

Sharing Our Marianist Stories, Episode 48 Transcript Bergamo - A Place to Come Home (with Kelli Kinnear)

00:00 - Kelli Kinnear

I am a graduate of the University of Dayton where I met my husband, and two of our three sons are also UD graduates. So, we are definitely a Flyer family and a part of the Marianist family. My mom worked at UD for many years, which is what brought me to choose UD. I had professors who were Marianists, and my mom had friends who were Marianist brothers. Fr. Jim Heft comes to mind. His famous 10:00 AM Masses at the UD Chapel, if I could get to that Mass, that was the highlight. We were always in awe because he memorized the gospel, and his homilies were amazing. So, that began my introduction into the family of the Marianists.

00:47 - Mike Bennett

In June 2024, Kelli Kinnear began her new role as Executive Director of the Bergamo Center for Lifelong Learning after 32 years of working at Chaminade Julianne High School. It's clear she has deep roots in the Marianist family.

01:03 - Kelli Kinnear

When I began at UD, I knew I wanted to work with youth, and originally, I thought maybe that was youth ministry. And, of course, there wasn't a major that worked well with that. And I was advised, "How about just choosing education, and then, you have that background?" And so, I majored in education with religion and English concentrations, and I student-taught English at Chaminade Julianne. When I was graduating, there was an opening for a full-time religion teacher at CJ, and that's how I began my career at CJ right out of UD, continuing in the Marianist world. I taught religion full-time for a number of years. My career path and ministry at CJ evolved through the years, eventually into part-time religion teacher and part-time Assistant Director of Community Service.

01:55 - Kelli Kinnear

Back in the 90s, the Community Service department at CJ was just beginning, and it was separate from the Campus Ministry department, and I became Assistant Director of Community Service. As the Director moved on, that full-time position became open, Bro. Ed Brink – who is another Marianist brother who is very dear to me and who I admire greatly – he happened to be the principal at CJ at the time. He really pushed me, persuaded me, encouraged me to take on the full-time Director role of the Community Service Program. I was fighting against it a little bit because I remember thinking, "Gosh, do I take this? Then, I'll probably never go back to the classroom." End of story, I did end up taking it, and I never really did go back into traditional classroom role. So, my prediction was right. But it's all good because as my career and ministry evolved at CJ, it was all wonderful. I was Director of Community Service for a number of years. And eventually, the Community Service and Campus Ministry departments at CJ merged, and my role eventually became Director of Ministry and Service. And that is the role I had for the last 16 years at CJ. So, I had been at CJ for a total of 32 years.

03:08 - Mike Bennett

32 years, that's quite a tenure. I'm sure you have many stories to share. I'm curious if there are ways you really saw the Marianist Charism embodied that really stick out to you as concrete examples of the Marianist Charism in action at CJ.

03:28 - Kelli Kinnear

Sure. One of the biggest things that comes to mind is CJ's community, which is very important, and the Marianist family and part of the charism. People truly care for one another. I'll start with our students: what a wonderful student body we have! Students from every zip code around Dayton, students diverse in ethnicity and socioeconomic areas, and how they learn, and the diversity of our students is wonderful and the community of students. That all of our students can come together at CJ in one place and be a family. And part of what makes that community so special is the faculty and staff: a wonderful, caring, compassionate community of men and women who are faith-centered and who deeply care about the students that they serve. People who will spend countless hours outside of the school day to serve the students, whether it be tutoring or coaching, volunteering to go on a mission trip, volunteering to go on a Kairos retreat. It is the faith-centered community that makes CJ special. And I'll add to that, too, the commitment to service and justice, which is very much a part of the Marianist Charism.

04:36 – Kelli Kinnear

In my previous role as Director of Ministry and Service, I would try and give my heart and soul to nurturing that piece of service and justice, to bring that to our students, and to try and instill that in our students. So that, when they graduated, they were people of service and justice that would go out and live that beyond the halls of CJ, that it just became a part of who they were. Many times, through the years, I would see students who continued their service even after the requirements. Some of them were so impacted that their career choices were defined by their service experiences at CJ. Those were also amazingly graced moments for me to see that, “Okay, we're doing something right at CJ.” It's not just about students going out and being successful in the world and making lots of money and having amazing careers. Which, that's a fine thing, and hopefully some of them will. But the number of our students who we see going out and living their faith and working for justice and continuing in their service.

