

Sister Carole is living the dream

WV Institute for Spirituality is her instrument

By Joyce Bibey

As she stands in the parlor of a retreat house which graces Virginia Street in Charleston, Sister Carole Riley bids farewell to folks she hopes are leaving with the same feeling as leaving home and instantly longing for an opportunity to “come ‘home again — a place of welcome, peace, acceptance, freedom to be who God made me to be in this moment.”

Sister Carole of the Sisters of Divine Providence congregation is the Spiritual Director of the main campus for the West Virginia Institute for Spirituality that sits just a block away from the West Virginia State Capitol and Governor’s Mansion. Surrounded by grand evergreens and lush gardens, the retreat and training center for WVIS offers an extensive list of spiritual development, healing, and growth for individuals and groups in a compassionate Christ-centered environment.

The petite, perfectly groomed white-haired religious sister with a heartwarming smile may at first glance seem like an ordinary sweet servant of God but spend an hour with her and one will

walk away with a sense of being in the presence of a dynamic fisher of souls—someone who genuinely wants to bring out the best in everyone with a little humor lovingly woven into the process.

When she is not in retreat mode, good luck keeping up with her.

There isn’t much Sister Carole hasn’t coordinated at the center. Whether it be helping to create the countless reflection booklets, sabbatical programs, days of prayer, spiritual director trainings, directed silent retreats, or programs to support single

mothers, Sister Carole is able to carry the brunt of the load with a bit a grace and a lot of wisdom. She and WVIS are now affiliated with Graduate Theological Foundation in the areas of spiritual direction and sacred music teaching on the Master’s and Doctoral levels. She holds several degrees in music education and piano performance from Duquesne University including a Bachelor’s, Master’s, and Doctorate. She is also a licensed professional counselor and an AAPC-Fellow.

It was Bishop Joseph



Courtesy Photo

The stately retreat house for the West Virginia Institute for Spirituality sits on Virginia Street in Charleston.

Hodges who encouraged Sister Carole to take this journey several decades ago to Central West Virginia. Although she admits it was not necessarily because of her expertise in scripture, theology, or Church teachings, it was because she could drive a truck, she shared with a laugh.

It’s true the late bishop was looking for a group of three religious sisters to work in Charleston for the Catholic schools there and eventually help with a spiritual direction retreat center that may have otherwise closed its doors. The bishop had provided a

truck to haul everything that was needed in the capitol city. Sister Carole was happy to go on the adventure. She was going to get to teach music—her love and area of expertise—at Charleston Catholic High School.

Bishop Hodges served the diocese from 1962 until his death in 1985 – the years when the Second Vatican Council’s focus on evangelization was emphasized. Bishop Hodges focused heavily on evangelization in the diocese by implementing a formalized office to introduce and run parish renewal programs, Teens Encounter Christ retreats, Cursillo, Marriage Encounters, and many more pastoral and lay leadership programs throughout the diocese.

The WVIS compliments his vision, Sister Carole said. The retreat center is now her main focus. She said it is her greatest joy to bring people of all faiths into a conversation about God as a means to hope and peace.

“We nurture the mind, body, and soul through scripture and reflection to obtain personal peace, healing, and

mindfulness,” she said.

Sister Carole and her colleagues at the institute host retreats for parish councils, married couples, and individuals. If you check out the organization’s website at wvis.org you will see Sister Carole’s efforts are reinforced by a team of more than two dozen other spiritual directors and supervisors positioned across the state.

For those who come for a spiritual journey she said her job is to, “help them stay ‘in and of’ the world God desires for them.”

“All of our work is so important to us,” she said. “It would be unrealistic to think after attending a retreat you stay on a spiritual mountaintop for good. What you learn at the retreat must be lived out, worked out, fine-tuned, and applied in the tests and trials of daily life.

“Spiritual practices of the retreat can be helpful, but even Jesus did not ‘live on the mountaintop,’” she said.

Before any individual or group comes to the West Virginia Institute of Spirituality Sister Carole prays.

“I pray that God’s love surrounds, protects, guides, and enables the person coming to be open to God’s presence and I pray that I and all those at (WVIS) are collaborative with what God is doing in and for this person,” she said.

If you would have told her younger self how many hundreds if not thousands of people, she would inspire through her calling to serve she wouldn’t have believed it, she said.

As a young novice Sister Carole set a goal for herself “to work and be a saint who made a difference in people’s lives, bringing them closer to Christ and heaven.”

Those who meet her confidently say she is living the dream.



Sister Carole Riley



Courtesy Photo

A group of spiritual directors gather at the West Virginia Institute for Spirituality.

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