

Sister Jacinta Powers: Finding her joy in serving the poor

When people talk about Sister Jacinta Powers, they may mention her sense of humor, her desire to keep learning, or her skills as a nurse. But everyone mentions her love of ministering to the poor.

“She gets her joy in service, it’s what excites her,” said Ursuline Associate Martha House, who has accompanied Sister Jacinta on several mission trips abroad. “Some people like to vacation, but her joy comes in service.”

“Her intensity and love for the poor, her insights and intelligent searching for the truth, and her precious sense of humor are great gifts to me and to our Ursuline community,” said Sister Rosemary Keough, who taught Sister Jacinta in high school and ministered with her in Chile.

“Serving the poor has always been part of me,” Sister Jacinta said. “It’s been a process. Where does Jesus call my gifts to? I’ve been really blessed with education and a love of hands-on nursing,” she said. “Where God wants you is where passion and need intersect. I’m always happy serving the poor.”

For the past year and a half, Sister Jacinta has been serving the working poor as a registered nurse at the Church Health Center in Memphis, Tenn., after returning from a full-time Ursuline ministry in Mandeville, Jamaica. The center calls on the aid of churches and the medical community to offer care and wellness education for those who do not have insurance.



Sister Jacinta works in a three-member team which includes Tarresse Jones, a certified medical assistant.



Sister Jacinta smiles while talking with her supervisor, John Foster, the clinic manager at the Church Health Center.

“After returning from Jamaica, one of the things I wanted to make sure of was to stay in touch with my call to serve the poor,” she said. “That was my prism.” Sister Maureen Griner, director of the Dorothy Day House in Memphis, told her there was a great need to serve the poor there, and put Sister Jacinta in contact with the Church Health Center.

“I wanted hands-on nursing,” Sister Jacinta said. “Church Health Center just felt so right. You hear the mission, it just resonates with me.” She began in June 2009.

The Church Health Center began in 1987, a year after Dr. R. Scott Morris moved from his native Atlanta to Memphis. Morris was an ordained Methodist minister and a physician, and said he knew his call was to serve the poor. “Atlanta was getting too big. I read that Memphis was the poorest big city in

America,” said Morris, who still serves as executive director of the center and sees patients daily.

“The mission of the Gospels is to preach, teach, and heal,” Morris said. “In our church, we have preach and teach down. If you want to be faithful, you don’t get a pass on healing.”

Today, the center sees 36,000 people a year in its clinic, another 100,000 in its wellness center. (Learn more by visiting www.churchhealthcenter.org.)

“We’ll take all the nun health care professionals. We’ll hire them sight unseen,” Morris said. “They are committed. They’ve persevered over time.” Sister Jacinta also brings another special gift, Morris said. “Sister Jacinta makes me laugh almost every day.”

Sister Jacinta works on a team with a nurse practitioner and certified medical assistant seeing 20-23 patients a day. “Diabetes and hypertension are what we see most,” she said. Long-term patients make appointments the day before, and there is also a walk-in clinic, where Sister Jacinta works on Fridays.

“A long-term patient is a woman who works 20 hours a week, is the primary provider for a child 6 or under, or a full-time student,” Sister Jacinta said. “A man is the same, except he has to work 30 hours a week.” Walk-in patients may be coming for the first time. “They say, ‘I lost my job and my insurance, I don’t know where to go,’” Sister Jacinta said.



Stephanie Hurd, a certified medical assistant, helps Sister Jacinta find some paperwork at the Church Health Center.

John Foster, clinic manager, calls Sister Jacinta “a big picture thinker.”

“I go to her first to see if we need to make schedule changes. She comes to me bringing solutions,” Foster said.

Having a sister on staff benefits the center, Foster said, who notes that one of the doctors on staff, Dr. Ellen Buchignani, is a Sister of Mercy.

“We don’t preach to patients, but you can sense the attitude when you walk in the door,” Foster said. “It’s not uncommon for patients to ask the staff to pray with them. It is a ministry,” he said. “If you have a patient who needs some sort of guidance, it’s so nice to have Jacinta and Dr. Buchignani with us.”

