are the challenges you face?

The hospital system can be difficult with respect to record-keeping requirements and how much time that takes away from being at the bedside. Sometimes, I think it would be nice to have a system that can be more responsive to individual needs when the patient is facing end-stage disease, but systems are never really good at tolerating exceptions, so the challenge is to document what you must and still be as available as you can be to patients and families.

What have you learned from working with children with special needs?

I've learned that there is always some way to connect with a child with autism, even when he or she seems quite withdrawn and uninterested. It is up to us who are not as socially challenged as they are to unearth the connection with them. Sometimes, it's music; sometimes, it is a particular game or a place they like to go or playing with water, or maybe just a gentle, inviting voice.

Do you have a good news story to share?

I have many! It has been a joy to watch the early efforts to have a rhythm band with the children of Mercy Home blossom into what is now an adult performance band (Melodic Soul) where participants practice weekly and do volunteer shows in senior centers. In addition, Mercy Home runs two creative arts programs for children with autism on Saturdays throughout the year as a way to enrich the children's lives and offer "time off" to the parents.

As a member of Mercy Medical Mission, I've seen children who have had their club feet fixed and their cleft palates reconstructed because of Sr. Karen Schneider and her team of doctors. It's pretty exciting to return to a village and have a young girl dance for you when, the last time you were there, she needed a crutch to walk because her foot was so turned inward.

Anything to break your heart?

I was in Haiti a few days after the earthquake with Mercy Medical Mission. To see the devastation and be with children who had lost their parents and were themselves facing amputation of a leg was heartbreaking. At the same time, I couldn't help be touched by how they seemed to accept what had happened and how they reached out to help one another.

What have been your most satisfying achievements?

That is just too hard to think about! I have loved so many things I've done because of the people I have worked with and the good things we've accomplished together. Personally, maybe teaching in college was most satisfying, but only because I was scared stiff when I first began and didn't think I would ever be any good at it. I accepted because my friend, Sr. Virginia, said I should and could, and then I got lots of help from Sr. Rosamond, a Josephite sister and psychologist, who gave me great ideas for how to teach and involve the students. I owe my teaching successes to them!

Any disappointments?

Well, I sometimes wish I were more assertive or maybe a better salesperson for the ideas I think could help change systems for the better. I think I would need to be more charismatic to pull that off, and charisma isn't learnable, is it?

How does your membership in the Sisters of Mercy enrich your life?

It is a great thing to be part of a community of people who are so dedicated to enriching the lives of people who are poor, who need education, who need support to reach their potential and to know that the programs and services we have sponsored or founded have been so effective in reaching people in need. And it's also a beautiful thing to be part of a group of people who can pray together and have fun together and are there for you in good times and in difficult times. That is my community.

Please say something about your connection with Mercy associates.

I could write a book! What an inspiration it has been to be part of our Mercy associate group for well over 30 years. These laywomen have been such a gift to us and to me. We pray together each month, and they bring the spirit of Mercy into their jobs, their families, their neighborhoods and their parishes, volunteering their time and talents with great generosity. Our monthly get-togethers are not only a time for prayer but for learning more about each other and of growing in friendship and in community. We have been with each other at times of sorrow, when a member has died, and in times of joy, when a member is honored. Our group is multicultural, and it has enhanced each of us to learn more about each other's histories. I often think that our foundress, Catherine McAuley, looks down from heaven on Mercy associates with great love.

What is your favorite Scripture passage?

In John's Gospel in the first chapter is the verse, "The word was made flesh and lived among us." I had a Scripture professor, Fr. Denzer, who explained that the more correct translation would be, "He pitched his tent

among us." I loved that idea of Jesus pitching his tent and have always thought that you can't get any closer than pitching your own tent in the midst of the folks you have come to teach and save. I think that's what we're called to do, to be really part and parcel of the lives of the people we serve, so we truly listen and understand their stories as they do.

What is your image of God?

I know God is a spirit, but of course, all those years of God the Father images are in my head, too. I think of God as a listener and someone who easily wraps arms around us when we pray or are in need. I also think he laughs at our overworrying or sweating the small stuff, probably shrugs her shoulders and thinks, "Why do they keep doing that when they know I will take care of them?" My recent favorite book is [*The Shack* \[3\]](#) because I think the author has made God very real and very loving, and that is my image as well

Has it changed?

Well, I'm more conscious that God is not a he. But I don't think I ever thought of God as anything but loving and available.

How do you pray?

I pray with Sr. Virginia each morning. I talk to God when I am with someone and trying to find the right words or trying to read what they are not saying. I am very conscious of God-in-nature.

What in our church encourages or discourages you?

I'm encouraged by Pope Francis' concern for the welfare of the poor and marginalized. I'm discouraged by how noninclusive we seem to be.

Is there anything you would change?

I would pay more attention to the good that people do rather than focus on sin. I would pay more attention to God as Love than God as Judge. I would have more programs for youth.

What causes you joy?

Seeing individuals working toward their goals in life and getting closer and closer. I work with lots of women who have sacrificed much to get their educations while raising families, and I feel so happy for them when they achieve their goals.

On a simpler note, watching the ocean; going over the bridge in the morning to work and seeing a red sky at daybreak. One time, there was this amazing rainbow. That was a wow moment for me.

What gives you hope?

The goodness in people. Their efforts to help one another.

How do you relax?

I read, garden, talk with Sr. Virginia, with whom I live and who has been a great inspiration to me. She is now 90 but always wise and fun to be with.

I've so enjoyed this conversation! Is there something you wish I had asked?

Who could imagine anything more!

[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](#) [4] from Now You Know Media.]

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Links:

[1] <http://mercyhomeny.org/>

[2] <http://ncronline.org/node/67516>

[3] <http://www.amazon.com/The-Shack-Wm-Paul-Young/dp/160941411X>

[4] <http://www.nowyouknowmedia.com/stories-of-forgiveness.html>

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