

Third cousins continue family tradition of religious life

Oblate Sister of Providence Rita Michelle Proctor and Sister of Notre Dame de Namur Gwynette Proctor both heard God calling, albeit at different times of their lives.

Both of the third cousins answered, however, continuing a legacy of service that runs through their large, extended family.

“It’s a wonderful feeling to be in ministry with Sister Rita Michelle here in Baltimore,” said Sister Gwynette, the director of Black Catholic Ministries for the Archdiocese of Baltimore. “I love the fact that we may work together on something or use the resources of my office and support what she’s doing and vice versa.”

Other relatives also entered religious life, among them Oblate Sister Mary Clarice Proctor, who died this year.

“The life of the Oblate Sisters attracted me because of their hospitality,” Sister Rita Michelle said. “Knowing there were others of my family and heritage - that did make a difference to me.”

Her parents valued Catholic education. Taught by the Oblate Sisters, Sister Rita Michelle’s interest in them was piqued as early as middle school.

“I knew I loved God, and knew I was interested in working with children - those are things I can remember that stood out,” she said. “I knew it was something I wanted to do, something I had a desire to do.”

Sister Rita Michelle graduated from Academy of Our Lady High School in Washington, D.C., but attended St. Frances Academy in Baltimore for two years. It was in high school that she considered religious life more seriously, though there was never a defining moment to shove her in that direction.

“I wasn’t knocked off a horse like St. Paul,” she said with a laugh. “There were no

apparitions.”

Sister Rita Michelle received both her bachelor’s and master’s degrees from what is now Towson University. After professing her final vows, she taught at St. Frances Academy and the former Father Charles Hall School. She transitioned into administration, and was either a vice principal or principal for 26 years.

“I was able to do those things which I felt God was calling me to do on a broader level,” she said. “I felt that God was with me and sent wonderful people to assist me in my efforts, and I left very fulfilled as a principal.”

Technically retired, Sister Rita Michelle remains busy, as the campus minister at Archbishop Borders School, where she also teaches Religion, and Ss. James and John Catholic School.

Sister Gwynette, meanwhile, taught and served as an administrator at several schools, including the former parish school at St. Ambrose in Baltimore. She was director of both Our Daily Bread - during St. John Paul II’s visit in 1995 - and Christopher Place Employment Academy, and of the Notre Dame Education Center in Lawrence, Mass.

She traces her vocation to her parents, who adopted numerous children, to the extent that her household sometimes grew overnight.

“They had a tremendous influence,” she said. “It was the kind where you were a living witness, how they raised our family. That left an impression on my soul. It shaped my view of community and what it meant to the Gospel, to see in everyone the face of God and to know that everyone is your sister and brother. It wasn’t words on a paper - I lived it.”

Sister Gwynette graduated from Mercy High School in Baltimore and Frostburg State University, then earned a master’s degree from Howard University.

Attending a program for lay adults at the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur motherhouse in Ilchester, she was inspired by the since-deceased Sister Kathleen Mary O’Brien. The excitement she felt in her heart and soul led Sister Gwynette to believe she was intended for the religious life.

“I listened to what they were doing in their lifestyles and in their ministries,” she said. “It was all so exciting, and it spoke to me.”