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Mother's faith, Mercy sisters inspire Grenada native

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Feb. 19, 2013 Conversations with Sr. Camille

When Laurel Jerome joined our Cherish Life Circle a few months ago to help promote the abolition of the death penalty, the members immediately perceived her leadership qualities.

Sr. Camille: Laurel, you are a responsible wife, parent and parishioner. Where did this talent develop?

Jerome: I'm really not quite sure. I'm guessing it came from my mother, Christine Samuel, who always wanted to see things done the right way and who encouraged me to do positive things. She sent me at a very early age, to learn how to knit and crochet; she taught me how to sew and encouraged me to take extra classes at school and move ahead in life. She was married at 16 and became a housewife. I believe she dreamed big but was never able to achieve being more than a housewife. She died suddenly in 1989 at St. Mary's Hospital in Brooklyn. May she rest in peace.

Where did you grow up?

I grew up in Grenada, a Caribbean island in the West Indies. I am from St. Mark's Parish in a town called Victoria, named after Queen Victoria.

What was your family like?

My family was very loving, but at the same time strict, seeing that I was their only child. I really never wanted for anything; I was showered with love and affection, given most things I asked for -- within reason, of course.

I was a very quiet and shy child. I had rules and I obeyed the majority of them because breaking any rule meant that I would not be allowed to go with my friends for the afternoon Sunday walk, which most children in our town enjoyed, or to the movie matinees. Those were big deals because there really wasn't much to do in our small town. The girls walked together, and the boys kept to themselves. We would just walk and chat or pay a few cents to see a movie. Our parents gave us a few cents more to buy treats. There was a lady who sold homemade ice cream from her home. A few people walked around selling special homemade candies and sweet potato puddings and other treats, as most shops were closed on Sundays and those were such delicious treats that most children looked forward to.

My family owned a variety shop, and most of their lives were spent running the business until their marriage broke up and Mother moved to New York and took me along. Mother was a devout Catholic; we attended Mass, she loved to pray and back then, even though Catholics didn't read the Bible, she always prayed her rosary and read the Psalms. She showered me with books, but my most treasured one was a children's Bible. Eventually, my mother left the church and started running around with the Jehovah's Witnesses, but she confessed that there were many unanswered questions and she longed to return to her Catholic faith. However, she died suddenly in 1989 without doing so. I gave her a Catholic funeral and buried her in her hometown in the Catholic cemetery.

What schools did you attend?

Pre-primary, I attended St. Mark's Anglican School because it was very near to my grandmother's house. Later, I attended St. Louis R.C. Girls School and Mac Donald's College in Grenada. In New York, I attended John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

How and when did you meet your husband?

I met my husband, Leyland, here in Brooklyn in 1985. We both lived in the same apartment building.

What is he like?

He is most times a quiet person who loves to attend Mass and enjoys a good party. He believes that as long as one works hard and does what is right, he has nothing to worry about in life. I've never met anyone who has such strong work ethics. I remember there were days that although he was sick and feeling lousy, I had to try hard to convince him not to go to work, and he didn't always listen. He attends Mass every Sunday and participates in different church activities. He saw to it that all three boys attended and participated in the Mass.

Would you say something about your children and grandchildren?

Only that they have all fallen away from the Catholic faith. I am praying that they return home to the Catholic church.

What do you want from our faith for them?

I would really like them to always know how good God is and that they should never cease to pray but to always turn to God in both tough times and good times.

Please say something about your work experience.

As a teenager and into my adult years, I worked in many fields, and I enjoyed working. I baby-sat; cleaned houses; worked in a supermarket, a department store and banks. I worked for temporary agencies, and so on.

But the last 17 years working for the Sisters of Mercy on Willoughby Avenue was the best. Words cannot explain how I felt working for the sisters and visiting with those were sick during my lunch breaks. I believe that I grew as a person and so much closer to God during those years. I'd walk the hallways and the grounds of the Convent of Mercy and see the elderly sisters silently praying the rosary, and for some reason, that took me back to when my mother and I did that. I would then go home and pray the rosary.

