

# Sister Kathleen Feeley, 82, keeps sharing her vision

When Sister Kathleen Feeley was summoned last year from Ghana by her order, the School Sisters of Notre Dame, to serve as interim president of the Institute of Notre Dame, she faced prodigious change.

She would be moving from a developing West African nation to a Baltimore institution with a 164-year history. To ease the transition, Sister Kathleen packed a few things that would serve as links between the two worlds.

"I brought back (some) artifacts," she said. "One shows three individuals linked together all carved from a single piece of wood, which suggests the unity of all people. I also brought back the Ghanaian symbol of an animal that walks forward but, at the same time, always looks backward to symbolize taking the best from the past.

"I found a common humanity in Ghana different from myself. As human beings, we are more alike than different. That idea, of the unity of all persons, is part of the SSND charism."

In addition to objects, she also packed a trunk of ideas, because that's what she has done wherever she has served -whether it be Ghana or IND or College of Notre Dame of Maryland.

Sister Kathleen, 82, is a woman of great ideas and vision, which was particularly evident April 27 at College of Notre Dame, where she spoke on "My Odyssey: Ghana to IND."

Over seven years in Africa, it took her through villages - the "real Ghana," she said - to the Catholic University of Ghana, where she taught every student on campus.

"I'm proudest of my opportunity to get a university started," she said, "and to help students who would not have had this opportunity had this Catholic university not been founded."

The odyssey took her to the village of Sunyani, where she instructed novitiates to the religious life, and even to Southern Sudan, where she “saw what a war-ravaged country looked like.”

The odyssey eventually led her to IND.

“I got the call from the School Sisters of Notre Dame, and it took me all of about 20 seconds to make my decision,” Sister Kathleen said. “That (IND) is a wonderful place. I knew it intellectually; I now know it exponentially. If you want to see a group of diverse students, come to IND.”

Principal Ann Seeley likes to say that Sister Kathleen “hit the ground running” at IND. One of her first innovations was SSND/IND Partners (CR, Jan. 27), which brings 11 sisters once a week and four others occasionally to the Aisquith Street school. They serve as tutors, library and study hall facilitators, research aides and archivists.

“The SSND spirit is very dear to me,” Sister Kathleen said. “I wanted more SSNDs in the school to be an embodiment of the school. . . . What I really wanted them to be was the SSND spirit at IND.”

It was hardly the first time she labored to do that.

As president of College of Notre Dame for 21 years, Sister Kathleen played the lead role in developing its Continuing Education for Women initiative, weekend college and graduate program. At the heart of all three is the importance of “enabling persons to reach the fullness of their potential,” but the driving force behind the implementation of that mission became women’s education.

“We had a campus-wide discussion,” Sister Kathleen said of the early 1970s, when the college considered going coed. “What became clear was that we had a unique mission. We were always keeping our eyes on what was best for women. We wanted to grow as an institution and stay close to that mission.”

Sister Kathleen has long been a hero of mine. As a teacher at IND, I luckily have had the opportunity of working for her. She makes me a better person and I am immeasurably better for the experience.

In January, Sister Kathleen had my freshman Language and Literature students literally on the edge of their seats as she talked about William Butler Yeats and unrequited love in the Irish poet's "The Stolen Child."

"I have a deep pride in this institution," Sister Kathleen said of IND. "Every day I see students and faculty doing what education is all about. ... It's a beautiful full circle: You receive and you give."

On St. Patrick's Day, Sister Kathleen led a group of IND students on a tour of The Baltimore Sun. Mary J. Corey, senior vice president and director of content, and the first woman to head the newsroom in the 174-year history of the paper, was a student at the College of Notre Dame when Sister Kathleen was its president.

A woman of vision meets a woman of vision.

"I have been really lucky in my life to be surrounded by wonderful role models," Corey said, "and one of them was Sister Kathleen."

For selfish reasons, I was hoping that Sister Kathleen would reconsider her decision to leave IND at the end of June, but with a firm plan in place for Mary Funke to assume the presidency of the school, Sister Kathleen will be moving on. She freely admits, that at the end of the day, "I'm exhausted."

I have friends of a similar age who say the same thing, and they've already had four naps. While there are those who slow down when they reach the end of a task, Sister Kathleen seems to have picked up a step.

*Mike Reeb is an English teacher at the Institute of Notre Dame. He can be reached at [mreeb@indofmd.org](mailto:mreeb@indofmd.org).*