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Faith, mom's spirit guide speech pathologist through life

by Sr. Camille D'Arienzo

Conversations with Sr. Camille

I first met Joanna Polito through the eyes of her aunt, our much loved Mercy Sr. Regina Shelley. She thought Joanna might follow in her footsteps, but I'm sure what she would want most of anyone is for each to follow her own heart. I remember so well how Joanna and other family members stood at her bedside as her life ended Sept. 13, 2000.

***Sr. Camille:* Joanna, how old were you then?**

Polito: I was 15 when Aunt Jeannie passed.

What impact did your aunt's life and death have on you?

In life, Aunt Jeannie was the person I looked most forward to seeing. In a single hug, all of life's difficulties disappeared, and I was most happy. She had a way of making every situation bearable. When she spoke to me, it was as if only she and I existed in the world. She was never too busy for anyone, especially her family.

What do you remember about the day she died?

Sept. 13, 2000, was a remarkable day. I was picked up from school early and told we needed to rush over the Mercy motherhouse to see Aunt Jeannie. When we got there, our entire family and many of her closest friends were gathered around her bed, with my grandmother caressing her arm and softly singing to her. The very minute she passed, 3 p.m., the bells of the nearby St. Lucy-St. Patrick Church tolled. It was the most beautiful yet saddest day of my young life. Her death left a hole in my heart and the hearts of my cousins as well. It was the first time we saw our parents, aunts and uncles cry. It was the first I saw the vulnerability of my grandmother as she lost her oldest daughter. For months after, it affected my

family, especially on Christmas and Easter.

Aunt Jeannie's death was preceded by my grandfather's earlier that year. Coupled with that loss, I found myself crying myself to sleep and questioning God and his plans. I withdrew from many of my friends because they had never experienced death as I had. They didn't understand my emotions and frustrations.

Death returned a few years later to claim your mother. How have you been able to continue following your dreams since then?

I live to make my mom proud. If I contemplate doing something, the first question I ask is, "Would Mommy approve?" That's what gives me the motivation to keep going. She always had high hopes for me, so I had them for myself. My biggest fear, ever, since I was a little girl, was disappointing my parents. That fear remains with me today, and I am sure it always will. When my mother got sick with cancer, I was a full-time student at Brooklyn College with a part-time job. When her health declined and she required more medical attention, I was offered a full-time night job with Goldman Sachs. My days consisted of doctors' appointments with Mom in the morning, classes in the afternoon and work at night. I was tired, but without my mother's income, my dad needed help paying bills and, well, I just needed to do what I needed to do. My sisters helped when they could, but they were living away from home with their own families to tend to.

After my mom passed, many people doubted that I would ever finish getting my undergraduate degree. To their surprise, I graduated with a bachelor's degree in speech-language pathology and audiology and moved on to attend St. John's University to complete a master's program. Sometimes I wonder how I was able to manage it all. Was it to prove people wrong or prove my mother right?

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What are you doing now?

Today, I'm a speech-language pathologist working with preschool children between the ages of 3 and 5 in York, Pa. Many of my children are from low-income, single-parent families. They come with multiple diagnoses: apraxia, autism spectrum disorders, ADHD, articulation and language delay.

How did you get to this point?

Lots of praying, family support, encouragement and, of course, my guardian angels. Many have stepped in as maternal figures to ensure I follow the right path.

Do you bring your faith to the workplace?

I do. My faith teaches me that we are all one with God. God does not make mistakes. We're all created in his image and likeness, regardless of differences. I try to encourage the families to look at their children and find that one thing that makes them special -- not the disorder, but an actual blessing.

What are the perks of your profession?

Besides getting the chance to play games all day? I work with pretty incredible children. Every day, no matter their diagnosis, they make strides. Whether they pucker their lips for the first time, blow a bubble or actually make a sound, it's progress. This job certainly taught me about patience. Progress may be slow, but it is still progress. I look at these children, most from broken homes, and life is put into

perspective for me.

What was your family life like?

My family life was great. I'm the youngest of four girls. They say I was spoiled, but I highly doubt that. I come from a fairly large, tight-knit family in which Christmas dinner drew approximately 40 people, all of whom were family. I have 23 first cousins and countless second cousins who are just as close as my first cousins. We had a pool in our backyard, so all the neighborhood kids would come over, especially when they heard my dad was lighting the BBQ. We certainly didn't have everything, but together, we had it all.

Where did you grow up?

I grew up in the Midwood section of Brooklyn, N.Y. I attended Our Lady Help of Christians from kindergarten through eighth grade and went to Bishop Kearney High School.

Did you have role models?

My sisters were certainly my role models. From them I learned what NOT to do and all the right things to do. That's why I was the perfect child!

Did you have a favorite teacher?

My favorite teacher was Miss Jessica Olynik. She taught third grade and introduced us to foreign countries. Every week, we'd go to a different one. We'd decorate the classroom with things from the culture. She'd bring in various foods for us to taste. I remember when we went to Japan: She taught us how to use chopsticks and how to write characters. I've not forgotten her in 20 years; I will certainly not forget her in the next 20.

