

Sister Kathleen Feeley leaves legacy of learning for seniors

Sister Kathleen Feeley, 80 years young, remains a great influence, in Baltimore and around the planet.

For the last six years, Sister Kathleen was a full-time faculty member at the Catholic University of Ghana, which grew from 37 students to approximately 1,500 during her tenure.

While she has relinquished that post, she will return in August to the town of Sunyani in that West African nation to shape the educational development of 40 men and women from several religious orders, including her own, the School Sisters of Notre Dame.

Sister Kathleen enjoys a large legacy in her hometown, specifically at the institution she led for 21 years, the College of Notre Dame of Maryland.

It marked the 20th anniversary of its Renaissance Institute June 5. Sister Kathleen gave the after-dinner address and was made an honorary member of the peer-taught program of non-credit courses for those 50 and over that she founded in 1989.

“Learning doesn’t stop at a certain age,” Sister Kathleen said earlier this spring. “It’s wonderful to see how the Renaissance Institute has taken off.”

It began with a brainstorm she had during her second decade at Notre Dame, where she was president and an English professor from 1971-92.

“She had seen her brothers retire, and felt that they needed some kind of intellectual stimulation,” said Mary Lu McNeal, who was the first director of the Renaissance Institute.

“She sent me to (the University of California) Berkeley, Harvard, Northwestern, to gather the best ideas. She said, ‘if you get the thing going, it will be like a steam engine. Get out of its way and let it roll.’ What made us unique is that it is peer-

taught and self-governed.”

What began with 140 “lifelong learners” in 1989 has settled on a cap of 325. Now under the direction of Rebecca Straub, the course offerings continue to expand, as attested by Pat Savage, a parishioner of St. Agnes in Catonsville who taught math for 27 years at Mount St. Joseph High School in Irvington.

In retirement, Savage has taken an art course that explored the work of M.C. Escher, and read and discussed James Joyce and Virginia Wolff.

“One of the good things about the Renaissance Institute,” Savage said, “is the diversity of the courses.”

That seems natural, considering the eclectic nature of Sister Kathleen’s own academic pursuits.

She’s an authority on Flannery O’Connor, a late contemporary. O’Connor’s fiction reflected her Catholic upbringing in Savannah, Ga., a regional flavor that was lost on the students Sister Kathleen has taught in locales like Australia, China, India and now Ghana.

Sister Kathleen, who professed her vows on Aug. 3, 1949, celebrated her 60th jubilee in early May, in Connecticut. While in Baltimore, she gave the commencement address for the Class of 2009 at Notre Dame Preparatory School.

Asked what she had learned in the last year, Sister Kathleen commented on the election of a new president in Ghana and a book that tied the Big Bang theory to Genesis.

“You can never,” she said, “stop learning.”

For more information about the Renaissance Institute, call 410-532-5351 or e-mail rstraub@ndm.edu.