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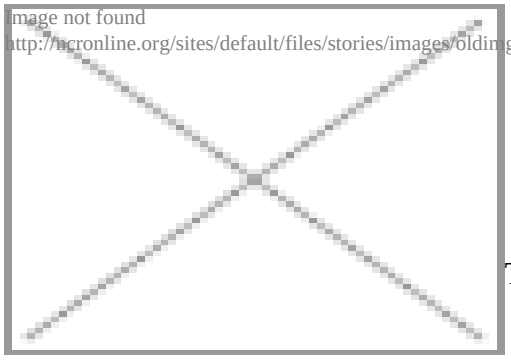
Purple Heart recipient gives back to community

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Dec. 13, 2011 Conversations with Sr. Camille

Except for travel tied to his military service in Vietnam, Robert Lohrey has never been outside the United States. Early most mornings, the slim, energetic man can be seen walking briskly along Myrtle Avenue, an old commercial street in the traditionally German, Ridgewood section of Queens, N.Y.



This is where Lohrey grew up, where he met and married his wife, and where they raised two daughters. After St. Matthias Elementary, Grover Cleveland High School and one year at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, he landed what would be his lifetime job at ABC-Disney in Manhattan. The following year he was drafted, spent two years in the infantry and returned to ABC-Disney.

Ridgewood is Lohrey's corner of the world, a suburb of our nation's greatest city. Few know the extent to which this quiet man has managed to improve the lot and lives of others.

Camille: Where did your passion for helping others begin?
Lohrey: I remember the exact moment I made my decision. I was sitting in a foxhole in Quang Tri, the northernmost province of South Vietnam. I was praying the rosary. I thought that if I made it home, I would do something for others. I wasn't bargaining with God for my life. It had nothing to do with that. I just knew I wanted to do more for others with the life I had.

Did you have reason to think you wouldn't make it home?
Sure. Throughout my time there, I was shot at at least once a month. Then, on ... Dec. 7, 1968, a defective mortar landed in the middle of our platoon. They called it friendly fire. I was wounded, but everyone around me died. I came home with a Purple Heart and a new way of looking at the gift of life.

You've certainly spent a lot of your life helping others. Surely your time in the infantry had an impact. What else influenced your choices?
My faith, especially my belief in the scripture that says that those who have more are expected to give more.

Is that your favorite scripture passage?
It's up there, but my very favorite, surprisingly, comes from the Old Testament. It's from Isaiah. He describes Jesus as the suffering servant who will endure all kinds of pain in order to teach and save us. It's about his forgiving and loving us in spite of his own rejection and pain. We hear that reading on Good Friday.

Were your parents religious?

My father was Catholic and my mother was Protestant. In those days, people in "mixed marriages" had to be married in the rectory and promise to bring up their children in the Catholic faith. My mom was more responsible about doing that than my father was. Still, because we were taught only Catholics went to Heaven, I was afraid she wasn't going to make it. I told her that. She did eventually become a convert, but I don't think that had anything to do with my threat.

How would you describe your early image of God?
Well, God was good, but very much a judge. It was as though he watched everything we did and was ready, in a blink of an eye, to punish us if we messed up.

Where did you get your early ideas about God and religion?
My parents sent me to St. Matthias, where I had the School Sisters of Notre Dame. They were very strict, but there was one nun, my fifth-grade teacher, Sr. Paulette, who was young, gentle and kind. I liked her a lot.

Has your image of God changed from the judge you described earlier?
Very much. Today I see God as kind, patient, loving and forgiving. Jesus set the example of how we as human beings are meant to respond.

What happened to the promise you made in the foxhole?
When I returned from the war, I found out that my parish had a Holy Innocents Society in which volunteers spent Saturday mornings caring for mentally challenged children and their caregivers. I signed up, and that experience opened the door to everything else for me. I've been with this group for 40 years. I've watched children grow up and their caregivers get old.

What is it about this effort that has held your interest?
First of all, the caregivers. I marvel at their love and resilience. I worry about some, too. For example, there's an 86-year-old widow who needs help herself, and she's still taking care of her 60-year-old dependent son. We're trying to find a place that will give mother and son the attention they need. And then there are the leaders and volunteers: priests, sisters and lay people. They are among the most beautiful people I've ever met.

Was there anyone who had a particularly strong influence on you?
Sr. Gemma Napolitano, a Missionary Sister of the Blessed Trinity. She was with the Holy Innocents all the time I knew her. She was full of love for Jesus. She had a strong commitment to people who are poor and mentally challenged. She passed away on Aug. 13, and my wife, Lydia, and I drove to Philadelphia for her funeral.

How did Lydia know Sr. Gemma?
Lydia and I got married in St. Matthias Church nine years after I returned from Vietnam. She used to volunteer with me. Everybody knew and loved Sr. Gemma. After our second daughter was born, Lydia decided it best to stay home with the children. She's continued to volunteer, teaching poor women how to sew and make quilts.

I know you spent 39 years as a financial manager for ABC-Disney. Were you able to bring your faith to the marketplace?
Not directly. Some of the others knew I was Catholic and I think I treated everyone with respect. They also saw me leaving to attend a nearby noon Mass most days.

Do you think your faith made an impression on your daughters?
I hope so. When Debbie and Donna were children, I would pray with them every night. Lydia and I sent them to Catholic elementary and high schools, and we all went to Mass every Sunday. We want them to know the importance of helping others. When the girls were growing up, we'd sometimes bring them to the Saturday program so they could see that their parents volunteered to help others, and also that people who do such things find a lot of joy in it.

What else do you do?
I've been a Eucharistic minister for 30 years. It's pretty awesome to see how people long for Jesus. Being able to bring Him to them establishes a special bond. I spend more time helping in the parish food pantry. Twice recently people told me they don't have a stove. Can you believe that? They live in our neighborhood and they don't have a stove!

You and I met at a parish Christmas bazaar eight years ago. Would you mind telling our readers how that happened?
Sure. You were selling Christmas cards. A man on death row was (and is) the artist. The money you raise goes to help poor children. As we talked, I told you I was against the death penalty. You invited me to join your Cherish Life Circle, which opposes it and also offers prayer services for families of murder victims. I did. That put me in touch with the artist, David Hammer. He amazes me by his desire and ability to help others, even though he's on death row.

Anything else?
Five years ago I took another wonderful step. I became an associate of the Sisters of Mercy. This summer I volunteered at the Dorothy Bennett Mercy Center's summer camp for poor Brooklyn children. That was a new experience for me.

Another new experience has been walking both daughters down the aisle in ceremonies not too far apart. What do you hope for them?
That the faith that has helped Lydia and me will serve their marriages as well. And that they'll find ways to give back as a way of saying thanks to God for their good lives.

We've focused on what you do for others. What do you do for yourself?
Every year I go with a friend to Vermont to spend time with the Benedictine monks at the Weston Priory. That's spiritually enriching.t

Did the tenth anniversary of 9/11 have any impact on you?
I can't help thinking about the inhumanity of that attack. The fragility of life was even clearer to me that day than it was in that Vietnam foxhole. On the other hand, I take comfort in remembering all the good people who risked their lives to help others. Maybe it was their way of giving back.

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

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