“All these doctors, CMAs, and nurses could make a lot more money elsewhere,” Sister Jacinta said. “They don’t come for the money. They are responding to a call. I’m a little cog in a wheel that’s a great chariot. On the first day, I felt a part of the wheel.”

Country girl



In 2009, Sister Jacinta (far left) talks to Sister Monica Seaton’s 7th and 8th grade faith formation class at St. Stephen Cathedral in Owensboro about her ministry in Jamaica.

Sister Jacinta grew up on a farm in tiny Curdsville, Ky., a stone’s throw from Maple Mount, with an older sister and brother. “I’ve always loved rural. We had cows, pigs, corn, and soybeans,” she said. Her dad, Joe Powers, was a farmer and a full-time jokester, she said.

“Daddy took us fishing every Sunday after Mass, always from the bank, no boat,” she said. (They fished in the nearby Green River or at her uncle’s lake.) Three of her father’s younger brothers are priests in the Diocese of Owensboro, Aloysius, Richard, and Bernard Powers.

Her mother, Thelma, raised the children. “She taught us to read before we started school. I still love to read,” Sister Jacinta said. Her sister, Mary Aloysia, was five years older, her brother Hubert 2 ½ years

older. Mary Aloysia died in 1985. “She was the idol of us both,” Sister Jacinta said.

Her mother named her Jacinta after the youngest of the three children who witnessed the appearance of the Virgin Mary in Fatima, Portugal, in 1917. Since her older siblings were already named, Sister Jacinta took Lucy as her confirmation name, and Hubert took Francisco as his, so that all three of the children of Our Lady of Fatima would be in the family.

“My daddy thought I was ‘Joe-cinta’ after him,” Sister Jacinta said. “It took him about eight weeks to realize I was ‘Jacinta.’”

Sister Jacinta was taught by Ursulines at St. Elizabeth School in Curdsville. Sister Eva Boone, who now heads the quilting ministry, was her first-grade teacher, and Sister Luisa Bickett taught her fifth grade. “That was 1965, the first time we sent sisters to South America,” Sister Jacinta said. “I remember Luisa staying in at recess listening to records that didn’t make sense (they were in Spanish). After Christmas, she didn’t come back. She’d gone to Chile,” Sister

Jacinta said. "That was the first time I put the world in a bigger picture."

After St. Elizabeth, Sister Jacinta attended Mount Saint Joseph Academy, where Sister Rosemary Keough was one of her teachers.

"I especially remember when her class did the decorating of the old gym at Brescia for their prom," Sister Rosemary said. "They built with Joe's help a real windmill for 'Windmills of your Mind' and covered it with broken pieces of mirrors -- they were very creative. I was supposed to be their junior homeroom sponsor, but always felt not really needed -- they came up with such good ideas."

Sister Jacinta enjoyed her days at the Academy and was very involved. "I worked on the newspaper as a photographer and headline editor, played on the basketball team, was in drama, and the honor society," she said. Sister Agnese Coomes was her math teacher. "She got us to learn way beyond our ability," she said. "She was one of the sisters I took care of in the infirmary 15 years later." (Sister Agnese died in 1990)

Sister Jacinta was not actively thinking about becoming an Ursuline, but the pull of the sisters was strong. "Just seeing them live differently than what we were doing, it was a curiosity," she said.

A taproot so deep

Thelma Powers had been in the Ursuline community for more than six years before leaving. Despite that, and the presence of three priest uncles, entering religious life was not discussed in the Powers home, Sister Jacinta said.

After graduating from the Academy, she went to the University of Kentucky, but there was a "restlessness of unknowing that wouldn't go away," Sister Jacinta said. "I kept in touch with the young sisters. I decided I needed to give it a try." She entered as a postulant in January 1973, and the novitiate that summer, making this her 37th year of religious life.

