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Mercy sister overcomes rough start to thrive in education

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Apr. 17, 2012 Conversations with Sr. Camille

At 52, Mercy Sr. Lisa Gambacorto is known as the competent, well-respected directress of Mount Saint Mary Academy in Watchung, N.J. Along the way, she's accumulated other proficiencies: She also taught elementary and high school and served as a student counselor and campus minister. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in sociology and two master's degrees in school administration and counseling psychology. She's a licensed marriage and family therapist and had a private practice for seven years before becoming the directress.

It was in this period that the estimable Sr. Lisa gained a reputation as The Tooth Fairy with a class of developmentally delayed children and the local police department. More about that later.

Sr. Camille: Lisa, where did you get your start in life?

Sr. Lisa: I was born the second daughter of Dominic and Janet Gambacorto in Shrewsbury, N.J. I have an older sister, Gina, and a younger sister, Dawn. I'm close to both of them.

What values did you draw from your parents?

My parents influenced my belief system by how they live their lives: They are honest, authentic, affectionate and faithful. They have been married for 56 years. They were very fair and always encouraging. Honesty is the most important value in my family.

As an adult, you have demonstrated a variety of interests and competencies. What were you like as a child?

I was a very busy little girl and loved both girl and boy toys. My father built me a small storefront, and my mom bought me a plastic cash register. I was very tiny for my age. People saw me as verbal, precocious, animated

and driven. I'd get up early in the morning to sell cookies and drinks to the trash collectors and neighborhood people as they left for work. This entrepreneurial spirit escalated as I got older. I sold old jewelry and homemade yule log centerpieces and fixed broken toys for the kids on the block. As a teenager, I was selected as the youth representative for the recreation commission of the town. I became very involved in town politics and considered going into public service.

It sounds as though you were ready to retire before embarking on an adult career.

My career goal throughout my childhood was to be a dentist.

What kind of student were you?

When I was in the second grade, I was diagnosed with dyslexia. I attended Shrewsbury Borough Elementary School. The teachers were perplexed because I was advanced in language and had excellent social skills, but I could not read or spell. It's just as well that I didn't go to Catholic elementary school, because in my mind, I couldn't differentiate between the words GOD and DOG. That would have been a big problem, don't you think?

How did your classmates see you?

I was well-liked in school. Basically, I was fun to be with. I overcompensated for my disability with a quick wit and a great sense of humor.

And your teachers?

At eighth-grade graduation, I received the Robert Rue Campbell Award, given in honor of a member of the town who was killed in WWII just one day before his 21st birthday. The criteria of the award given by Robert's family were, "sunny disposition, honorable, kind, brave and dedicated." Students and faculty were asked to nominate candidates. The person who received the most votes received the award.

What happened when you went from a public elementary school to Red Bank Catholic High School?

I met the Sisters of Mercy. They had me at the first "Hello"! The experience I had at Red Bank Catholic was life-changing.

It was a risk for me to attend Red Bank Catholic because they were not equipped to handle my learning difference. In my junior year, the principal, Sr. Percy Lee Hart, taught my algebra class. She asked me to do little jobs in the office during my free period, and the next thing I knew, she asked me if I was interested in piloting a program called "Administrative Apprentice," not to be confused with "Celebrity Apprentice." I would shadow her in my senior year and then write up the experience in a professional journal called, "Today's Administrator." The New Jersey Department of Education approved my receiving academic credit for the program. The experience I had working with Percy, both professionally and personally, was extraordinary. She allowed me to interact with students and faculty in many different capacities.

Please explain.

I began to learn more than school administration from Sr. Percy Lee and the other sisters. They invited me into their life and I was inspired by the joy I saw and felt there. The sisters were young and fun. They prayed with us and invited us to the convent. We felt their care for us in and out of the classroom.

Were people surprised when you decided to become a Sister of Mercy?

Nobody thought I was the "type" to enter the convent, but I knew it was something I had to at least try. My

parents were supportive, but I think they had bets in how long I would last. I had a very difficult transition when I entered the convent. I was 21. I came from an upper-middle-class suburban Italian family. I found convent life difficult. I missed my family, my customs and traditions, and we almost never had pasta. (I hate ham and boiled potatoes.) My formation director was first-generation Irish and it was as though we came from two different planets.

