

Sister Rita Klarer turns a life of obstacles into an opportunity to serve

JUNE 25, 2013 –

Sister Rita Klarer overcame an abundance of family deaths when she was still a girl, and her own near-death in the 8th grade. She learned to walk again in 1986 after a car accident that put her in the hospital for two months.

Looking back on 66 years as an Ursuline Sister of Mount Saint Joseph, Sister Rita believes her own trials prepared her to help those in greatest need. That included helping men who were incarcerated receive their GED, to supporting families devastated by the loss of a loved one, to visiting the sick and elderly.



Sister Rita Klarer in summer 2012.

“Without a doubt, the early tragedies I endured prepared me,” Sister Rita said from her room in Saint Joseph Villa at Maple Mount. “Good things come out of terrible things. I was just called to it. I’ve always felt like anything I’ve been given was a gift from God,” she said. “My favorite prayer is ‘Yes God.’”



Sister Rita is an animal lover, and is pictured with her two dogs she once owned, Chimo and Maggie.

“She is a steel magnolia,” said her friend Paula Duke, who lives in Kansas City. “She’s a southern gal, as sweet as can be, with the spiritual backbone as strong as steel. She’s independent, highly principled, amazingly gentle and very caring.”

“She is no ordinary person,” said Sister Judy Warmbold, a Daughter of Charity who lives in Gould, Ark. “She is uniquely gifted, deeply spiritual and extremely creative. If there’s a problem, she’ll find a way to fix it, if she has to go through the back door or out the roof.”

Sister Rita’s final public ministry was visiting the sick and elderly of St. Patrick Parish in Kansas City, Mo., which she did from 1999 until coming to the Mount in January 2011. Father Jerry Waris was the pastor at St. Patrick Parish.

“As frail and little as she was, she got around more places than anyone on the staff,” he said. “On Christmas and Easter, there were so many people who would have welcomed her, but she spent the whole day at North Kansas City Hospital visiting the sick. I know she thought that was one of the best days of the year.”

Her failing health brought her back to the Mount, where her journey as an Ursuline began in 1946. As with every challenge in her life, she is ready. “I’m trying to live every day as best as I can, accept whatever God wants, trying not to growl about it,” she said. “When I think about all the people without medical care, how could I complain?”

A child of the war

Sister Rita was born in Louisville in 1926, the fifth child of Leo and Rudina Klarer, who would eventually have eight children. Sister Rita is the only one of the children still living.

“I could easily say my first memory was death, my little brother Jimmy,” who died before his first birthday, she said. Her grandfather lived with the family and he died when she was in the 7th grade, then her father died the next year, at age 46. Also during that year, Sister Rita had a severe case of streptococcus, and the doctor told her parents her only hope for survival was the experimental drug sulfanilamide. The drug, and a lot of prayers, cured her.

It seemed the Klarer family could not escape tragedy. During Sister Rita’s freshman year of high school, her older brother Bud died following an operation. World War II was ongoing at this time and both her brothers Bill and Rudy served in battle. Rudy was on a football scholarship at the University of Tennessee and played in the Sugar Bowl as a sophomore before enlisting in the service. He was killed in combat in June 1945, earning the Silver Star for bravery, as he died protecting the lives of the men under his command. His No. 49 is one of seven numbers retired by the University of Tennessee.



Sister Rita holds the framed jersey of her brother, Rudy Klarer, as she stands next to former University of Tennessee head coach Phil Fulmer the day her brother’s jersey was retired. Rudy Klarer was killed in battle during World War II.

Sister Rita earned a scholarship to Nazareth College in Louisville (now Spalding University), but with her mother having to take over the family building supply business, she thought perhaps she

should drop out and help with the business. Her brothers urged her to continue her education and she earned her degree. “I think I became a support for my mother,” she said.

For a few years, Sister Rita was thinking about becoming a sister. “I was taught by the Sisters of Charity in high school and college, but I was taught by Ursulines in elementary school at St. Columba,” she said. “I fell in love with the Ursulines. I liked every teacher I had at St. Columba.”