"The Vatican II changes were still going on. Father Bernard (Powers) was our teacher of theology," she said. She was one of three members of her novice class, and the only one who remains. "It never felt wrong," she said. "In the last 10-15 years, there's a solidness. You know that taproot is so deep, you know nourishment is still coming up. It's really God's grace."

Sister Jacinta received her degree in biology from Brescia College, with a secondary degree in education. Her first ministry was familiar ground – two years as a science teacher at the Academy, 1977-79. "It was an honor to be at the Academy," she said. "I know they tried to get quality people."

From there she went to St. Augustine School in Lebanon, Ky., where she taught science and history to seventh- and eighth-graders. The principal of the school was Sister Therese Martin Mattingly.

“I loved her. I think it was her love of people,” Sister Jacinta said. “She spoke to everybody, everybody knew her, and everybody loved her.” More than 20 years later, in 2001, Sister Jacinta was on duty as a nurse in the Mount infirmary when Sister Therese Martin died.

In 1980, Sister Jacinta was sent to Lourdes Central High School in Nebraska City, Neb., to teach science and math. While there she taught the younger siblings of Sister Betsy Moyer, who she would one day live with.

“It was my first out-of-state mission. We traveled by Greyhound bus for 13 hours to get home,” she said. She enjoyed her time teaching in the high school. “I liked to teach kids who chose a subject they wanted,” she said.

In 1982, Sister Jacinta followed her desire to serve the poor by moving to Chillan, Chile, to serve as a parish minister at Divino Maestro Parish. “Chillan was the only foreign mission we had. Since I’d entered, I’d wanted that experience,” she said. “They were the poorest of the poor that I could have contact with. It was a call to help the most vulnerable, the ones who don’t have a voice – who teach me to speak.”

She and Sister Rosemary were to learn from Sister Luisa Bickett (her former fifth-grade teacher) and Sister Mimi Ballard.



This sign hangs over the admissions desk at the Church Health Center in Memphis, Tenn.

Rosemary said.

“One day Sister Jacinta asked me if I felt as if I fit in and I replied affirmatively,” Sister Rosemary said. “She, however, was very attracted to helping Elena, the parish nurse, with all the



Sister Jacinta listens to Orlean Murry, of Memphis, detail her symptoms at the Church Health Center.

“When we arrived in Santiago, Sisters Luisa and Mimi were there to greet and help us,” Sister Rosemary said. “We stayed a few days with the Mercy Sisters from Rochester, N.Y. The sisters sent Jacinta and me out to buy bread and it was raining quite hard. All of a sudden, a bus came along and threw a huge wave of dirty water on us – we laughed and considered it our Chilean Baptism!”

Much of the sister’s ministry in Chillan consisted of meetings with team leaders, catechists, and those who prepared the monthly themes for small community prayer meetings, Sister

sick people.”

A nurse is born

After just two months in Chile, Sister Jacinta’s father suffered a heart attack. Joe Powers survived the attack, but Sister Jacinta came home to be with her family. She spent the first six months of 1983 teaching at Mary Carrico Elementary School in nearby Knottsville, Ky., but her experience in Chile had changed her.

“It cemented in my heart and soul that I really liked nursing,” she said. In the fall of 1983, she entered nursing school at the University of Louisville, graduating in 1986. She returned to the Mount to become co-director of health care at the Mount Saint Joseph Infirmary, along with Sister Claudia Hayden.

“We were on the floor at 4:20 in the morning. We had a good day if we could get home to watch the 5:30 p.m. news,” Sister Jacinta said.

“She’s very knowledgeable, what she doesn’t know, she researches until she knows it,” Sister Claudia said. “She has a real teaching skill to persuade better self care. She can use a lot of humor, or be very straight.”

After two years, Sister Jacinta returned to Louisville to work as an oncology nurse at Norton’s Hospital.

“I loved it. Those people who came in to get chemotherapy knew what life was about,” Sister Jacinta said. “They knew what was valuable – family. You’d get really close to the patient and families.”

