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## A Life of Education, Care, Service

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## A Life of Education, Care, Service

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Sister Rosemary Wack, S.N.D. de N., remembers vividly the night in 1962 when she found out she'd be eligible to work in her order's African missions.

"I immediately volunteered to go to the Congo," said Wack, a 1958 secondary education graduate and this year's recipient of the National Alumni Association's Christian Service Award.

It was the start of 40 years of missionary work, most of it in Africa, first in education and administration, then later in nursing.

Wack, known as Sister Mary Immaculata at UD, didn't get to Africa immediately; noting her interest in the missions, her order's general chapter saw leadership potential in the 34-year-old nun and elected her a general councilor, a post for which she was not yet of age. She soon received a special indult from the pope and took her seat on the council in Rome in 1963.

In 1964, her first trip to Africa steeled her conviction: Africa was where she was called. She received a six-month assignment in Kenya to set up the order's new missions there and committed to relocating there after her term on the council was complete. By the time she returned in 1969, her order and several others in the area were well-established; hundreds of secondary schools were opening throughout Kenya, and programs were emerging to train new teachers. Wack took a job as a lecturer in teacher education at Kenyatta University in Nairobi, Kenya. After 10 years, her students began to return as faculty, and from 1965 to 1978, the number of secondary schools in Kenya had grown from four to more than 1,800.

"I found I was teaching alongside those I had taught, and I realized I was no longer needed in this way," Wack said. "That night, at age 50, I decided to become a nurse."

So began her second career. She enrolled at Sinclair Community College in Dayton and became a registered nurse. It seemed providential, she said, studying nursing at Sinclair, built on the very grounds of the parish school of her childhood - Sacred Heart in downtown Dayton.

Quoting from T.S. Eliot's "The Four Quartets," she noted her circular path:

What we call the beginning is often the end

And to make an end is to make a beginning.

The end is where we start from.

In 1994, after caring for her family and working several years in Appalachia, she returned to Africa — Zimbabwe — to minister to AIDS patients, teach AIDS prevention and train nurses in a land that desperately needed them. There, she learned a new facet of care: sitting with the dying. At the height of Zimbabwe's AIDS epidemic, when a third of the population was infected with HIV, it wasn't uncommon, she said, to sit with dying mothers as their babies were lifted from the breast.

"Hundreds," she said. "I've been with hundreds of people as they died."

It's a ministry she continues today in Cincinnati at Mount Notre Dame, where she moved in 2002.

"It's a thin place, the Celtic say, between here and the eternal," she said. "To be with someone as they pass into eternal life - it is a privilege."

Her mission is still one of service. Fit, able and spry as she approaches her 80th birthday, she drives her sisters and other residents to medical appointments, and she pushes a wheelchair, opens a door and lends a hand instinctively when she sees a need. But she shuns the notion that her work is worthy of such honor.

"There isn't a person here who hasn't dedicated her life to Christian service," she said. "I cannot understand why I was selected."