“No one expected me to become a nun,” she said. “When I told some of my college friends, they placed bets on how long I’d last. Maybe it’s time for me to collect.”

She was one of six postulants entering in February 1946, and they referred to themselves as the “six Jell-Os.” She was “lime,” because she was the sixth. Her lone remaining classmate is Sister Mary Irene Cecil, who was orange.

A teacher and more

“I just assumed I’d be a teacher,” Sister Rita said, and for the next 26 years she was. She served in Paducah, Harrodsburg, Louisville and Fredericktown in Kentucky, then 10 years in Lourdes Central High School in Nebraska City, Neb. She taught every grade except fourth, fifth and sixth.

“I loved all my teaching assignments. I liked high school the best, you could do so many things,” she said. “I taught all boys at St. Bartholomew in Louisville, 7th and 8th grade. Everybody wanted to teach the girls, but I could challenge the boys. They asked questions they wouldn’t have asked if girls were there.” In 1954, she ministered with her 8th grade teacher, Sister Therese Martin Mattingly, when they opened St. Andrew School in Harrodsburg.

Sister Rita spent her summers pursuing master’s degrees (she has a master’s in mathematics and one in pastoral ministry), but in summer 1973, she decided she wanted something different. She received a brochure that mentioned jail ministry in Kansas City, Mo., about 150 miles from Nebraska City.

“At my first meeting with the superintendent, he told me he would like me to teach volleyball and other sports to the women,” Sister Rita said. “My response was, ‘Mr. Gagne, I loathe volleyball. Let me do what I can do, I can teach.’ He agreed immediately.” All summer she taught men and women the basics. “What a thrill it was when one of them earned a GED,” she said.



Sister Rita is pictured in 2005 with two of her friends, Sister Marie Bosco Wathen, center, and the late Sister Marita Greenwell, her classmate.

Halfway through the summer, Gagne called her to his office, Sister Rita said. “Sis, you can’t go back to Nebraska. We need you here,” he said. She explained that she had a contract to teach in Nebraska and had to go back. He asked her to come back to stay after that next year.

No Ursuline Sister had participated in jail ministry before. Sister Rita contacted Sister Annalita Lancaster, who was major superior at the time, to seek her advice. “I remember her reply and especially her final words: ‘Our work is to take Christ to the poor. This is it. Make your plans and we will support you.’ And the support was always there,” Sister Rita said.

Her classroom was the gym with a leaking roof, and she had no books or supplies, so she had to borrow everything. She worked with men in the work release program, who were allowed to leave the jail during the day to work, but had to report back at night.

“The proudest student was a 53-year-old alcoholic man who studied day and night to earn his GED,” she said. “No one who ever earned a PhD could have been prouder.”

By the end of her second year, it was clear that the man who ran the STAR program – Specialized Training to Avoid Recidivism – was not doing his job, Sister Rita said. She did not want to be there on the day he got fired, so she left early. The next day, Gagne came to her and said, “You’re the new director of the STAR program,” she said. “I don’t want it,” she replied, but he said, “I didn’t ask you if you wanted it, it’s yours.”

For the next 12 years, she ran the program and made improvements. “I had to figure it out all by myself. I kept track of the guys, made sure they honored their contract,” she said. “I told them if they came back under the influence, they wouldn’t work for three days.”

“I was never worried. I could walk anyplace I wanted in that jail,” she said.

A life-changing accident

In June 1985, a truck turned in front of the car Sister Rita was driving. Both her legs were severely injured and she spent two months in the hospital, where she was told she would likely never walk again. That only emboldened her to try harder.

The most difficult aspect of being in the hospital was that her sister Jean died of cancer during that time. “It was hard knowing I would not be at her funeral,” Sister Rita said.

Over time, she advanced from a wheelchair, to a walker, to a cane, but recurring pain led her to discover that all the cartilage in her ankle had disintegrated. Her ankle had to be fused to her leg, which would make it permanently rigid.