I attended evening classes whilst working at the Convent of Mercy, and I had big plans. I wanted to go on to big things in life, maybe be a corporate lawyer; however, the respect I received working at the convent made me feel so loved and so at home, I didn't want to leave. The fact that my work was so appreciated! I never received such acknowledgment in the corporate world! I never wanted to work any place else. Sr. Camille, you were my first boss, and I was amazed at how kind you and the rest of the leadership team were. I had never experienced this in all the places I worked. Well, I became an associate of Mercy and my faith in God, in my church, in life and in people as a whole grew.

Thanks, Laurel, for sharing that memory. It's good to see that you recognized how much we respected and valued you. Now, on to another question. What is your favorite Scripture passage?

"If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31) "Trust in God, for God is love." As a child, walking to school, I passed a small wooden house daily where a little old man lived all alone. He had nothing, really; the house was sort of bare, with the exception of an old stove and some dishes. He always had a warm smile and his

doors were always wide open, and on the inside were those words written in big bold letters I read them every day as I passed, and they stuck with me.

Do those quotations make a difference in your life?

Yes, I live by those words. Just to know that no one, nothing can come against you if you place your trust in God, who is an ever-loving being, is so amazing and so comforting**.**

What is your image of God?

God is to me a supreme being that cannot be fenced in by our limited human knowledge.

Has it changed?

Yes, my image of God used to be this great big male figure. In my mind, I now see God as an extremely positive force of light, filled with total infinite love and goodness that is beyond human comprehension. I also know that God is a forgiving being.

Can you say what led to this altered impression?

I remember having a brief God discussion with you one day at work, and I believe you started me thinking more of who God is. I also contribute this change of thoughts to reading certain books on that subject and attending certain retreats.

What about your faith is most meaningful to you?

I love the fact that the Mass is celebrated, with the highlight being the consecration of the most Holy Eucharist, as Jesus instructed us to do in his remembrance. I love that part of the Mass.

Who most influenced your belief system?

My mother had such faith before she fell away from the church that the foundation she laid for me kept me in the faith. I attended Mass regularly and participated, but many times, my mind was on other things. My belief system grew and strengthened as I worked alongside and for the Sisters of Mercy. Their praying ways; respect and love for all, especially for the poor; their dedication to the Blessed Mother; and on the whole, their way of living started me thinking that there was more to being a believer than just attending Mass and going through the motions. I would say that prior to working at the Convent of Mercy, I was just a regular cradle Catholic who attended Mass only because I wanted to avoid committing sin.

Did you grow up with any heroes or heroines?

Yes. Martin Luther King Jr. was my hero. To put his life on the line for what he believed was right while knowing that there was so much hatred out there was admirable and astounding.

Has personal sorrow taught you anything helpful for yourself or others?

Yes. After the sudden death of my mother, who was also my best friend and confidant, I grieved silently for well over eight years. We had spoken over the telephone daily, we shopped together, and her sudden death left a hole in my heart. Now I've healed with time and prayers and have moved on, but I find myself been drawn to console and comfort people in similar position.

Which of your dreams have come true?

My dream of owning a business. I have recently started a commercial and residential cleaning company. Growth is very slow, but I believe that with continued hard work and dedication, it will grow.

What do you still long to achieve?

I'd love to be able to help those less fortunate than myself. I know that in many places in the world, and even here at home in this great country, people go to bed hungry. I have seen that as simple a thing as having a pair of shoes or clean water would allow people to live a better and healthier life. I'd love to be able to reach out; it is heart-wrenching to see such suffering. I pray that one day, I'll be able to do something to really ease someone's suffering.

What do you want from the church?

I'd love the church to remove certain barriers -- barriers that, in my opinion, are preventing it from growing the way that God intends it to grow.

What in our church encourages or discourages you?

I'm encouraged when on certain occasions our church is full, and I am discouraged whenever I hear of a closing or a merging or our churches.

Is there anything you would change?

I'd really like to see more young people at Mass, especially in my parish, St. Martin de Porres, so I'd appreciate knowing how to reach out to them.

What causes you sorrow?

Unnecessary killings like the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. I actually sat in front of the television and cried my eyes out. I really hope that something will be done to curb these killings.

How do you relax?

Crafting, reading and listening to a worthwhile television program relax me.

What causes you joy?

