

## PROFILES IN EXCELLENCE

### MEET SISTER MARY THERESITA DONACH - "SISTER T"

By Scott Posner



What leads to an extraordinary life of service? A commitment that began at the tender age of 15 in 1963. An affiliation with the church that now has lasted for over 62 years. For those of you that have had the privilege to know Sister Theresita, maybe we can share some surprises. For the rest, get ready to meet a truly extraordinary person.

Sister Theresita was born on February 2, 1946 in Greenpoint Brooklyn. Her given name was Deborah Felicia Donach. Born to Leon and Cascara Donach, her dad was a butcher and her mother

worked in the clothing business in Greenpoint, then known as the "Schmatta Trade" - the Yiddish term for rag trade. Her younger sibling, a sister named Donalea, passed in 2020. Her younger brother Leon currently lives in Arizona.

Early memories are filled with summers in Yaphank at her Grandmother's "shack". The emphasis being on the word "shack"! No plumbing, no electricity, an old style ice-box, that needed regular replenishment. A very cramped space filled with 6 children, 2 mothers, 1 grandmother and 2 fathers on the weekends. While you may assume these were difficult and challenging times, the reality was far different. Sister Theresita describes wonderful summers, filled with exploring the area, being outside all day, making friends with nature, playing in the dirt and singing songs. Having fallen in love with the area, the family soon moved from Brooklyn out to Yaphank full-time.



When asked how she would be described by other during this time she shared: “A rambunctious troublemaker.”



What led Deborah Felicia to the Church at just 15 years old? She describes the 1960's as a time that held much fewer opportunities for woman. She knew early on that she “wanted more” than the traditional paths that were presented to her. She was attracted to a life that focused on taking care of others. So in 1963, 15 year old Deborah made her way to Philadelphia to begin her training. She entered the Postulant at the Nazareth Academy. She then entered The Community of the Holy Family of Nazareth and became Sister Mary Theresita Donach in 1964 upon entering The Novitiate. At 15 she didn't realize there were different Charisms with different focuses. These

focuses include social justice, preaching, taking care of the poor and ministry to the family.

Having never been away from home, homesickness followed her and was a very strong and unwanted companion for that first year. Her mother regularly mailed her the comics and that connection to home helped her overcome her loneliness. This also created a life-long attachment to comics, likely rooted in those early days of comfort and the connection they had to her mother.

Sister Theresita's second year of studies brought her back Long Island. The 3rd year was back to Philadelphia. Then in 1966, Sister Theresita made her First Vows followed by Final Vows in 1971.

Now for those of you who know our beloved Sister Theresita, you know she has boundless energy. Good thing because she was kept on the move constantly. From 1968 - 1970 she taught 1st and 2nd grade in Worcester, Mass. Then moved onto Norwich, CT to teach 8th grade. Oakdale, CT was the next stop before moving on to the Diocese of Norwich as an Associate Director of Youth Ministry. In the 1970's she found herself back home on Long Island as the Director of Youth Ministry in Oakdale followed by her

partnering with Father Tom Mulvanerty to build the Church of the Resurrection in Farmingville.

If that does not seem busy enough, she also started a non-profit called Hugs & Halos to raise money for other non-profits in need. She also served as a project manager for Haitian Apostolate, making numerous trips to the Haiti starting in the late 1990's. When asked why she chose to serve in Haiti, our pragmatic Sister shared since everybody was so worried about Y2K at the time, she decided to go to Haiti where there were no computers so there was nothing to worry about. However, there was also no food in Haiti therefore creating a lot of needs to fill. Her time there was not



without some interesting incidents. One day she was traveling by car with a group and had to take a detour around a closed road. The road they found themselves on was very rough, forcing them to drive at 10 mph.

Unfortunately an ambush awaited them. Fortunately, their weapons of choice were not guns but coconuts. What was a slow and careful 10 mph drive in became a 40 mph escape in reverse. It was during a mission trip in Haiti where a student shared a very eye-opening observation. He noted that in the U.S. we give our excesses while people in Haiti were giving to fill a need, not from what they had in extra.



Over the years Sister Theresita has come across many generous people from all walks of life. In fact on a recent flight to Arizona to visit her brother, who is facing medical challenges, the stranger in the seat next to her handed her \$1,700 to help with his mounting medical bills. This type of kindness is present, we just tend to see the negative behavior emphasized more often than the positive.



In 2018, Sister Theresita arrived at St Philip & St James Catholic Church in Saint James, N.Y. and served as a Pastoral Associate with Father Tom Haggerty. In that role she assisted with Baptisms, Wake Preparations, Retreats and the OCIA which is now the RCIA or the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults.

We talked about how the life of nuns have changed over the years. Sister T shared that back in the 1960's life as a nun was extremely structured and quite austere. They saw their families just twice a year. However, since Vatican 2, which rolled out in the 1960's, things have changed. Lay-people became more involved in Church roles. Services were now in native languages, not just Latin. And, life became less austere. Nuns now can retain their Baptismal names. Now Sisters are able to focus on their individual gifts and talents to serve where they can make the most significant contributions.



Sister Theresita currently lives on the grounds of the Little Flower Children's Institute in Wading River. She shares the residence with two other nuns. Each of them has the opportunity to focus on their individual talents. One nun works at the jail in Riverhead and the other nun focuses on religious education. Sister T focuses on retreats.



I must admit that Sister Theresita is the only nun I know. My image of nuns was a mix of Sally Fields the Flying Nun and the stern and scary movie versions. Sister T has shown me the reality of what nuns stand for. Above all that they do, they strive to make a significant and positive impact for the communities they serve. She described the responsibility to use her talents to enrich the Catholic Community and to help people develop a relationship with God and how to hold onto that. When asked about her view of people who are not Catholic or don't share her beliefs she very eloquently shared that: "God created all of us. Therefore, we need to respect and honor that version of God that is in everyone." She also shared that we are all more similar than different and that we all have lives of struggles and choices that we need to adapt to along the way. Or better put by Sister Theresita with her contagious laugh: "We all need to change our dance step."

When asked if people treat her differently when she is dressed in her Habit, she shared that those who know her do not. They see the person before the clothes. Those who don't know her respond differently. They share their religious experiences and ask her to pray for them, to which she answers that she will pray with them.

Sister Theresita's extraordinary life of giving continues today. Besides her lifelong commitment to the church, she is an active member of the Rotary Club of Smithtown. That is where I had the pleasure to come to know Sister T. She is a person of great caring, compassion and humor! We all need a Sister T in our lives, no matter what your religious persuasion happens to be.



Note: Happy 150th birthday to the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth which was founded in 1875 by Frances Siedliska, a Polish noblewoman.