Did it get easier as time went on?

After 18 months, my formation director asked me to leave. She said I didn't fit into the community. I was simply too loud, too talkative, too colorful and too overwhelming. She told me that I was a nice girl, I would make a good comedian, even a great teacher, but there would be no place for someone with such a "big personality" in religious life. At the same time, I was teaching eighth grade in an inner-city school in Trenton, N.J. Sr. Lee Ann Amico was the principal of the school and we became friends. She requested that I be allowed to stay, at least until June. She insisted that I was a great teacher and would be a wonderful Sister of Mercy.

What happened next?

The major superior of the community came to the school and sat in my classroom one day. The next week, she called me to come to Mount Saint Mary for a meeting. I was prepared to tell her that I would be leaving as soon as school closed in June and that I had realized that even though I felt called by God to serve, the Sisters of Mercy were not ready for me and I was not ready for them. The sisters I had known and loved at Red Bank Catholic were a fond memory for me, but nun boot camp, as I called it, had drained my spirit. I was very unhappy.

I got a big surprise when I walked into the boss' office. She told me that I would not be going home, and that she wished that we had 10 more Lisas.

"Ten more Lisas?" I said. "Are you sure?"

She also told me I would be received into the community as a novice sooner rather than later if that is what I believed God wanted. I told her that I would not stay if I had to change my personality. She said, "You need to be YOU, that is who God wants you to be." And Sr. Lisa was born!

Your holding on required faith and courage. How do you see God in the tempest that rattled you?

I see God as a loving presence, a gentle breeze and a warm salt-water spritz on a very hot day. I don't see God in gender form, but as a beautiful, healing blue mist.

I think I have that image of God because I grew up at the Jersey shore and have always loved the ocean and have seen God's power in the calm and stormy sea.

Has that image changed over time?

Yes. I saw God as a kind of old man, a Santa Claus figure. The evolution of the image has gone from all-knowing and all-powerful to all-loving and all-friendship. I no longer ask for miracles, only serenity and strength.

What is your favorite Scripture passage?

My favorite Scripture passages are when Jesus asks the disciples to feed his sheep and to look for the one who is missing. I think these speak to my heart because I've tried to nourish all those I meet and I look for those who have lost their way. I, too, have been the lost sheep.

What does your faith require of you?

My faith calls me to act with joy as I encounter people. My work with adolescent girls gives me daily opportunities to reflect on the core values of the Sisters of Mercy. Our young women deserve to see and experience what these values mean in a real and practical way.

Have you encountered any particular challenge in this arena?

I had the privilege of being a guardian to a young woman in the 1980s. Because she wasn't able to live at home, we took her into our convent and sent her off to college on a scholarship. When she was in her junior year, I got a call from the police. She had been jogging when she collapsed and died of a brain aneurism. My heart was broken. I donated her organs and she gave life to others. Believe it or not, this devastating experience deepened my faith. She used to call me Sister Mom.

Where is your comfort zone for praying?

My favorite way of praying is when I am exercising. For some reason, it helps me focus. I place myself and my body in motion to receive God. Many beautiful ideas and feelings have come to me when I am exercising.

Are you comfortable in inviting others to religious life?

This is a difficult question for me. Only God can call someone to religious life, and if God wants me to do the leg work, I am willing! I think there's nothing sadder than a "wannabe Mercy" who never had the courage to take the plunge.

What do you ask of Catholicism?

I'd like Catholicism to catch up to the present reality. We need to inspire all people and help them find strength in their faith. We're losing this generation. We must reclaim our children and show them the beauty of our faith.

How would you assess the current situation?

The diminishment of the sisters causes me great sorrow. Their wisdom and humor causes me great joy! The young students at the Mount give me great hope. I often tell them that they are the future doctors, nurses, politicians, inventors and creative thinkers and I trust them.

Now, Sr. Lisa, how did you gain a reputation as a tooth fairy?

Well, I was dressed as a tooth fairy for a dental presentation on proper tooth brushing for a special education class at school. Wearing my tooth fairy attire, I was late for a marriage counseling appointment. I had to get home to change into my professional outfit. I was a little over the speed limit when I was pulled over by a police officer. He told me to slow down so I would be around to collect the children's baby teeth and leave them a small reward, in the time-honored tradition of all proper tooth fairies.

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

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