05:39 – Kelli Kinnear

In hindsight I'm able to see how I was touched or formed, but maybe [in] the moment, I wasn't aware. I think another influential Marianist in my early years at CJ was Fr. Chris Whitman, who was the Director of Campus Ministry. He had an influence on me as someone I admired and respected, [a] person of deep faith and commitment to justice. It's people, as I look back in hindsight, who touched me, experiences that touched me. One of my proudest things that I left at CJ was creating the Urban Plunge retreat and mission trips. And looking back, our first Urban Plunge retreats were at a Marianist community in Cincinnati in Over-the-Rhine. And those brothers, those experiences had a great influence in me that, at the time, I didn't realize.

[06:31 – *Marianist Brothers singing the Salve Regina*]

06:39 - Kelli Kinnear

The Marianist Charism has had an incredible impact on my personal life and my faith life. Being at UD and then CJ and now Bergamo, the Marianists and their care for all people, their inclusiveness, their openness, their passion in their work and their commitment to social justice. All of those things have shaped me and helped me to become a better person and helped me to continue to strive to be a more faithful person and to grow in my faith. To be reminded at the place where I am working, where I'm doing ministry, that what Jesus came here and was truly about. To love others, to teach us to love, and through the witness of

Mary. All of those things have nurtured my faith and helped me to become the person that I am and to strive to live that out in how I treat others, in how I do my ministry, in how I welcome others, in how I am inclusive towards others.

07:41 - Kelli Kinnear

I had been at CJ for a total of 32 years, but it wasn't like I was ever stagnant in what I did there, and that kept it fresh and new. And, of course, you have new groups of students every year that always keep you fresh and new. But after 32 years, I was discerning that maybe it's time for a new change, new adventure, a new ministry. And our three boys had all graduated from CJ by that time, and [it] just became a time in my life where I thought maybe it's time to take a new direction.

08:13 - Mike Bennett

That new adventure included a call to bring her ministerial and educational experience, as well as her commitment to the Marianist Charism, to her new role as Director of Bergamo. What are some of the things you're excited about at Bergamo?

08:26 - Kelli Kinnear

There are actually a lot of things I'm excited about. First of all, on a very basic level, I'm excited that I was able to continue working for and with the Marianists. That is exciting to me and it feels like I'm still home. I'm at a good place in Bergamo. I'm not sure how many retreats I chaperoned or directed at Bergamo Center. So, that is also like coming home to me. So, just the path that led me here and how everything came into place is pretty amazing. I drive into work, and I pray in the car. That's one of my places of prayer. And oftentimes in the morning I'm saying, "Thank you. Thank you, God, that I'm going where I'm going, that I am driving to Bergamo for my new job." So, it's just been a great joy that I am here, and that God has brought me here. I'm excited that I will get to welcome the guests that we have, and that I would get to see and reconnect with people from all over the Marianist world who I've known here or there.

09:29 - Kelli Kinnear

It's exciting that I still get to work with youth and young adults, and older adults as well. Now, in terms of the future, I do have some goals. One of the goals is around marketing. I want others to know what an amazing retreat center we are and all that we have to offer. So, that if a group has never thought about coming to Bergamo and staying at Bergamo, they will consider it. Social media, that's one of my goals, and part of marketing and increasing that awareness of Bergamo, so we can share our story that way. I've also envisioned some future Tik Toks with our young adult facilitators who help lead our junior retreats. So, bringing in marketing through social media and a newsletter, to let people know what's coming up the pike. We're going to include a piece that's about the faces of Bergamo. So, every newsletter, you'll get to learn about the people behind Bergamo, whether it be a staff member, a board member, or one of our spiritual directors. There'll be like a little mini retreat with a prayer and a quote. And some pictures or we'll highlight some of the amazing groups that are coming and staying at Bergamo.

