Sister Pam Mueller: Mixing faith and laughter in service to others

Ursuline Sister Pam Mueller is starting her fifth year as a campus minister at Brescia University in Owensboro, Ky., someplace she never imagined herself when she was training as a speech language pathologist.

“Become an Ursuline, your faith will take you where you never intended to go,” she said with her trademark laugh.

Faith and laughter are Sister Pam’s calling cards, two traits that got her through a tumultuous childhood and led her to join the Ursuline Sisters 40 years ago.

“They say a vocations director should stay two or three years, I did it for six,” Sister Pam said. “They say a campus minister should stay two or three years, I’m starting my fifth. I’m either stupid or I really do have faith.”

Ursuline Associate Karen Siciliano and Sister Pam have been friends since they met in 2004 at the Ursuline-led Spiritual Direction Institute. “One of the best gifts is that our friendship is really rooted in God,” Siciliano said. “Most people see Sister Pam as this flashy, energetic, bubbly woman, but she has an incredibly deep spirituality.”

Sister Pam has a special attraction to the “least of those” in society, Siciliano said. “She’s most effective at Brescia when students come to her with a serious problem. She really rises to the occasion when a lot of us would step away,” she said. “Whatever she is called to do, she puts her whole self into it.”

Father Larry Hostetter, president of Brescia University, said the purpose of campus ministry is to ensure that Brescia is a place to get both an outstanding education, and an opportunity to grow in faith.

“She’s really good at meeting the needs of students who perhaps need extra support,” Father Larry said. “Maybe it’s a student who is vacillating, or a student in crisis. She finds helping ways to live through that. She’s really good at recognizing individual needs.”

Sister Rose Marita O’Bryan ministers in the office next to Sister Pam in the Contemporary Woman program, and sees how she fills the needs of the students.

“Sister Pam is very selfless with her time and energy in interacting with the students,” Sister Rose Marita said. “When one or more students come to her office door, she immediately changes her plans and is totally present to them. I think that is the essential piece of campus ministry and she does that extraordinarily well.”

Sister Pam wasn’t educated as a campus minister, and said that has made the journey
more challenging for her. “I hope I’m modeling patience,” she said. “I rely on my faith a lot. “My favorite thing to do is journey with young people who are in the midst of struggle, and be a help to them,” she said. “I’m concerned about them and their faith life, and I try not to be judgmental.”

She has learned to not take it personally when students she has helped through a crisis don’t see a need to come back to campus ministry, or to a Mass or penance service. “If they have issues with God, religion, the Catholic Church, or had a bad experience with another sister,” that affects their relationship with her, Sister Pam said. “I hope the word is out that ‘She’s OK, you can talk to her.’”

Her official title is director of campus ministry and the Christian Life Experience Program at Brescia, but the future of that program is uncertain.

“It started as a discernment program for men, for vocations to the priesthood, then it was broadened to other vocations,” she said. Sister Pam was supervisor of the Women’s Discernment House at Brescia while she was director of vocations, and that evolved into Christian Life Experience.

“We worked on being a disciple first,” she said. “When you learn how to be led, then you work on where you’re going.”

Whether the program continues is up to the students, she said. “Things come and go on a college campus, you have to change,” Sister Pam said. “I see that as part of (Saint) Angela’s charism.”

Even if the program ceases, she will continue a weekly meal at Saint Joseph’s Table, she said.

“A meal became very important, college students rarely sit down to a family meal,” Sister Pam said. Students take turns cooking the weekly meal and everyone helps clean up she said.

Sister Pam was an associate professor at Brescia from 1981-1992 in speech language pathology, and said she sees students differently now because her role is different.

“Before, I felt responsible for their education in what I was teaching. I was hard on them, so they’d be prepared,” she said. “I can’t be as responsible for them now. I’m not exactly their friend, in a way, they see me as a grandmother type.”

