

9-13-2021

Their Voice, Their Vocation: Religious Sisters in Health Care

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Shreffler, Stephanie, "Their Voice, Their Vocation: Religious Sisters in Health Care" (2021). *University Libraries Blog Archive*. 412.

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Their Voice, Their Vocation: Religious Sisters in Health Care

By Stephanie Shreffler

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted society's debt to doctors, nurses and other health care workers. In order to document and share this important work on the front lines, the University of Dayton Libraries recently acquired a new digital collection of 18 oral histories that tell the stories of religious sisters, priests and laypeople who have worked in Catholic health care.

The oral histories, part of the U.S. Catholic Special Collection and [available for download or listening on eCommons](#), were conducted by Patricia “Patti” Ringos Beach, an oncology and palliative care clinical nurse specialist, and Beth E. Heinzeroth White, a pediatric clinical nurse specialist, from late 2019 to mid-2020. The interviewees tell fascinating stories about how Catholic health care has changed from the mid-20th century to the present; the discernment process for those entering religious life; and what Catholic health care will look like in the future as the number of religious brothers and sisters declines. The oral histories also include details about how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the lives of the interviewees.

Beach and White answered some interview questions of their own about their goals for the project and what they learned from the sisters:

The project *Religious Sisters in Health Care: The Conspicuous Love of Jesus* looks to the past to define the present and provide a lens to the future. The words of the sisters bring to the bedside caregiver an appreciation of the solid foundation the sisters laid for ongoing ministry and how our own healing ministry can be purposefully kept alive for each and every person under our care.

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Shreffler: Tell me about your own work in health care.

Beach and White: We are both advanced practice nurses who worked as clinical nurse specialists. (Beth specialized in pediatrics and palliative care, Patti in oncology and palliative care.)

Shreffler: How did you get the idea for this project?

Beach and White: It started with a question: “What will happen to Catholic health care when the sisters are no longer around?”

It was late in our careers that we asked this question. Perhaps it was because we were busy nursing. We were looking at patients and standards of quality care and not thinking of the bigger picture. Little time was spent reflecting upon the mission of Catholic health care. We were not in administrative or managerial positions, so using the mission of Catholic health care as an essential element of health system decisions was not part of our regular work experience. Slowly — and then all of a sudden — it became apparent to us that there were no more sisters in our facilities. Then, from our staff nurse peers, we heard the comment, “Jesus has left the building.” We were stunned. The sense of our patient care being different because we practiced in Catholic institutions suddenly was not so obvious.

We invited a convenience sample through known contacts to participate in this project. The target population was women from religious orders whose charism specifically identifies health care as part of their mission or whose individual work takes place within Catholic health care. Each sister had extensive experience in the ministry of Catholic health care. Their roles ranged from nurses to chaplains to administrators.

In addition, we also interviewed several people who were not religious sisters but active in Catholic health care today.

fieldwork, publishing and professional service. His impact is beyond measure, writes colleague Ryan McEwan.

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Shreffler: How are you hoping to present this information yourselves? Are you working on an article or a book, for example?

Beach and White: We have one article from this work, “Our Search for Meaning: Religious Sisters in Health Care; The Conspicuous Love of Jesus,” scheduled for publication in the *Journal of Christian Nursing* in 2022.

One of our major goals was to make these rich interviews with formidable and forward-thinking women accessible to the general public. We are very appreciative of the University of Dayton for their efforts and partnership.

Shreffler: Do you have other publications or research projects you’d like to share with our readers?

Beach and White: We are currently working on some fiction books to introduce nursing to younger readers. Our goals are to illustrate the satisfaction and difficulties associated with this career choice.

We have published several articles in the nursing literature related to palliative care, pediatrics and oncology. We are also co-authors of two award-winning books:

- *In the Shadows: How to Care for Your Seriously Ill Adult Child* (2013, Hygeia Media/The Oncology Nursing Society) — *American Journal of Nursing* 2013 Book of the Year (consumer health category).
- *Caps, Capes and Caring: The Legacy of Diploma Nursing Schools in Toledo* (2018, University of Toledo Press) — 2018 Best Local History Book, Bowling Green State University Center for Archival Collections.

Shreffler: How did COVID-19 affect your interview process?

Beach and White: Very dramatically as you might expect. After face-to-face interviews in early 2020, our plan to sit down and meet with the sisters was changed to Zoom or phone interviews. We are very grateful for the technology that allowed the project to continue to completion

because, as you can imagine, the advanced age of the sisters made significant delays extremely problematic. In fact, significant delays could have resulted in much lost information. So I guess we learned to adapt and adjust and to not put things off.

***Shreffler:** What was the most interesting or meaningful thing you learned from the oral histories?*

Beach and White: Probably one of the strongest takeaways from these oral histories is to always look forward. Religious sisters in health care did not waste much time on what they did not have or could not change or even their past accomplishments; they always looked to the future. They left a legacy and a plan for Catholic health care to survive and thrive, although it definitely looks different in the 21st century. Their advice was to “Let God do the worrying.”

The other very strong message was one of service. They continually asked, “What needs to be done?” “How can I help?” And they never forgot the poor and underserved. Theirs was the continuation of the ministry of Jesus Christ in every sense.”

BROWSE AND LISTEN

Browse the [collection on eCommons](#). If you have any questions about the oral histories or are interested in using other items in the U.S. Catholic Special Collection, please contact Stephanie Shreffler at sshreffler1@udayton.edu.

— *Stephanie Shreffler is an associate professor in the University Libraries and the collections librarian and archivist for the U.S. Catholic Special Collection.*

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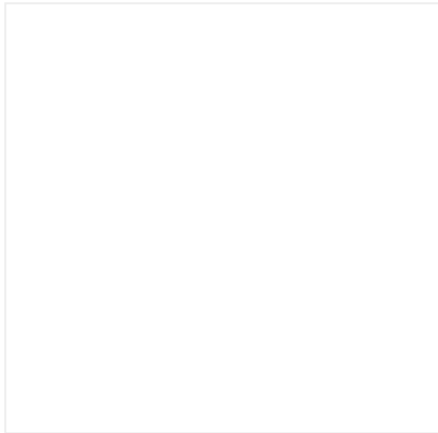
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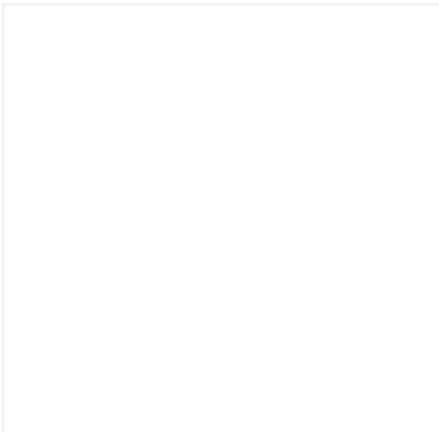
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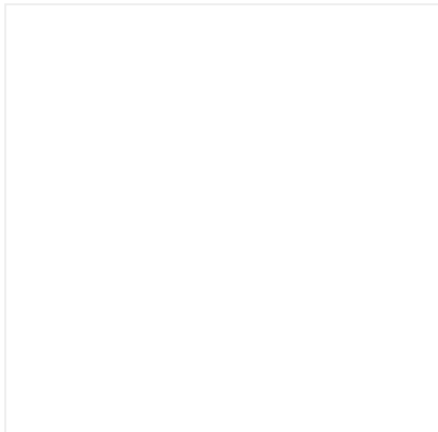
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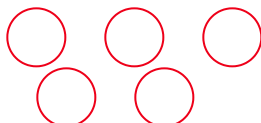
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