Changes were occurring in Sister Jacinta’s family as well. In October 1988, her father died at age 75. “He left me a sense of joy,” Sister Jacinta said. “People say ‘he’ll never die because you have his sense of humor.’ Everyone loved being around Daddy.”

In 1990, Sister Jacinta moved back to Owensboro to be closer to her mother. “After he died, Mother moved into town, so we didn’t have that country home place,” Sister Jacinta said. “My brother and I got closer to support her.”

She became a dialysis nurse at Owensboro Daviess County Hospital, the longest ministry she’s had, and another chance to build relationships with people.

“You see these (dialysis patients) three to four times a week for a couple of years,” she said. “You get to know them, their families, and their dog’s name.”

It was while working there that she met Martha House, and also worked briefly again with Sister Claudia.

In 1995, two events shaped Sister Jacinta’s life. In October, her mother died at age 82, and in December she was elected to her first of two terms on the community’s leadership



Sister Jacinta gets some information from Sherrian Henderson, of Memphis, a patient at the Church Health Center.

Council. She continued to work part-time as a dialysis nurse during her first term on the Council, but left in 2000 when her second term began.

During her tenure on the Council, Saint Joseph Villa was built, the long-term care facility to replace the aged infirmary. But the proudest moment for Sister Jacinta was when the community joined UNANIMA International, the nongovernmental organization of the United Nations that helps shape international policies, especially those promoting the welfare of women and children.

“I was honored to be the person on the team to go to meetings in New York, being a cog in a wheel, part of a vehicle to make the world a better place,” she said.

The Ursuline Sisters were ultimately the driving force in getting the state of Kentucky to pass an anti-human trafficking law in 2007.

Sister Jacinta said being on the Council is very humbling. “It taught me how many sisters were trying to hear the voice of God and follow it. We’re all as different as the number we have,” she said. “Like a piano, every string has its own tone. Sometimes we need some tuning, but when we’re all in tune, we can do much together to help others make a journey to heaven.”

During her second term on the council, Sister Jacinta earned a master’s degree in healthcare administration from Webster University. In January 2003, she became the first health care administrator for Saint Joseph Villa.



Sister Jacinta works with one of her parishioners at St. Patrick Catholic Church, Susan McGhee, who heads the Patient Assistance Program.

“We were trying to get a certificate of need so we could get state reimbursement,” she said. “I had to make sure we were following all the laws, I had to go to Frankfort (the state capital) to work with lawyers. We never got the certification.”

With her term on the council coming to an end, and the recognition that the certification was not going to come, Sister Jacinta decided to leave Saint Joseph Villa in October 2004.

“I wanted to use my gifts to do something that wasn’t being done,” she said. Sister Joseph Angela Boone, chancellor of the Diocese of Owensboro, told her the director of social concerns was looking for someone to explain the Medicare prescription drug plan to seniors. In November 2004, Sister Jacinta began as an AmeriCorps worker with the diocese.

“It turned out good, I got to use my gifts to teach the plan to vulnerable people,” she said.

When the program ended in 2006, the diocese wanted to keep Sister Jacinta as an employee who would explain how people could live a healthier life. She was asked to come up with a name for the program.

“I’m fascinated by bridges,” she said. “In Kentucky, there are so many little bridges we cross without even knowing it. So I named the program ‘Bridge to Health,’ to help people get

from where they are to a healthier life.”

Jamaica

The diocese partnered with impoverished Mandeville, Jamaica, in 2003, and Sister Jacinta went for the first time in 2004, with Ursuline Associate Mary Danhauer, Martha House, Dorothy Tipmore, and Sister Barbara Jean Head. “That’s when Mary fell in love with it. She went to work in the clinic,” Sister Jacinta said. Martha House and she made several trips to help Danhauer in her clinic for a week at a time.

“On one trip, two other nurses went with us,” House said. “Jacinta told us during the day, remember the people and events where you saw God in people’s actions. She kept a journal, and that would be our discussion at night. She thinks like that.”