The university offers an optional mental health screening to students, the results of which were eye-opening to Sister Pam. “There are a lot more students diagnosed with mental health issues, like bipolar disorder, depression, and anxiety. It interferes with their lives,” she said. “They are always competing. Parents need to know the stress level their child is functioning in.”
During her first year as campus minister, while the counselor was off campus, an instructor told Sister Pam that two students were talking about committing suicide. She was ill prepared to deal with that, but has since become a certified instructor in suicide prevention.

Aside from helping students who are struggling, campus ministry is designed to help people “flourish to be the best they can be,” Sister Pam said.

“I do a lot of liturgy planning for Mass and penance services,” she said. She is filling the same role for the Ursuline Convocation, a once-every-three-years gathering among Ursuline Sisters in Cleveland July 1-4. “Who would have ever thought I would be in charge of liturgy and prayer services?”

She puts on a “Busy Persons Retreat” in the fall, in which the retreat experience is worked out around a student’s schedule. “Most of the people who’ve discovered those are non-Catholics,” Sister Pam said. “Some want to continue with a spiritual director. I tell them they can work out a fee with a spiritual director, or they can talk to me for free.”

Sister Pam’s involvement in the initial Spiritual Direction Institute at the Mount Saint Joseph Conference and Retreat Center was a good experience for her, she said.

“It affirmed for me that I could listen. I’m a pretty good discerner with people,” she said. “It made me reflect on my growing up, and made me want to understand more about God.”

Siciliano says Sister Pam has a heart for justice. “That rough growing up has given her a heart for those who are struggling.”

Out of chaos came faith

Sister Pam’s name is not short for “Pamela.” It’s an acronym her parents gave her as a child for her full name, Patricia Ann Mueller. “If I heard ‘Patricia Ann,’ I knew I was in trouble,” she said.

Sister Pam was the youngest child and only daughter of Frances Henry and Carrie Elizabeth Mueller, and she has three brothers who range from two to seven years older. Her brother Jim is the color analyst for the Cleveland Browns. “I grew up pretty happy, despite it not being an easy life,” she said.

Born in Owensboro, the family moved to Evansville, Ind., then to three different cities in Florida by the time she was 10. “I was in Miami during the Bay of Pigs invasion,” she said. “When the Cuban refugees were coming to Miami, I thought the Communists were coming. I thought ‘Who will take Communion to people?’

She imagined hiding the Eucharist on her so she could deliver Communion. “I was influenced by reading ‘The Lives of the Saints,’” she said. “I thought, ‘What can I do?’”

Shortly before she turned 11, her father died, leaving the children with her mother who was not capable of caring for them.
“My dad died in June, my uncle came in February and brought us back to Kentucky,” she said. There she became a ward of the state, and her Ursuline vocation story began.

She returned to Owensboro and attended St. Pius X School for the sixth grade, where she met her first Ursuline, Sister Vivian Bowles. Sister Philomena Cox taught her seventh grade, and Sister Cecilia Jean Lonergan taught her eighth grade. Jean Lonergan left the community in 1970, but she made the greatest impression on Sister Pam.

“When I realized I should be an Ursuline, I went to Jean first,” Sister Pam said. (Jean Lonergan died Dec. 31, 2009.)

Sister Vivian was in her first ministry at St. Pius. Sister Pam enrolled late and was quiet at first, but that didn’t last long, Sister Vivian said. “She told me I didn’t look like the sisters she’d seen in Florida,” Sister Vivian said.

Sister Pam’s aunt and uncle were not fond of Catholics, but Catholicism was so important to Sister Pam and her brother Ron that they asked the court if they could live with a Catholic family for a summer. They lived with Hugh and Pauline Mills in Owensboro.

Nancy Mills, now an Ursuline Associate, was in the third grade when Sister Pam came to live with her family. “I remember the priest from our parish called and asked Dad if he could take in two children. He said ‘sure,’” Mills said. “It was the kind of thing my parents would do. I thought it was cool.”

Once she was finished with elementary school, Sister Pam’s aunt and uncle refused to sign a letter allowing her to attend Owensboro Catholic High School, she said. Both Lonergan and the court system intervened, and Sister Pam ended up attending Mount Saint Joseph Academy. “The court decided the Academy would give me some stability,” she said.

