

*Sister Mary Jeanne in her own words, story of her life from birth through 1990.*

I was born in New Orleans on July 23, 1926, the daughter of John and Rosetta Girshefski. I had three half-sisters, ages fifteen, seventeen, and nineteen, as my father's first wife had died four years previously. Another sister was born nineteen months later. I was the son my father never had, as I was more interested in athletics and outdoors rather than ruffles and bows.

Since my mother had been a public school teacher prior to marriage, it was natural that I enroll in public school at the age of four. It was the height of the depression, and my father's job was in jeopardy; he was the eldest son, and his mother had died leaving his father alone. Because of these factors it was decided that our family should move to my grandfather's home [Dutchtown, Louisiana] to live with and care for him.

School was a good experience for me; my grades were good, and my athletic ability kept me on school teams. After graduating as valedictorian of my class and earning a scholarship, I enrolled at Louisiana State University.

All of my educational experience had been in public schools as there was no Catholic school in the town in which I lived. All of my classmates were Catholics until my junior year of high school, when another school merged with ours and we had our first non-Catholic classmates. During the summer the Dominican Sisters taught us catechism.

Upon graduation from Louisiana State University, I accepted a teaching position in New Orleans in a Catholic school as a physical education teacher and coach. I was shocked to hear one of the nuns telling the students that they should never go to Louisiana State University as "they would lose their souls." It was at LSU that my first stirrings of a religious vocation had begun. There for the first time I had the opportunity of attending daily Mass and had been very involved at the Catholic Student Center.

For three years I desperately fought the idea of entering religious life, and finally on September 10, 1950 I entered the Dominican novitiate in Rosaryville. Two years later, because I already had my degree, I was missioned to Dominican College, the youngest of ninety-six sisters. There I had the opportunity to teach college physical education classes and to be the constant companion of anyone who needed to go out.

The community had a policy which called for the three years of temporary profession to be spent in different assignments. My third year found me back at the novitiate, teaching those high school students (aspirants) who intended to enter the community upon completion of high school.

In 1955 I made final profession and became principal of the aspiranture, a job which included being principal, teacher of seven classes, head janitoress, spiritual and vocational counselor, or whatever was needed. I remained in that position until 1961. During the summer months I was at St. Louis University earning a M.Ed. in Secondary Administration.

When I completed the degree I was transferred to St. Anthony's in New Orleans as a junior high school teacher. There I remained teaching in a departmental situation whatever no one

else wanted to teach. I held teacher certification in English, mathematics, science, social studies, and physical education and did not care what I taught, only that I would teach.

After four years I was sent by the community to pursue a Ph.D. in higher education administration at St. Louis University. Carl Hangartner, S.J., was my major professor and the director of my dissertation. He exerted a tremendous influence in my life.

I returned to St. Mary's Dominican College, and after serving one semester in the Education Department was appointed as Chairman. For the next nine years teacher education was involved in all the activities of my life-- teaching methods classes, supervising student teachers, providing opportunities for classroom observation, advising older students who were returning to school for certification, serving on college committees, attending meetings as the only female dean of education in the state of Louisiana, and keeping abreast of what was happening in teacher education throughout the United States.

In 1976 my father died at the age of ninety-two, and my mother was left at home alone. With community permission I resigned from the college, took a position with the Louisiana State Department of Education and moved home to live with my mother. I was a Section Chief in the Division of Special Education, working to develop new programs in compliance with federal legislation to benefit handicapped people. Seven years of travel, conducting inservice training for teachers, working with colleges to update their educational programs, authoring the regulations for implementing the state law in Louisiana, and handbooks for teachers ended with a change of administration and a movement toward "younger" personnel. I resigned in January 1983.

My community offered me a sabbatical at Weston School of Theology in Boston. While there I was recruited to be principal of one of our elementary schools. During my two years there student enrollment increased, a new junior high school facility was built, the kindergarten program was expanded, and new programs were added. Despite all the progress there was some teacher dissatisfaction and the School Board decided that it might be wise to change the administration.

In 1986 a godchild was diagnosed as having lung cancer and given three months to live. He requested that I "go through the dying process with him." I spent the next year going through chemotherapy, surgery, and radiation with him after which he went into remission. Between the medical experiences I was doing inservice training for one of our elementary schools, and had made a decision to continue that as my ministry.

All plans changed when I was asked to accept the position of principal of St. Joseph's High School in Greenville, Mississippi. The school was poor, and in danger of closing because of financial problems. Two years of budget balancing, academic program improvement, student recruitment, and development stabilized the program. The addition of the Christian Brothers to the faculty made it possible to leave the administration of the program in capable hands. At the end of the 1988-89 I submitted a letter of resignation to the local school board and returned to New Orleans.

This brings my story up to date [1990].