

Sister Mary Neil Corcoran, ‘heart, soul and spirit’ of Esperanza Center, dies at 91

When Henry Velasquez arrived in Baltimore as a young Honduran immigrant nearly two decades ago, he met a sprightly nun with big glasses and a big heart who would change his life.

Mercy Sister Mary Neil Corcoran tutored Velasquez in English several times a week at what was then known as the Hispanic Apostolate in Fells Point. Together with other tutors at the outreach center, Sister Mary Neil gave Velasquez the skills and confidence to become fluent in English – a language he could not speak prior to coming to the United States.

Sister Mary Neil was nurturing, Velasquez said, but also demanding. She pushed her students because she cared about them and wanted them to master the language they would need to flourish in this country.

“She was a very sweet person from the first moment you met her,” remembered Velasquez, a 34-year-old parishioner of Sacred Heart of Jesus-Sagrado Corazón de Jesús in Highlandtown who works in real estate. “You could completely trust her and feel she was looking out for your wellbeing.”

Sister Mary Neil, former director of the Hispanic Apostolate (now known as the Esperanza Center), died Aug. 20 at Stella Maris in Timonium. She was 91. A funeral Mass was offered Aug. 24 at Stella Maris.

Born in Baltimore, Betty Corcoran was the third eldest of eight Corcoran children. She graduated from Mount St. Agnes High School in 1944 and entered the Sisters of Mercy novitiate at Mount St. Agnes College in Mount Washington in 1945. She took Sister Mary Neil as her religious name. Her younger sister, Joanie Corcoran, also became a Sister of Mercy, taking Sister Elizabeth Anne as her religious name.

Sister Mary Neil earned a bachelor’s degree in Spanish from Mount St. Agnes, a

master's degree in romance languages from Western Reserve University (now part of Case Western Reserve) in Cleveland and a doctorate in Spanish from the University of Navarra in Pamplona, Spain.

Sister Mary Neil first connected with the Hispanic Apostolate by serving on its board when the apostolate began in 1963. She volunteered there until 1975, when she became program director.

In the 1980s, Archbishop William D. Borders appointed her coordinator of Hispanic ministry for the Archdiocese of Baltimore, and, in 1990, she became the director of the apostolate. Although Sister Mary Neil retired from that post in 2002, she continued to teach English classes and worked with immigrants at what became the Esperanza Center.

Over her many decades of ministry, Sister Mary Neil taught at Mount St. Agnes High School and also served as a professor at Mount St. Agnes College and what is now Loyola University Maryland in Baltimore.

She was the chaplain to Spanish-speaking inmates at the city detention center and had served as a teacher in Washington, D.C., and Georgia.

Valerie Twanmoh, current director of the Esperanza Center, remembered that when she took the post in 2011, one of the first questions Sister Mary Neil asked was, "How's your Spanish?"

Twanmoh admitted that although she studied the language in school, she was not fluent.

"She said, 'We're going to fix that,'" Twanmoh remembered.

From that time until the week of her death, Sister Mary Neil gave Twanmoh Spanish lessons once or twice a week at the Catholic Charities-run Esperanza Center.

"She was just an amazing woman," said Twanmoh, noting that Sister Mary Neil was also fluent in French. "I don't know if I've met anyone with as much love for people and love for life as Sister Mary Neil."

Describing her predecessor as the “heart and soul and spirit” of the Esperanza Center, Twanmoh said Sister Mary Neil befriended everyone she met, showing interest in learning about their lives even if she only knew them for five minutes.

Jermin Laviera met Sister Mary Neil only moments after Laviera got married at a Baltimore courthouse 30 years ago. Still wearing her white wedding dress, Laviera showed up at the Hispanic Apostolate to sign up for English classes. The nun joked that Laviera, an immigrant from Venezuela, was “too beautiful to be in this place,” but signed her up and later began teaching her English.

“Sister Mary was a person who was here for everybody,” said Laviera, who now works at the Esperanza Center as its client services representative.

Jennifer Williams, a former reporter and web editor for the Catholic Review who volunteered at the Esperanza Center, remembered her friend’s knack for recruiting volunteers.

“She really had a way of drawing in professionals from all walks of life, be it doctors, teachers or lawyers, to help,” Williams said.

Sister Mary Neil was also eager to share “powerful stories of faith” from the Spanish-speaking community, Williams said.

“When she heard young soldiers from Peru who had been catastrophically wounded in landmine incidents in their country were receiving prosthetic limbs from Johns Hopkins, she went above and beyond to make sure they were able to get to Mass,” Williams said.

At Sister Mary Neil’s urging, the Catholic Review wrote an article about the soldiers’ struggles.

“She would said, ‘Jennifer, you just have to meet these fellows and see how strong their faith is,’” Williams said.

The Catholic Review reported in 2002 that from the time Sister Mary Neil first became director of the Hispanic Apostolate until her retirement, the organization doubled in size and relocated several times. Today, the center has more than 12,400

client visits annually. The center offers English classes, legal assistance and other support.

Velasquez, who learned English with Sister Mary Neil's help, visited her at Stella Maris after the nun suffered a recent stroke. He wanted to be with her, he said, even though she could not communicate.

"Just being there let me reflect on how she gave her entire life to service," Velasquez said, noting that Sister Mary Neil inspired him to do his best in every aspect of life, including family, career and faith.

"Look at the impact she had on me," he said, "and then try to imagine how many thousands and thousands of lives she impacted throughout her life."

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