Sister Pam equates her years at the Academy as similar to the 1966 movie “The Trouble with Angels,” about two girls and their years of pulling pranks at their Catholic school for girls. She made good friends she’s still in contact with, and it was during those years that she began considering religious life.

“Someone has to take an interest in you, and those Ursulines did,” she said.
Sister Amelia Stenger was a year ahead of Sister Pam at the Academy, and the two are in a bonded community now.

“She has a remarkable sense of humor. We always called her ‘Sister Pun’ because she can come up with a pun about anything you talk about,” Sister Amelia said. “In high school, she was always having fun. She was the life of the party and still is. She’s always involved in helping people be happy.”

When Sister Pam graduated from the Academy, Sister Vivian and Lonergan “went around the world” to be there, Sister Vivian said. She was ministering in far western Kentucky, so she flew to Louisville where she borrowed her father’s car, then drove 70 miles to Marion County, Ky., to pick up Lonergan, and then they drove 150 miles to the Mount for the two-hour graduation ceremony.

“She was very proud of her,” Sister Vivian said. “I don’t know anyone else we would have made that trip for.”

After graduating from the Academy, Sister Pam began mulling whether religious life was her calling. At Christmas in 1968, her aunt and uncle told her they’d heard she was thinking about becoming a sister. “I told them I was thinking about it, but I hadn’t decided anything,” she said. “They said, ‘If you’re even thinking about it, you have a week to get out.’”

Unsure of what to do, she called Pauline Mills and asked if she could come visit her. The two had a nice conversation, and when Mrs. Mills invited her back, Sister Pam replied “How about Friday?” She planned to ask her then if she could stay with the family until she got on her feet. She wrote her brother Ron to tell him of her plan.

“My brother called them and told them what I wanted,” Sister Pam said. “When I got there, Mr. Mills said, ‘Of course you can stay with us.’” It’s a story that always makes her cry.

When Hugh Mills died in 2006, his obituary listed Sister Pam as one of his daughters. “She’s still a member of our family today,” Nancy Mills said.

Sister Pam entered the Ursuline Sisters as a postulant in August 1969, and became a novice in 1970, making this her 40th jubilee year. “After I entered, I wondered if it was a free choice,” she said, or was it a chance to get out of the dysfunction her family life had been. “I’m pretty sure now it was the right choice.”

The changes from the Second Vatican Council were hitting hard when she entered, but her background helped her cope. “I grew up in chaos and I entered in chaos,” she said. “When I entered, we were rewriting the constitutions. We had guidelines rather than a rule, if not, I wouldn’t have made it. It was the right thing for me. I know God’s hand was in it all.”

Those rocky years caused Sister Pam to “live in the now,” she said. “I was probably in my 30s before I realized you could make plans. I thought you just survived what happened, not that
you could control anything in life,” she said. A quote she likes is, “Life is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be lived.”

She always comes back to her faith and her sense of humor as her greatest gifts. “I wouldn’t have made it through without faith,” she said. “It’s a gift, I didn’t earn it. My relationship with God has been very personal, and that’s a gift.”

In the classroom

Her first ministry began during her last semester as a Brescia student in 1973, she was a student teacher residing at Precious Blood School in Owensboro. “I was privileged to live with Sister Mimi Ballard,” who directed the kindergarten at Brescia, she said. “She was very good in her example of how to live. She said we need to contribute where we lived.”

In 1974, she became an itinerant speech language pathologist for the eight Catholic schools in the Owensboro area. Using a “block” schedule, she worked every day at two schools for eight weeks, then moved on to the next two schools. Her interest in speech pathology was spurred during a career day at Mount Saint Joseph. “I thought it was the neatest thing I’d ever seen.”

Most of the students had problems with articulation. “Every time I thought I couldn’t take one more kid, one would come in more sparkly and full of life. I knew God was there,” she said.

After five years in that job, she attended the University of Louisville from 1979-81 to get a master’s degree in speech language pathology, so she could become an instructor at then-Brescia College.