10:39 - Kelli Kinnear

We're a retreat center, so hospitality is very important so that our guests feel welcomed and that they feel special, that they walk into a clean, inviting, lovely space. But they also get to enjoy nourishing, delicious meals. And if you are getting away for a weekend retreat or a couple day retreat, you want to be served a lovely meal. We have been working closely with

our food service provider in enhancing our meal selections and options, and providing delicious food for our guests. Specifically, just for Bergamo, some of the food will be locally sourced. So, that's another area we're working to improve on.

11:28 - Kelli Kinnear

Another excitement that I have is development. I would like to invite others to join in our mission to provide a spiritual place of rest, rejuvenation, peace, a place that is faith-centered through our Catholic Marianist faith, and I want to invite others to join in our mission by considering a gift to Bergamo so that we can continue programming, but be able to expand on it and enhance what we already do well, to do more creative, amazing things with the gifts of our friends and future donors. I invite all of the listeners to spread the word about Bergamo, to like us on Facebook and follow us on Instagram, to get the word out about us so that others who might not have considered us would maybe consider coming to stay with us and enjoy the wonderful things that we offer. And if you had never before considered a gift to Bergamo, I invite you to consider joining in our mission by giving us a gift.

12:37 - Kelli Kinnear

Our goal is to keep our retreat center affordable, so we don't want to charge prices that feel unattainable. In order to do that, to help our revenue source, gifts to Bergamo are deeply appreciated and well used to make it the best possible experience that they can get when they come to a retreat center. We are a nonprofit, and like other nonprofits, we have to rely on revenue sources that are beyond just the paying guest to be able to maintain and to grow and prosper in the ways of being a wonderful, hospitable, welcoming retreat center that has the best possible amenities that we would be able to offer. We have people from all over the country that come and stay with us, and we want them to leave feeling like they were at a special place. So, if you go to our website, www.bergamocenter.org, there is a link where you can click to contact us. There's also a donate link money.

13:42 - Mike Bennett

Can you talk about some of those ways that people might engage with or utilize Bergamo, aside from schools and churches that take groups there?

13:50 - Kelli Kinnear

If there are groups or organizations that want a space for a daylong meeting, seminar or retreat, Bergamo is a place that they should consider. We have large meeting spaces and multiple small group spaces for breakout sessions. I think one example that comes to mind, UD's English department had their opening department meeting at Bergamo. So, it offers a place where people can get away to just be in a new space for a day. Along with the amenities and the great space we have inside our facility, we are on the grounds of Mount St. John. We have walking paths, our beautiful grotto, the woods, a prayer labyrinth, just amazing spaces to get out and walk. So, where we are located is also an incredible plus for groups that want to come and stay, whether they're here for a retreat or a one day meeting or conference. We offer a lot.

14:52 - Mike Bennett

Before we hear Kelli's response to our concluding question, I offer a word of thanks for listening to this episode of *Sharing Our Marianist Stories*, a production of the North American Center for Marianist Studies in Dayton, Ohio. I'm Mike Bennett, Media Administrator for NACMS. Make sure to subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts, follow us on social media @ThisIsNACMS, and utilize the resources on our website at

www.nacms.org. And now, let's hear Kelli's response to our concluding question. We know the Marianist founders corresponded through letter writing. so, if you were going to write anyone, dead or alive –

15:38 – Kelli Kinnear

My goodness!

15:39 – Mike Bennett

- a letter and be guaranteed a response, who would you write to, and what would be the topic?

15:43 - Kelli Kinnear

Oh, wow! If I'm guaranteed a response, I would write to Pope Francis. First of all, I would invite him to come to Bergamo to lead a retreat. And I would ask a lot of things: where he gets the courage to do what he does, and how he maintains his great faith and his wisdom, and what wisdom he would have to share with me that helps keep him going and doing what he's doing in the midst of sometimes difficult criticism and difficult things going on in our world.

16:19 - Mike Bennett

Wow. I'm excited to have him here.

16:22 – Kelli Kinnear

Me too! I can't wait!

16:24 – Mike Bennett

I'm just imagining the grounds being covered by tents, you know? Not that that's allowed, but I imagine for that event, we would have some exceptions.

16:35 – Kelli Kinnear

Well, an exception for Pope Francis.

16:38 – Mike Bennett

Right, exactly!