



SISTER CLARE BASS



SISTER MARY FLICK



SISTER HEATHER GANZ



SISTER ZITA O. IWUOHA



SISTER ALISON MCCRARY



SISTER CARMEN ROJAS



SISTER KELLY SMOCK



# Discovering Concordia's 'bundle of treasures'

**W**hen asked what they discovered during their two-week visit with the Sisters of St. Joseph of Concordia, seven women early in their religious lives used the words "simplicity," "commitment," "vibrancy" and "freedom to explore."

They may very well have been describing themselves.

The seven women, ranging in age from 28 to 57, are novices in six separate congregations of Sisters of St. Joseph. This is the second year they have come to Concordia in January, studying with the sisters here as part of their "novitiate."

On Jan. 30, they returned to the Chicago home they share during the eight-month program.

The visiting novices were:

- ▶ Sister Clare Bass from the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet in St. Louis, Mo.
- ▶ Sister Mary Flick from the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet in St. Louis, Mo.
- ▶ Sister Heather Ganz from the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood, N.Y.
- ▶ Sister Zita Obiageri Iwuoha from the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden, Pa.
- ▶ Sister Alison McCrary of the Congregation of St. Joseph

▶ Sister Carmen Rojas from the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto, Ontario, Canada

▶ Sister Kelly Smock from the Sisters of St. Joseph of Northwestern Pennsylvania

The novice directors accompanying the group were Sister Anne Davis, a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet-Los Angeles Province, and Sister Bernadette Dean, a member of the Congregation of St. Joseph.

About a dozen years ago, the U.S. Federation of Sisters of St. Joseph — a cooperative organization of more than a dozen independent congregations that share a "genealogy" that began in LePuy, France, in 1650 — created the yearlong "novitiate" program,



**FAR LEFT:** Sister Marcia Allen, president of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Concordia, leads the novices on a tour of the Nazareth Motherhouse during their January visit.

**LEFT:** Sister Clare Bass from the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet in St. Louis, Mo., shares a table with one of the children in the upstairs playroom at the Neighbor to Neighbor center in downtown Concordia.

**ABOVE:** Sister Alison McCrary of the Congregation of St. Joseph, standing, gets sewing instruction from Neighbor to Neighbor volunteer Jean Wilcox.

in which novices from all the congregations live and learn together.

The idea, according to Sister Anne, was to ensure that novices have a foundation in understanding the congregation's history and mission, and to have a "peer group" of other sisters about their same age and experience.

The program has evolved into an eight-month residential program, which for the second year now is being hosted by the Congregation of St. Joseph — a community that formed when seven smaller communities (including the Sisters of St. Joseph of Wichita) merged in 2007.

The novices' stay at Manna House of Prayer included extensive study on the history and mission of the original Sisters of St. Joseph, under the direction of Sister Marcia Allen, president of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Concordia.

They also had ample opportunity to visit with sisters here — including a day at the Neighbor to Neighbor center in downtown Concordia and a trip to Belleville to meet Sisters Mary Savoie and Margaret Nacke. And they had time to explore North Central Kansas and southern Nebraska.

"There are two ways to see the United States," explained Sister Carmen Rojas, a native of Mexico City who immigrated to Canada and joined the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto. "You can go to a big city like Chicago and see the influence it has around the world, and you can come to a small town where the sense of community is palpable, where people are really connected."

And in a small city like Concordia, added Sister Mary Flick, a native of St. Louis, "You can really see the impact that the Sisters of St. Joseph have had here

over the years, and all the ways they are an important part of this community."

On one hand, the novices were struck by the "universality" of the Sisters of St. Joseph — how an estimated 14,000 women worldwide share the same mission as members of the religious communities that grew from that first one in 17<sup>th</sup> century France.

On the other hand, several of the novices mentioned the wisdom and experience concentrated in Concordia.

"I've discovered the hidden treasure we have here as Sisters of St. Joseph," said Sister Zita, a native of Nigeria who immigrated to Pennsylvania a number of years ago. "All these wonderful women hidden here — Sister Marcia wrote the book we are studying, Sister Bette (Moslander) was president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious..."

That's part of the reason the novitiate includes visits to Concordia and other congregations, Sister Anne adds: It helps novices see how Sisters of St. Joseph put into practice their mission of "loving God and neighbor" no matter who or where they are.

"This has deepened my appreciation of Sisters of St. Joseph and how to be present to those around me wherever I am," says Sister Alison, a New Orleans native.

Or, as Long Island, New York, native Sister Heather explains, "I've been given a bundle of treasures that I'll be unpacking for the rest of my life."

*NOTE: There is also a novice in the Sisters of St. Joseph of Concordia — Sister Dian Hall of Cartersville, Ga. — who was received into the congregation last summer. She is not taking part in the federation novitiate program.*

## 'Novitiate' draws women from across U.S., Canada

The "family tree" that is the Sisters of St. Joseph began with a single, small group of women in LePuy, France, in about 1650. And 363 years later, there are branches throughout the world.

In the United States, the independent communities of women religious who are a part of that genealogy form a loose cooperative organization called the U.S. Federation of Sisters of St. Joseph. The Sisters of St. Joseph of Concordia is one of about 20 individual congregations (depending on how you count them). Together there are roughly 7,000 Sisters of St. Joseph in the United States, and about 14,000 worldwide.

In the 1970s, the federation began inviting novices — women who have already spent a year in formal preparation for becoming a sister and discernment on their religious calling — and the formation directors from their congregations to come together four times a year. At those weekend gatherings, they would study their history, spirit and spirituality.

Through the 1980s and into the '90s, more congregations took part, and the time devoted to the increasingly formal "novitiate program" grew.

"But this was never driven by the federation," explains Sister Anne Davis, one of two federation novice directors and a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet-Los Angeles Province. "This was a response to the needs of the novices."

As the 1990s ended, the federation approved what is now an eight-month residential program. It was offered for the first time in 2000, hosted by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Chambery in West Hartford, Conn.; 14 novices took part that year.

Other congregations have hosted the program, and twice in the ensuing years there have been no novices in the program. This year is the second time the program has been hosted by the Congregation of St. Joseph — a community that formed when seven smaller communities (including the Sisters of St. Joseph of Wichita) merged in 2007 — and it is located at a house owned by the congregation in Chicago.

The other federation novice director is Sister Bernadette Dean, a member of the Congregation of St. Joseph. Sister Bernadette has served in this role since 2006, while Sister Anne began her first year in August 2011.

▶ **MORE INFORMATION** about the basic process for women who feel called to vowed religious life can be found at [www.csjkansas.org/vocations/](http://www.csjkansas.org/vocations/)



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