

Sister Stories



Sister Jeanne Andre Celebrates 75 Years in Religious Life

When you enter the home of S. Jeanne Andre Brendel, you know it! The door is open and the mat on the stoop reads “Harvest House.” Harvest House is a unique model of senior living in which residents have their own rooms, but choose to live as a family. They share meals, stories, and the cozy nooks and crannies of the single-family home in Syosset. S. Jeanne Andre founded this ministry 35 years ago to combat not only the malnutrition of seniors but also loneliness. Recently, S. Jeanne and S. Mary Butler gathered in the kitchen which overlooks a big backyard. On the table, there were chocolate-covered cookies and piping hot tea. It was time to talk about S. Jeanne Andre and her 75th Jubilee as a Sister of St. Dominic of Amityville! During the interview, S. Jeanne shared her stories - punctuated with laughter. She expressed her joyful awe about how she could see the

presence of God throughout her journey.

“More than ever, you (God) were there,” said S. Jeanne, her eyes sparkling. “You moved me in that direction – and I went along. You were there, and you will be with me every moment. That makes me so grateful for my life.” She acknowledged that “My body is not what it used to be, but what is so much richer? My soul! That’s the wonder! Life is so wonderful if God is a part.”

S. Jeanne is known for her ability to light up a room with her sheer joy (and hilarious stories). She is also known for the good work she has done with seniors. While it is well known that she is the founder of Harvest House, did you know that she was also the first Director of Retirement for our congregation?

S. Jeanne first discovered her love for older sisters while living at the large convent on Montrose Avenue, Brooklyn, which housed many elderly sisters. She even helped take care of a former prioress, Mother Caritas Harth, who served from 1928 to 1943. “I learned to like old people and I kind of got a feel for what the Order was.” Although S. Jeanne taught in schools for 20 years, in 1970 her calling shifted.

During a Chapter meeting, even though S. Jeanne Andre found herself on a committee about senior sisters which led to her becoming the first Director of Retirement for our congregation in 1970.

At that time, the sisters did not retire! They often worked well into old age and even through health issues. If sisters were asked to stop teaching, the senior sisters felt ashamed. “They thought that it meant they didn’t do good work,” Sister Jeanne explained. At that time, older sisters were sent to live on the site of the former orphanage for girls, St. Rose in Melville.

As director of retirement, S. Jeanne's first assignment was to visit the sisters there. "I walked in and saw no one," she said. With pep in her step, she knocked on their doors proclaiming "Good morning sister!" Peeking out through dark slivers of their doorways, the response was lackluster. "They were angry sisters with nothing to do!" S. Jeanne decided, "We have to get rid of that building and bring them here (to the Motherhouse). It was hard but it was a wonderful change."

As the sisters were brought to the Motherhouse, S. Jeanne started to develop programs for the older sisters. This program was called the Anselma Program, named for a former prioress, Mother Anselma Ruth, who served from 1943 to 1955. "It was the first formal retirement program and it grew!" she said. Sisters had the opportunity to enjoy ongoing events such as art, liturgy and dance. She recalled teaching autoharp to a handful of enthusiastic sisters. S. Jeanne started the long-standing tradition of taking them on vacations to Montauk which continued for many years! She also held the first Irish Night, a fundraiser that continues to this day, to raise money for our retired members. As changes were made, she shared this information with other religious congregations.

S. Jeanne was supported by the congregation to pursue a degree from Fordham with a concentration in gerontology. In 1973, she served as the Administrator of Social Service in the Siena Center in Franklin Square. It was there she discovered that many elderly were living by themselves suffering from malnutrition and loneliness. She decided to do something about it! In 1983, she pioneered a new form of family-style living for seniors when she founded Harvest House in Syosset. In order to accomplish this unique endeavor, she fought for a change in zoning laws that went to the Supreme Court! For the past 35 years, she has been ministering in this capacity with S. Mary Butler and many others.

Post-Vatican II, S. Jeanne Andre was one of the first Sisters to try living in a smaller community, as large convents closed. With special written permission from Prioress Frances Maureen, she moved into an apartment in Flushing Queens with sisters such as S. Ernestine Wenz, S. Gloria and S. Jeanne Clark. "It was a need," she said, adding that because it was a new way of living, some older sisters were upset by it. "When anything is different, it's hard," she said. She recalled inviting S. Thomasina, an older German sister who cooked in one of the convents. S. Thomasina had told her (in a thick German accent) "I don't like this. Why are you doing it?" But when sister saw the household "eat together and pray together," S. Thomasina supported her.

In 1964, S. Jeanne was the proud founder of a girl band that played into the 1970s. "The Guzman Girls", named after the Founder of our Order Dominic de Guzman, livened up many Jubilee celebrations and fundraisers for the sisters held at parish halls with songs like "Moon River" and "Sunny"! Sisters blasted their instruments while dressed in habits, and later red blazers! The band boasted S. Dottie Kane on saxophone, S. Maria Martin on trumpet, S. Carol Standerwick on drums, S. Sally Butler and later S. Miriam Cecile Lenihan on keys, S. Barbara Nirrengarten on melodica and S. Jeanne Andre on soprano saxophone.

Although she is unable to sing now, S. Jeanne is famous for her love of singing. At her parish Jubilee celebration, she was surrounded by attendees as they sang her favorite song: "Won't You Come Home Bill Bailey?" She called it "the most profound moment of community! They were singing the way I could not sing. They were saying, 'I will sing with you!'"

On the day of the Jubilee Mass in September, she offered a reflection to the congregation. She mentioned her sense of loss. "We are well aware of the many 'letting go's' we have faced. Personally...letting go...of hearing, singing, dancing, walking freely and driving." But as S. Jeanne Andre has let go, she says, "But I say, 'Hold on!' Hold onto the love that lured us and spoke to us 50, 60, 70 and 75 years ago. God lured us, and we said 'yes.' God spoke to our hearts anew and we responded with love! But now, God calls us to a deeper invitation and tells us that the world needs you, needs your love. Our answer can only be 'Yes, oh, yes, loving God' to the work of transforming this world in need. 'Oh yes, Lord God, yes!' Remain in my love, as I remain in you!" When she finished saying those words, the whole of St. Albert's Chapel rose to their feet, giving her a standing ovation.