Sister Jacinta was struck by the happiness of the people in Jamaica. “They want to bring you into their life. There’s a contrast of seeing people here with so much stuff, but no apparent happiness all the time,” she said. “It makes you wonder why there can’t be more equality.”

Sister Barbara Jean said she could tell the trip had sparked something deep inside Sister Jacinta. “She’s a very generous person with a big heart. Her deep, deep desire is to work with the very poor,” Sister Barbara Jean said. “With each trip she made, when she came back I could see a difference in her.”

During the Ursuline Sister’s Chapter meeting in the summer of 2007, Sister Jacinta floated the idea of starting an Ursuline ministry in Jamaica. When 20 sisters came to discuss it, the idea took hold. In March 2008, six sisters and an associate went to Jamaica on a fact-finding mission for a week, and when they returned, recommended that a full-time ministry be established.

One of the sisters on that trip was Sister Monica Seaton, whom Sister Jacinta befriended when Sister Monica was a postulant.

“On Jacinta’s previous journeys to Jamaica, she was touched by the people and their love of God,” Sister Monica said. “Jacinta’s heart reaches out to the poor and vulnerable of the world and, true to the Gospel, her mission is to help alleviate their suffering. Jacinta’s passion was so deep she wanted to invite others to experience the face of God in the same way she had.”



These are two of the children Sister Jacinta met on her 2007 trip to Mandeville, Jamaica.



Sisters Monica, Martha Keller, and Jacinta Powers sit in front of the famous fountain in Sienna, Italy, during a 2008 trip.

Also in 2008, Sister Monica accompanied Sister Jacinta on a pilgrimage to Brescia, Italy, to visit the places of Ursuline founder Saint Angela Merici.

“In Brescia, we attended Mass in the church where the body of Saint Angela rests,” Sister Monica said. “It was an awesome and moving experience for each of us and then it was time to continue our journey to other places before returning to our hotel in Brescia that night. Jacinta’s desire to follow Angela led her to make the choice to stay in the church and spend the day praying before the body of Angela rather than continue on the side trips,” Sister Monica said. “When we reconnected that evening she was so radiant as she shared the story about how the sisters at the church had brought her tea and she spent

the time in prayer, having tea with Angela – as though she was catching up with a long lost friend. Like Angela, Jacinta’s mission is to lead others to Jesus. Jacinta would never want the focus on her but instead to do what Jesus and Angela would do for others. Making choices, she would say, is what life and encountering the Divine is all about – choices for the other person and not for oneself.”

During the community’s meetings that summer, it was determined to attempt a ministry in Jamaica. In September 2008, Sister Jacinta and Sister Betsy Moyer left for Mandeville.

“I was so excited,” Sister Jacinta said. “I knew I wouldn’t see my familial friends, but having a cell phone and a computer made it easier to stay in contact than when I was in Nebraska,” she said.

The sisters ran into some obstacles in Jamaica that limited the chances for success, leading the two sisters to return to Maple Mount in April 2009. “If we did it again, we would know what job we would have before we went,” Sister Jacinta said. She taught a math class at the Catholic College of Mandeville and did some health care while there.

“It would take more people wanting it to happen, and more preparation next time,” she said.

After a couple of months of seeking her next ministry, she found the position with the Church Health Center. When she moved to Memphis, she attended several parishes before deciding on St. Patrick.

“I walked in, the music started, and I knew it was home. It was African-American music,” she said. When she found the parish prepared a meal for the homeless on Sundays, she quickly volunteered. “It’s a ministry that feeds my soul,” she said.

Susan McGhee works with the Patient Assistance Program at the Church Health Center, and also attends St. Patrick with Sister Jacinta. Her program solicits free prescription drugs from doctor’s offices to give to patients.

“I recruited her as a parishioner,” McGhee said. “She has a wonderful sense of humor. She’s always light and happy. We need that, because so many of our patients are not light and happy.”