What is your favorite Scripture passage?

"I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me." This quote serves as a motivator. It reminds me that I am never alone, for God is always directing my path. He may not always lead me in the direction I want to go, but his plan is greater, and he leads me in the direction I need to go.

What is your image of God?

To me, God has many images. He is the image of the person I need most in my life at any particular time. Sometimes he looks like my dad; sometimes when I really need my mom, God comes in her image. Sometimes he comes as my mom's best friend, Anne, who has taken me under her wing.

Has it changed?

It certainly has. When we're little, we believe every picture and image you see in the church or in books. God has long brown hair and wears sandals. As I have grown older and become more spiritual, I have realized God is present in every single person or natural creation at every single point of the day. He may appear as a beam of light cast by the sun or an actual person. This idea of God brings comfort to me. It makes me feel as though I am surrounded by his grace as opposed to looking for that one image and feeling disappointment when it can't be found.

Who most influenced your belief system? Please explain.

I grew up in a devout Catholic home. My grandmothers attended church every morning; my family, every Sunday. My sisters and I attended Catholic school from kindergarten to 12th grade. In addition, my aunt was a Sister of Mercy. My family has always been surrounded by the values and teachings of the Catholic church. Catholicism was instilled in me from all directions of my life.

However, the people who taught me to be more Christ-like were most definitely my parents. They taught me how to treat others, to care for them, to pray for them, and how to listen and be present. They taught me how to be merciful and rely on my faith to get through the most difficult of times. More importantly, they were Christ's best example of unconditional love.

What do you want from the church?

I ask that the church achieve all it asks of me. Many times, I feel as though the church doesn't always find goodness in all of God's creations and show mercy to them. Instead, it's quick to cast them away without truly understanding their stories. As the Scripture reads, "We are all created in the image and likeness of God." We should all be treated equally as such regardless of one's lifestyles.

What about your faith is most meaningful to you?

I am able to share it with my family and friends. It brings me comfort, knowing that I am surrounded by God's grace and that I will, one day, be reunited with my Aunt Jeannie and Mom.

Do you see it in action?

I do. I see God everywhere, and I do my best to acknowledge it and appreciate it, even on the hardest of days.

What gives you hope?

People who pay it forward: when people show compassion, love and support to people they don't know. This is when I know God is present and there is still goodness in the world.

Are you inspired by any saint?

I am inspired by Mother Teresa, a woman who lived during my lifetime. She was a leader in faith and in life. She reminded all people of God's goodness and sacrifice. She is a shining example of Christ.

How do you pray?

I pray in my head. Sometimes, I talk out loud. I don't necessarily say an "Our Father" or a "Hail Mary" unless I am asking for something particular, like a safe flight. I most often just have a conversation with God, asking him to watch over my family and direct me to follow his will. When I pray to my mom, I always tell her the most recent events of my and my family's lives, and I always quote a lyric from a Josh Groban song that reminds me of her. It is the same lyric I ended her eulogy with: "For always and ever, a thousand tomorrows may cross the sky, but for always and always, we will go on beyond goodbye" ("Always," Josh Groban).

Joanna, this summer your July Fourth sparkled with more than fireworks! Please tell us about the contest you won that brought you to Hollywood and to Josh Groban.

My mom's best friend, Anne, first told me about the contest. She sent me the link over Facebook and told

me I should enter. The premise of the contest was to write a reason why you should be considered Josh Groban's biggest fan. I was very hesitant to enter the contest, mostly because I had to sum up that reason in just 160 characters. Fortified by the encouragement of family and friends, I thought, "Well, I have nothing to lose."

My grandfather had an amazing opera voice and often sang "The Sound of Music" from the musical as well as "O Holy Night." Soon after he passed, Celine Dion released "The Prayer," which was sung with Josh Groban, and I was immediately reminded of my grandfather and became an instant fan. His music brought much healing to me and Mom when she was ailing. My very last Christmas gift from my mother was a pair of tickets to his concert at Madison Square Garden.

As I looked into the prize of the contest, I learned that I'd be flown to Hollywood to meet Josh Groban on July 4, the eighth anniversary of my mother's death. I couldn't help but believe that somehow, someday, it was a blessing from my mom, a sign that she was still with me. It was that realization that pushed me to enter the contest. I entered the competition just by writing these words: "His words go beyond the stars -- they are my prayers to heaven. Through his songs, I am home in my mom's arms, and she is alive again."

Within the first night of the competition, I was in first place and held that position until the end of it all. Through the magic of social media and Internet, my friends, family and friends of friends I didn't know but who knew my story voted for me. It was incredible to see the amount of support and love bestowed upon me.

My dad told me that not many people in their lifetime get the ability to know how truly loved and appreciated they are. With a full heart, I now know.

Did the trip meet your expectations?

Absolutely. The biggest expectation I had was meeting Josh Groban, which I did. All the other experiences and memories I made were just icing on the cake.

[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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