

My Journey in the Desert

Brenda Velasco, one of three women who entered the novitiate of the Sisters of Providence last summer, shares insights gained in her year as a candidate.

I can't believe how quickly time goes by, I recently thought looking around my room at the novitiate house of the Sisters of Providence in Spokane. Was I actually a novice now? It seemed like only yesterday I had arrived in Yakima as a candidate for the order, ready to live and learn what it was like to be a sister. I remember driving to Yakima from Spokane (where I was living at the time), that hot August day, still amazed that I was taking this big step. Here I was— an experienced television producer who enjoyed her work very much. Yet, I couldn't ignore this call from God anymore, a call to serve Him.

My candidate year was wonderful; full of blessing, challenges and hopes. Now I am in the novitiate, the canonical year, the ultimate test for me to see if this is truly the plan God has for me. As I experience this contemplative, reflective time, I can't help but smile when I think about my candidate year and how God touched my heart. I still can't believe I'm not in Yakima anymore, but I will always treasure the memories, the beautiful people, the children who entered my life and would change me forever.

First, let me explain about Yakima. It's a city in Central Washington about two hours southeast of Seattle. But unlike Seattle, it is in the desert, dry and hot in the summer. The majority of the nation's supply of apples and other fruits are grown in the Yakima Valley and it has a large migrant worker population from Mexico. Being Mexican and knowing Spanish, I knew I would have good opportunities for ministries there, but I wasn't sure if I wanted to live in Yakima for a year. Having grown up in Wisconsin, I was used to the lush green trees, the soft green grass, the beautiful lakes that went on for miles. I had worked at a television station in Kennewick, which is near Yakima, a few years ago and I knew from the experience that the desert didn't appeal to me. It was the last place I

wanted to return. But because the candidate house was in Yakima, I had no choice. Was I willing to give the desert another chance? Why not? I thought. This was for God.

So I arrived in Yakima ready to face the world, not knowing what it had to offer me as a candidate. There were two other candidates with me, Jessica Taylor and Anne Rising. That was really helpful, especially when you share the same fears and hopes that a "sister in training" faces. Our new home was a beautiful remodeled old house near the downtown, not a cold stone convent with a ten-foot wall around it that I had often thought of as a youth. No, the only things surrounding the house were rows of beautiful flowers that were carefully tended to by Sister Alice St. Hilaire, our candidate director. She lived with us along with Sisters JoAnn Showalter, Blanca Sagles and Dianne Crawford. There were seven of us in that house— more people than I had ever lived with before. But through God's wonderful grace, the transition for me went very smoothly.

The sisters were so wonderful to live with and I learned something new from every one of them. Sister Dianne was especially helpful to me in bringing out my creative side. She helped me "learn" how to cook, which was a miracle in itself. She also taught me how to crochet. I've made two scarves and am in the process of making an afghan. Everyone was so nice and I enjoyed the new friends we made, especially at St. Joseph's church, our neighborhood parish. This city may have been in the desert, but there was nothing dry about the hospitality.



Brenda Velasco (right) and Jessica Taylor carry the province's banner at the Vatican for the beatification of Mother Emilie Gamelin.



Brenda shares her artistic skills with students at St. Joseph-Marquette School in Yakima.

Our year wouldn't have been complete without the support of the other sisters in the Yakima community. They were attentive, caring, helpful in so many ways. We laughed together, prayed together, even mourned together. They truly are a special group of women who go out of their way to make sure you feel right at home. All of the sudden, that desert that I dreaded returning to was slowly growing on me and I was brave enough to consider it my home.

Having the opportunity to be directed by Sister Alice was a blessing. Even before I entered I knew that she would be instrumental in guiding me through a very important year of my life. It was wonderful to live with her and learn so many new things. She had grown up in the Yakima Valley and knew a lot of tasks. Never in my life did I think I would go plum picking or ride a grape harvest machine and pick concord grapes. She taught us how to make delicious juice from those grapes which we offered to Father Meany, one of our loyal Jesuit friends who lives across the street from the candidate house, and jokingly told him it was prune juice! Every day it was an adventure with her and it was a gift. But the best part was the listening. I loved her stories and loved talking to her about my journey with God. She always listened very attentively and offered me wondrous advice.