McGhee admires Sister Jacinta's commitment. "When sisters come to visit her, she brings them to help," McGhee said. "We're having a small group liturgy study, she's a facilitator for one group. She is an excellent facilitator, and a good listener."

When an earthquake struck Haiti in February, Dr. Ellen Buchignani, the Sister of Mercy who spent 27 years ministering in Jamaica before coming to the Church Health Center, answered the call for doctors to minister to earthquake victims. When she told Sister Jacinta nurses were needed also, she received permission to go, and Martha House went with her.

"When the earthquake hit Haiti, I told her, 'I know you're thinking of going to Haiti. Let me know your plans and I'll go with you,'" House said. "I know that's the way she thinks."

"We flew into the Dominican Republic, but we could tell when we crossed into Haiti," Sister Jacinta said. "The land was much more deforested, it was hard to grow things. Haiti is much poorer than Jamaica."

The children were the greatest difference from her trips to Jamaica, she said. "In Jamaica, the kids were always laughing. The kids in Haiti were not laughing," she said. "That said more to me than anything."



Sister Jacinta and Joe Samuels, who is spending a year working at the Church Health Center, go over patients' charts in their computers.

Tea" and "Stones into Schools" by Greg Mortenson; and "How Much is Enough?" by Arthur Simon.



Sister Jacinta checks a Haitian child's height during a check-up when she volunteered following the Haiti earthquake in February 2010.

Sister Jacinta's faithfulness was a help to House, she said.

"We had energy bars and peanut butter crackers in our suitcase, and we got one meal a day," House said. "One night I said that food may not last the week and then we're only going to have one meal a day. Jacinta said, 'Martha, don't worry about it, God will provide.'"

Reading and learning

Two of Sister Jacinta's loves in her free time are being outside and reading. She reads novels, spiritual books, and biographies. "I have several books going at a time."

Some of her favorite books include "Crazy Love," by Francis Chan; "The Rhythm of Life" by Matthew Kelly; "Three Cups of

“You can count on her having several books on a table ready to dive into upon completion of one,” said Sister Martha Keller. “Jacinta loves recommending good books and is usually on top of the latest bestsellers.”

“Jacinta is a true ‘five’ on the Enneagram – curious, intense, persistent, a thinker, full of questions and a life-long learner,” Sister Martha said.

“I try to be careful about what I put in my soul,” Sister Jacinta said. “I don’t watch TV other than the news at night. All my appliances are unplugged until I need them. (Sister) Monica says it’s like coming to visit the Amish.”

She listens to the radio when she travels, and has all her preset channel buttons programmed to K Love between Memphis and Maple Mount, a station that plays Christian, encouraging music. “Songs are powerful instruments to change a person’s ways,” she said.

Sister Jacinta’s wry sense of humor inevitably gets mentioned by all the people who know her well. Sister Monica shared this story:

“Two of her neighbor kids, about 4 and 5 years old, asked me if Jacinta was my grandma. Of course I told them ‘yes’ and when Jacinta came on the scene the girl said, ‘There’s your grandma!’ I thought for sure I was dead but Jacinta played along and said, ‘Oh, you met my granddaughter.’ The joy that Jacinta possesses flows from her awareness of being a beloved child of God.”

To Sister Claudia, it is Sister Jacinta’s generosity that most stands out. “I think she would give to the last drop,” Sister Claudia said. In 1994, Sister Claudia began a family ministry in which she eventually became responsible for raising her niece and two nephews. “When I had to be at the hospital at 5:30 a.m., she’d come to my home at 4:40 to help with the kids,” Sister Claudia said. “How many people would do that?”

Sister Jacinta believes she’ll be in Memphis for awhile, until the Spirit calls her elsewhere. “It seems the right fit for what I’m called to do,” she said. “The changes being implemented in health care will take a long time. There will still be millions who don’t qualify,” she said. “The Church Health Center will always be needed, because the kingdom hasn’t come yet.”

By Dan Heckel