

Contributing to the Needs of the Neighborhood by Michele Audet, CSJA

I'm an immigrant myself, although life for immigrants in Boston today is quite different from when I grew up as a Canadian immigrant in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. My family emigrated from Canada to a small town that consisted of a school with one room, where no one spoke French. The English-speaking teacher was not equipped to teach a French speaking child, so first grade was spent with coloring books. My parents, who valued education, sent me to a Catholic boarding school. Here, we were a diverse group of boarders from Canada, New York and day students, "habitants" from the local farming communities. We then moved to northern New Hampshire where I integrated into a bilingual French-English school and graduated high school. Most of the immigrant families worked in the local paper mill or shoe factory. My father was a businessman who owned and operated a lumber business with his brothers.

My parents were educated in Canada and were not familiar with the American school system. There was subtle discrimination where we grew up. This was not based on the color of your skin, but rather on limitations for education and opportunities for success. It was a culture where women didn't go to college and "French kids" were not expected to amount to much. Since I loved to learn, I had to figure out how to make education happen!

Taking various routes, I eventually graduated from college and came to Boston for graduate school at Boston University School of Social Work. I met Mari Ryan, CSJ, at the Jesuit Urban Center, who introduced me to the Sisters of St. Joseph of Boston.

I was invited to "come and see." I was captivated by the ministries in which the sisters were involved and with the women that I met. This wasn't some ladies sodality. In 2006, I participated in the CSSJ Heritage Pilgrimage in France, where we traced the roots of the Sisters of St. Joseph. It all came together for me by experiencing the sisters' history, walking their paths, and listening to their stories, so I became a CSJ Associate.

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Living in Boston, I have a desire to contribute to the needs of my neighborhood. Sister Mari invited me to meet Sister Nancy Braceland one afternoon for tea. She introduced me to the mission and work that Casserly House provides to immigrants and to the neighborhood. I was invited to join the Advisory Board. Casserly House is in the midst of the community and reminds me of the settlement house movement in the early beginnings of social work. The staff assists a diverse population find their strengths with ESOL classes, citizenship preparation, and finding gainful employment. Once the immigrants are ready, the staff help make connections with community resources. One of the perspectives of social work values is respecting the person-in-environment. Reaching out to the neighbor without distinction is a core CSJ value.

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Pictured left: Michele Audet, CSJA with Jim McCarthy during a Casserly House board meeting. Pictured below: Michele with associates Dolores Dauenhauer and Denise Cohen at their Associate Commitment ceremony.