When I was discerning on a ministry, I had so many options both in the Hispanic and Anglo communities, but most seemed to focus on children. I was a little hesitant because I had never really liked working with kids. I was a television producer, a journalist, not a teacher. Well, the Lord must have thought I needed to give children a chance, because what happened next

was a miracle in my eyes. The Catholic school in our area, St. Joseph-Marquette, needed volunteers. When I first heard about this, it caught my attention for some reason, but I didn't feel I could do it. Me, working with a bunch of rambunctious kids? I don't think so, I thought. Then Sister Alice told me that the art teacher needed some help with her classes. For some reason, that appealed to me. Well, I liked art a lot and it would only be for a couple of hours a week, plus the teacher would always be in the classroom. If I didn't like it, I could always leave, right? Why not try?

I went to the school with an open mind, but little did I know how much this experience would change me. I was very nervous that first week, unsure how I was going to deal with the students. But slowly, as the weeks went on, I realized I was really enjoying it. I worked with the first through fifth grades and found the kids to be a delight; they were interesting, cute and I loved being around them. Amazingly, Brenda Velasco, the person who said she would never work with children, fell in love with this new ministry.

What was God trying to tell me? I could feel His presence so much in those students. They offered so much and I learned something new from them every day. Even on days when they got rambunctious, I enjoyed it, believe it or not! I loved seeing the energy in their eyes and the joy on their little faces as they worked hard on their art projects. These children are truly a blessing and gifts from God. They are an inspiration to me and I love them dearly. Working at St. Joseph-Marquette Catholic School became one of the biggest highlights of my candidate year. It really represented to me the trust I had to say "yes" to the new opportunities God was giving me.

But now, that year in the desert is over and I'm in my first year of the novitiate to continue the long and exciting journey of becoming a Sister of Providence. From my bedroom window in Spokane I can see the trees, the Centennial Trail, the pheasants and quail running around the yard. Gone are the dusty Yakima hills, the miles of fruit orchards and majestic Mt. Adams in the desert horizon. I'm back in a city I know very well, but things are different. I'm in a new community of sisters, and have new blessings, new challenges, new hopes. I miss the sisters in Yakima, the students at St. Joseph-Marquette, even the desert, very much. But I am already

building strong relationships in Spokane and am getting to know myself and Jesus better.

Our opportunities for ministries during the canonical year are limited, but we do get to do some work. And, surprise, surprise, I'm volunteering once a week at a Catholic school here, working with third-, fourth- and fifth-graders and absolutely loving it! I consider my newfound love of working with children a call within a call. Is God calling me to be a teacher? I don't know. Maybe He is, but now I'm willing to find out.

I know there is a lot waiting for me as I look ahead to my future. I'm just putting my life in God's hands. He knows where I belong and will get me to that destination in one way or another. ●

Three Novices



Anne Rising, of Chula Vista, Calif., was formerly administrative assistant to the chairman of Brento Corporation in San Diego. Born in Pittsburgh,

she holds a diploma in religious education from the University of San Diego and the Diocese of San Diego. Her interests include going for walks, hiking, bird watching, biking, reading and playing the violin. ●



Jessica Taylor, of Sumner, Wash., had been a special education teacher at Highline High School in Burien, where she was born. She holds bachelor's degrees

in psychology and special education from Central Washington University. Her hobbies include wood carving, playing the flute, reading, and crocheting. ●



Brenda Velasco, of Spokane, formerly worked in news production at local television stations in the Tri-Cities and Spokane. Born in Santa Barbara, Calif., and

raised in Wisconsin, she holds a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. When she finds time, she loves dance, particularly ballet, ice skating, walking, working out at the gym, reading, writing, and going to the ballet or the movies. ●

EDUCATION FUNDS

New life is not just happening in Mother Joseph Province. In fact, in the entire international community of the Sisters of Providence, there currently are 30 women in formation – 8 candidates, 10 novices, 10 in temporary vows, and 2 women transferring from another religious community.

Mother Joseph Province accounts for one sister in temporary vows, Sister Karen Hawkins; the three novices pictured in this issue of *Caritas*; and the

two sisters in the process of transferring, Sisters Ann Lang Tran and Ann Mary Guong Vu. The rest of the women in formation come from Cameroon, Haiti, Western Canada, the Philippines, Egypt, and Chile.

Mother Joseph Province accepts contributions

designated to help pay for the education of women in formation in the province and the two pre-postulants in El Salvador, according to Sister Loretta Marie Marceau, province development director. Their education includes college courses and theological studies. As sisters, they will use their knowledge, skills and talents over the rest of their lives to serve the poor and unfortunate worldwide. ●

