

Ready to turn 100, Oblate sister is “living,” not “existing”



Oblate Sister of Providence Mary Anthony Garnier will turn 100 April 11. (Kevin J. Parks/CR Staff)

It's been two decades since a member of the Baltimore-based Oblate Sisters of Providence has turned 100.

That's all about to change when Oblate Sister of Providence Mary Anthony Garnier celebrates the centennial of her birth during an April 11 bash at her religious community's motherhouse in Arbutus, where she has lived since 2013.

Alert and quick to express her opinions, Sister Anthony told me during a recent visit she's "grateful to God for letting me stay this long." The spirited sister wanted me to know that although she is about to turn 100, she remains independent and stays up on current events.

"I'm not just existing," she said passionately, resting in a large rolling chair. "I'm living! And that's just what I want to be - I want to be living and knowing what's going on."

Born in New Orleans as the second oldest of 13 children, Velva Garnier entered the Oblate Sisters of Providence in 1935. She had been inspired by the women religious who taught her at Corpus Christi School in New Orleans.

"I wanted to devote my life to God," said Sister Anthony, seated in a community room beneath a large crucifix and an image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Sister Anthony could not remember facing discrimination as an African American woman growing up in the South. She noted that New Orleans has a large black Catholic community that showed strong support for women religious.



Velva Garnier (standing), is shown in a family photo with her friend, Gabrielle

Detiege, prior to entering the Oblate Sisters of Providence and becoming Sister Mary Anthony Garnier. (Courtesy Oblate Sisters of Providence)

In a 1994 interview with the Baltimore Sun when she served as the sacristan at the motherhouse, however, Sister Anthony remembered when black nuns could take Communion only after white communicants had received the sacrament.

"We have an extra blessing from God as a race," she told The Sun. "Being from the South, I can tell you some awful stuff. But my mother said that eventually God would take care of you. And that's also what our order believes: If we put things in God's hands, God will provide."

The Oblate Sisters of Providence were founded by Mother Mary Lange in 1829 to educate and evangelize African Americans. For 188 years, they have ministered at St. Frances Academy in East Baltimore, a historic school founded by Mother Lange that is proud to be the oldest continuously operating black Catholic school in the nation.

Throughout her many decades of ministry, Sister Anthony worked mostly in Catholic education. In addition to Baltimore, where she spent time at St. Frances Academy and the motherhouse, she served in Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Louisiana and Missouri. She was in active ministry in Buffalo, N.Y., for nine years before returning to the motherhouse at age 97.



Oblate Sister of Providence Mary Anthony Garnier is shown in an undated photo. (Courtesy Oblate Sisters of Providence)

"Sister Anthony always loved to talk to little children," said Oblate Sister of Providence Trinita Baeza, the nun who tipped me off about her friend's upcoming birthday. "She would hug them and encourage them to be good. She would sit in the office and be the goodwill person – the kind of person who could be a third neutral party that could hear the child's side and the teacher's side."

Sister Trinita said Sister Anthony will receive a new black veil prior to her birthday party and will be treated as the "queen for the day." The entire community will celebrate with her, Sister Trinita said, including an Oblate sister who will turn 100 next year.

"Sister Anthony has always been so active and joy-filled," Sister Trinita said. "She's always able to see the good side of a situation."

Happy birthday, Sister Anthony! Enjoy your special day!