The laughter of children at play with not a care in the world; just pure joy and fun makes me smile and relaxes me.

What gives you hope?

Every new baptism in our faith and everyone who enters religious life reassures me that all will be well with our church.

[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 [1] from Now You Know Media.]

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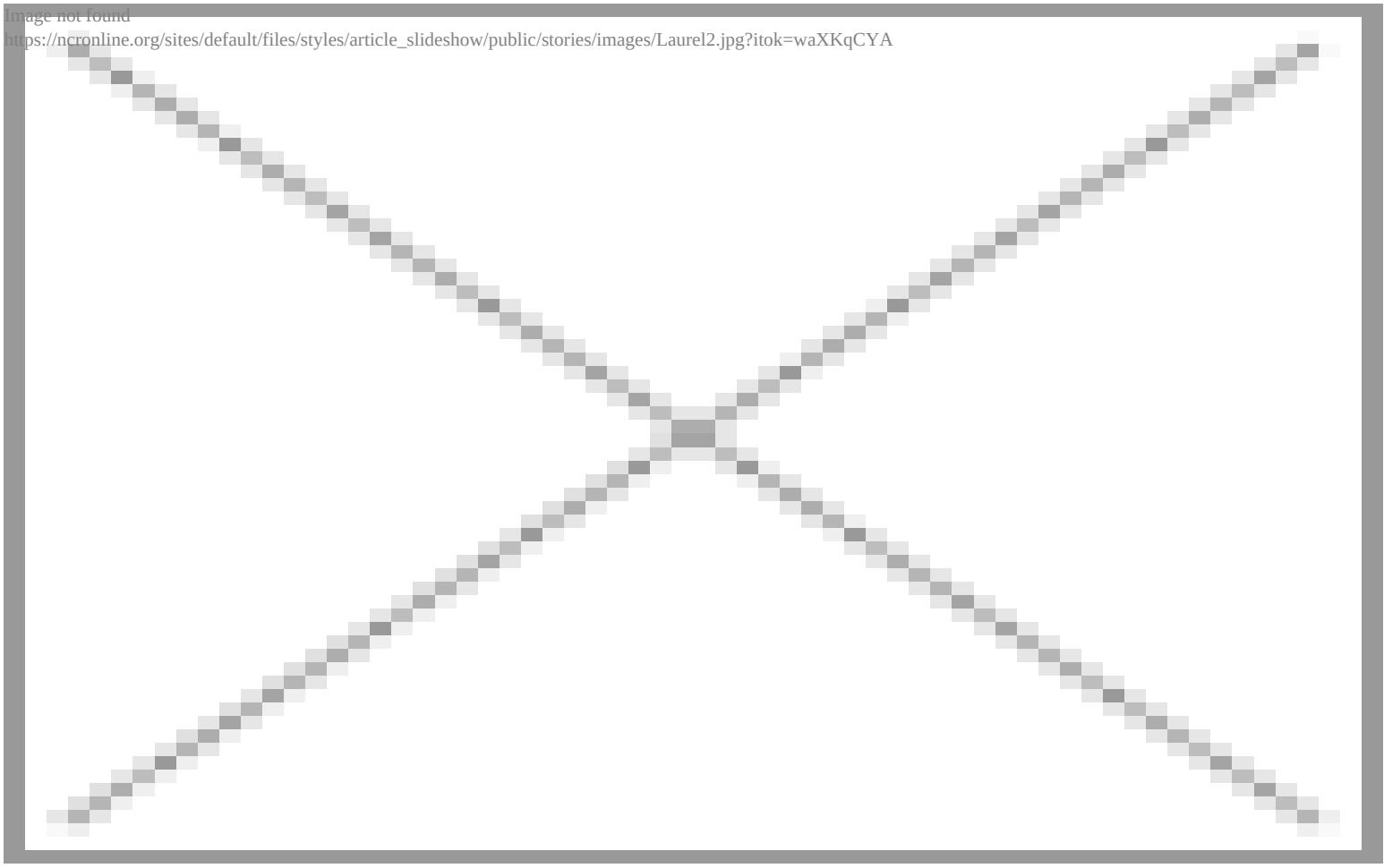

Laurel Jerome and her husband, Leyland

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Laurel Jerome

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