“I taught two courses and did clinics, supervising students,” she said. “I was on call to go to hospitals or nursing homes. I moonlighted at nursing homes to pay for my continuing education, to maintain my license to practice.”

In speech language pathology, her favorite people to work with were people who’d had a laryngectomy. “You always knew there was something going on in the personal side, with a laryngectomy or a stroke,” she said. “I’ve always loved the challenge of helping someone.”

She got a master’s degree in deaf education in 1989-90 to earn tenure at Brescia, but by 1992, she felt the need to do something different. “I had been invited to St. Louis University to be clinical supervisor one summer,” she said. “I liked it and I got invited to be the first full-time clinical director at St. Louis University.”

She enjoyed living with Ursuline Sisters of the Roman Union in St. Louis. After two
years at the clinic, a notice came across her desk seeking a director for the 1818 Advanced College Credit Program at the university. The program allows qualified high school juniors and seniors to begin taking college course work while still in high school.

“I knew I could do it,” she said. “I call it my leap of faith year.” She was hired as the first non-Jesuit director of the program, which she did from 1994-2000.

“I was going to high schools and watching people teach. I oversaw all classes, registered 3,000 students, and coordinated 20 faculty members from SLU,” she said. “It was like running a junior college.”

Another change in ministry

“I was planning to come home to be the development director,” in 2000, she said. “I’d never done that before, I wanted to know if the community would support me. I was so affirmed. I’m always reminded that this community supports me.”

A series of changes over the ensuing months resulted in Sister Pam taking a different ministry – director of vocations. The first few years were trying ones for her, but the experience had its rewards.

“The gift in vocation ministry is you learn your own vocation – you walk the talk,” she said. “I understand my vocation much better having been a vocation minister. Nobody’s vocation is the same.

“The focus in vocations is who we are and why we are,” she said. “I gave it my best, I had to be satisfied with doing everything I knew to do. If I help someone become a Passionist, or a young man become a priest, that’s a success. It’s not all about vocations for ourselves. God wants us all to be happy, using our gifts in service to the world.”

In late 2005, she was hired as director of campus ministry at Brescia by her former sixth-grade teacher, Sister Vivian, who was then president. “I knew that she liked young people and is not afraid of work,” Sister Vivian said. “I thought she needed something different.”

Sister Pam said she’s “doing what I need to be doing right now. I wouldn’t have had the depth of knowledge and experience without the vocation experience.”

An outdoors sister

Although some people call her a “girly girl” – Siciliano notes her great love of shopping – Sister Pam especially loves being outside, preferably around water.

“I love to detail cars,” she said. “Father Phil Riney is a good friend, we’ll go to Rough River and wash and wax our cars.” (She drives a Toyota Corolla.)

She became friends with Father Riney when she lived in Whitesville, Ky., and he was the
pastor there. “He had a boat, and I love the water,” she said. “I love to swim, to ski, just to float.”

Father Riney, who is retired, said the two have a lot in common despite their age difference.

“We had a retreat on the houseboat one time,” he said. “If we got hot, we just jumped in the water. There are no artificial put-ons between us.”

Sister Vivian lived with Sister Pam at Brescia for awhile, and enjoyed taking part in those boating trips as well. “You never have to wonder what Pam is thinking, she’ll let you know,” Sister Vivian said. “I’m very proud of her.”

Siciliano said that no matter what Sister Pam is doing, she’s finding a way to serve others. In the summer of 2008, Siciliano wanted to take her mother, who was recuperating from hip surgery, on a vacation, but she wasn’t sure where to take her. Sister Pam suggested she bring her to the Mount for a few days, and then the three of them would go to Hurricane Hills, an Ursuline property used for recreation in central Kentucky.

“It was such a great experience, that she’d be willing to spend five days with my mother and me,” Siciliano said.

“She took her camera along, and about two weeks later, I got a package. It was a memory book of our trip. My mom got one too. It is one of my mom’s treasures to this day, and mine too.”

There’s one more common occurrence when she gets together with Sister Pam, one that others also share, Siciliano said.

“We laugh all the time.”

By Dan Heckel