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JOINT OF ONENESS UPDATE: Archives

Preserving and telling the Mercy story

“Consistency,” “efficiency” and “access” are the watchwords for the implementation phase now in progress at the Mercy Heritage Center, reports Director Kat Oosterhuis. “The Journey of Oneness,” she explains, “is giving a unified direction to the archives function and is facilitating a broader reach for the Mercy story.” It’s a two-pronged approach of standardizing archival practices and responding more efficiently to inquiries from a broad spectrum of clients.

As most people are aware, the archival collections of all the Mercy congregations that came together as Institute in 1991 are now housed in Belmont, North Carolina, at the Mercy Heritage Center. What may come as a surprise is the fact that records and archival materials being created by the six Institute Communities (now and since 1991) are housed in their diversely located administrative offices. Coming to consistency of standards, policies, cataloging, services and so on across all of these locations is a major challenge of the archives implementation phase. This work is expected to take at least 18 months and, according to Kat, is foundational for efficiently making “the richness of our collection available to others.”

Those “others” are internal and external seekers of access to historical information lodged in the archives. “What do we know about race relations within the Sisters of Mercy and Mercy ministries?” ask Institute staff members who are working on a project for Black Catholic History Month in November. “Can you help us discover data and photos as we prepare for a significant anniversary?” asks a staffer at a Mercy ministry. “Do you have anything on holistic healing practices of sisters who came from Ireland?” asks an anthropologist. “What about materials related to maintaining a herd of dairy cows?” asks a museum curator mounting an exhibit on this topic. Such are the requests—resulting, in these cases, in productive searches—made of an Institute archivist!
Meanwhile, the Institute’s archival collection continues to grow. “We want to tell the broad story of Mercy, of the lives and contributions of the sisters,” Kat emphasizes. “That reaches well beyond governmental and legal and board materials.”

A call last year for works of art by sisters brought in some 500 pieces. A similar call for music, both compositions and performances, is coming soon, facilitated by Sister Cynthia Serjak, herself a composer.

With growing interest in women religious on the part of researchers and scholars, archives staff are conducting oral history interviews, offering records management training to Mercy-related ministries, and preparing an historical exhibit on the Sisters of Mercy in Guam, even as they work on internal operational consistency to make the whole Mercy collection a unified and accessible resource for inquirers.

The Institute archives at the Mercy Heritage Center in Belmont and in the several Communities are rooted in the dedicated work of sister historians across the decades. Today, the entire collection is stewarded by the Mercy Archives and Records Team (MART) with staff—including five professionally trained and certified archivists—located in Belmont; Omaha, Nebraska; and Merion Station, Pennsylvania.

Photo: On a recent visit to the Mercy Heritage Center, Sister Jackie Moreau (far left) looks at archival materials with, from left, Associate Cristina Piccottini and Sisters Dina Altamiranda, María Masbely del Cid and Sue Wieczynski.

Photo: Sister Mary Charles Cameron is a volunteer at the Mercy Heritage Center.

Credit: Mercy Heritage Center