

Being One with the People

an interview with Nancy Braceland, CSJ

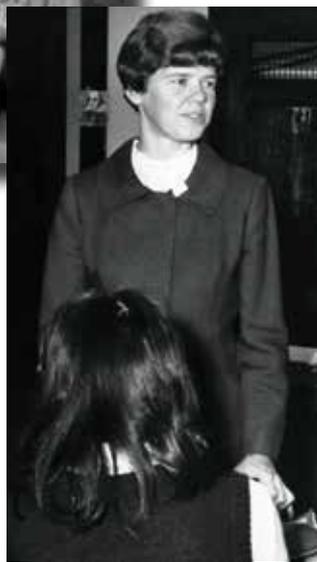
Sister Nancy Braceland is a risk taker. Throughout her ministries, she has pushed boundaries, sometimes choosing the unknown. She states, "I choose to be with the immigrant. Sometimes we forget that's our history: that either we or our ancestors were once immigrants - we have to remember this."

Sister Nancy's roots began in Newton, MA. She was the fifth of eight children, went to public schools, and enjoyed her younger years. It wasn't until Sister Nancy attended Framingham State College that she considered becoming a sister. She explained, "I had met some young sisters there; it was something about how they were, what they were about, that caught my interest. Mostly, I think it was because they took the time to tell us a little about themselves; they were missionaries. I found that attractive about them." She entered the CSJ Congregation in 1955.

Sister Nancy's first ministries included teaching at St. Catherine School, Charlestown, St. John School, Boston, and Sacred Heart School, Roslindale. She then attended Boston College to acquire her master's degree in English Literature. She studied full-time for a year and continued her classes during her next ministry at Mount St. Joseph Academy. "This was when the method of teaching was changing; new ways of working with students were developing - it was a very creative, wonderful teaching experience," she said.



Pictured: Sister Nancy with her family and teaching in a classroom.



After eight years, Sister Nancy felt there was something more she needed to do. She needed a stretch, and responded to the call to go to Peru as a pastoral minister. She reflected, "Some of the challenges I faced included leaving my family and community. I thought, could I find a community there that would be supportive and loving? Would I be able to speak the language? I didn't know if I would be a good fit because I had not had another cultural experience." After an initial six-week trial, she realized, "When you begin, you think the experience is what you want, but, at some point it becomes what you need." With mixed feelings, after seven years in Peru, family obligations brought Sister Nancy home. She said, "Some decisions are bigger than your own discernment."

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Back home, Sister Nancy accepted a ministry at Our Lady of Lourdes, Jamaica Plain. She chose this mainly because it was a Spanish ministry, though it presented a cultural shock to her. Peruvians had their own food, culture, patron Saints, etc., but at Our Lady's it was a multicultural situation, a whole new learning experience. After two years, she left there, but wanted to continue pastoral ministry. She accepted an interim ministry in Maryville, Missouri, working for eight months during the farm crisis. The position was to help revamp the parish, something she knew she could accomplish. She learned about the family farmers, how things worked there, and what the farmers were experiencing. There were foreclosures, which could not be stopped, but Sister Nancy and others helped raise people's consciousness. Referencing their different lifestyle, Sister Nancy said, "I think it's learning that there are so many ways of living diversity. Diversity can be multi-cultural, multi-ethnic; it can be gender, sexual orientation, or class. It was the same principle in Maryville, how do you bring everyone together?"



Sister Nancy then went to work for Catholic Charities, ministering at St. Francis Xavier Parish, Nashua, NH, primarily because they had a growing Hispanic population. The parish had large parameters because it was welcoming immigrants into the southern tier of New Hampshire, building up the worshipping community. “That was where I was able to learn better community organizing,” she said. Each ministry she had up to this point prepared her for her next journey.

After 14 years, Sister Nancy came home again. She said, “You use your gifts, you use them well, but then you have a feeling, not knowing what is going to happen next. At that time, the community wanted to express the CSJ 125th anniversary. One idea was to purchase a house in the city in a multi-ethnic, underserved community. I said, ‘sounds like me.’”

In 2000, Casserly House was born, and Sister Nancy has been there since. The Casserly House staff, volunteers, associates, and Sister Nancy work with adult and child immigrants to help them transition to the U.S. Sister Nancy and her staff also establish partnerships with local and city organizations; they keep up with current legislation, and educate themselves in domestic abuse issues, temporary protective status, and immigration reform.

Casserly House is Sister Nancy’s home. “Casserly House is why I became a sister. I think it’s a way of doing ministry as a Sister of St. Joseph. Living Church, but not necessarily institutional Church, is how CSJs express who we are, and how we are. It has to do with being one with the people.”

About her life Sister Nancy said, “My life, I like my life. I like how I’ve been treated. I also like the choices I’ve made, the risks I have taken. That’s the thing: when we talk about taking a risk, or daring to dream, we need to know that we do that without 100% security that the thing is going to work. I think that’s what risk-taking is all about.” For Sister Nancy, the risk is worthwhile. †