“It took a long time for me to say, ‘Thank you God,’” she said. But her faith and her belief that “good things come out of terrible things” led her to the next ministry she loved, as a chaplain at Children’s Mercy Hospital in Kansas City. “I never really applied for a job, it was just something I had to do,” she said.

She handled the emergency calls of deaths, traumas and accidents, meaning she was on call every day. “A 16-year-old committed suicide on his birthday,” she said. “I went to the hospital to meet his mother. I didn’t know what she looked like, but I knew I would know who she was. I stood at the door and opened my arms to her, and she fell into my arms.”

“Since I was the only Catholic chaplain, I was called instead of a priest,” she said. “I was privileged to baptize 200 babies as they were dying.”

She served at the hospital from 1992-99, then came to minister to the elderly and sick at St. Patrick, where she was already a parishioner.

“I loved it, just to see their faces light up when you see them,” she said. “They yearn for the sacraments.”

When Father Waris came to St. Patrick’s in 1999, he thought, “If you take care of the poor and elderly, there’s a chance you will succeed. I found there was no one person visiting the sick and the shut-ins,” he said. When Sister Rita left Children’s Hospital, she asked Father Waris what she should do next. “I said God put you right in my lap,” he said. “She always thinks of others first.”

One day, Father Waris decided to join Sister Rita on one of her visits to a nursing home. “You’d think I was walking in with the pope,” he said. “Everybody in that nursing home knew who she was.”



After her traffic accident in which she was told she would never walk again, Sister Rita makes a triumphant return to the jail in Kansas City where she ministered.



Paula Duke met Sister Rita in the 1980s when they were in a master's program together through Loyola University, and they began a conversation of their shared love for Shantivanam prayer house in Kansas run by Father Ed Hayes. Sister Rita said her first visit to Shantivanam in 1972 changed her life.

"It was like the air was different," she said. "I got to know Father Ed Hayes, we became good friends. It changed my whole spiritual life. Oneness with God became supremely important."

Duke said Sister Rita has been an inspiration in her life. "Her faith was tested in a lot of ways," Duke said. Up until her health forced her to come home to the Mount, Sister Rita was still visiting a great number of elderly and sick people, "who were probably younger and healthier than her," Duke said. "She was working on an exit strategy by recruiting people to take her place. That's typical of her."

The Shantivanam House of Prayer in Easton, Kan., a place where Sister Rita grew in her spirituality.

Sister Judy met Sister Rita in 1987 while attending a workshop in Kansas City. "She worked in the building and her office was filled with birds," she said. "When I visited her apartment in Kansas City, it was filled with knickknacks and pictures of people who are really close to her, and everything had a story," Sister Judy said. "Her apartment was set up so she could have birds, flowers and be connected to the sky and nature. That's so important to her. You don't fence her in. She's always open to life and all people."

In recent years, Sister Rita was in pain all the time, but she kept on going and remained "zesty," Sister Judy said. "She always thinks of others," she said. Sister Judy visited Sister Rita at Maple Mount this summer, where she noticed Sister Rita's concern for the employees and other sisters.

"She was talking about the residents as if she weren't one," Sister Judy said.

Sister Rita has so many friends who write her that she can't answer all her mail. "The support of my friends in Nebraska, Kansas and Missouri is amazing," she said.

One of her side ministries she began were portrayals of Mary as an older woman, Mother Teresa, and a pantomime dressed as a clown called "Eucharist."

“I started thinking, how long do you think Mary lived? What was she like? My imagination kicked in. I think she suffered terribly with Jesus, then lived a wonderful life,” Sister Rita said. “She worked with the apostles, because only she could teach them aspects of Jesus that no one else would know. People loved it.”

During her days at St. Patrick’s, once a month Father Waris had her give a reflection during Mass. “I’m not supposed to do that, but if you don’t change, how will people ever learn?” Father Waris said. “People really looked forward to her homilies.”

Father Waris said ministering with Sister Rita was an answer to a prayer. “I feel like I know a saint,” he said. “If not, I don’t know how you get there.”



Sister Rita portraying Mary as an older woman, in a 2007 performance at Mount Saint Joseph.

By Dan Heckel