



Visitation School

VISION

annual report 2020-21

the things they carried

By Christina Capecchi Ries '00

Sisters' everyday items and religious artifacts to be archived and shared

Deep in the monastery, in what was once called The White Wardrobe room, Colleen Hansen is hard at work. Surveying and sorting, cataloging and curating, the mom of three has been quietly plugging along on a hidden project for the Visitation Sisters: creating an archive system of the belongings they left behind.

She passes a stack of hardcover yearbooks and pauses. "There are days I'll find myself reading one for an hour," she says.

Here, among tall wood cabinets that once held the Sisters' habits, Colleen is surrounded by a massive amount of materials – photos, trophies, books, floppy disks. Slowly but surely, she is making sense of them, putting each one in its place to create comprehensive archives.

She opens the drawers behind her desk, gingerly opening a photo album with century-old black-and-white pictures, clear and evocative.

"This is one of my favorites," she says, pointing to an image of a habited Sister standing outside the Fairmont building, flanked by grinning students with wavy bobs.

Ever humble, the Sisters rarely posed in pictures or gave themselves credit for their art and creative work. As a result, there were fewer bread crumbs left behind for an archivist.

Sister Jane Margaret Cullinan with an unidentified class.

Colleen Hansen



Colleen's mind spans the decades, reaching for a name. "I think this was Sister Jane Margaret Cullinan."

In the thoughtful planning that went into the Sisters' departure from campus, it was decided to create an archive of their materials. The plan was so important they secured funding for a new position, an archivist that would operate within the school.

Colleen filled the role in 2019, taking on the largest archival project of her career.

Colleen's leadership came at a pivotal time, said Sister Mary Frances Reis. "When Archbishop Hebda commissioned me to assist him in helping the last three Sisters remaining at Mendota Visitation in their transition, we had many challenges in terms of discerning new living arrangements for each Sister, the transfer of leadership in the school to the laity and the use of the monastery building itself. We decided we needed an archivist to help us to preserve 150 years of rich history, beginning with the arrival of the Sisters in 1873."

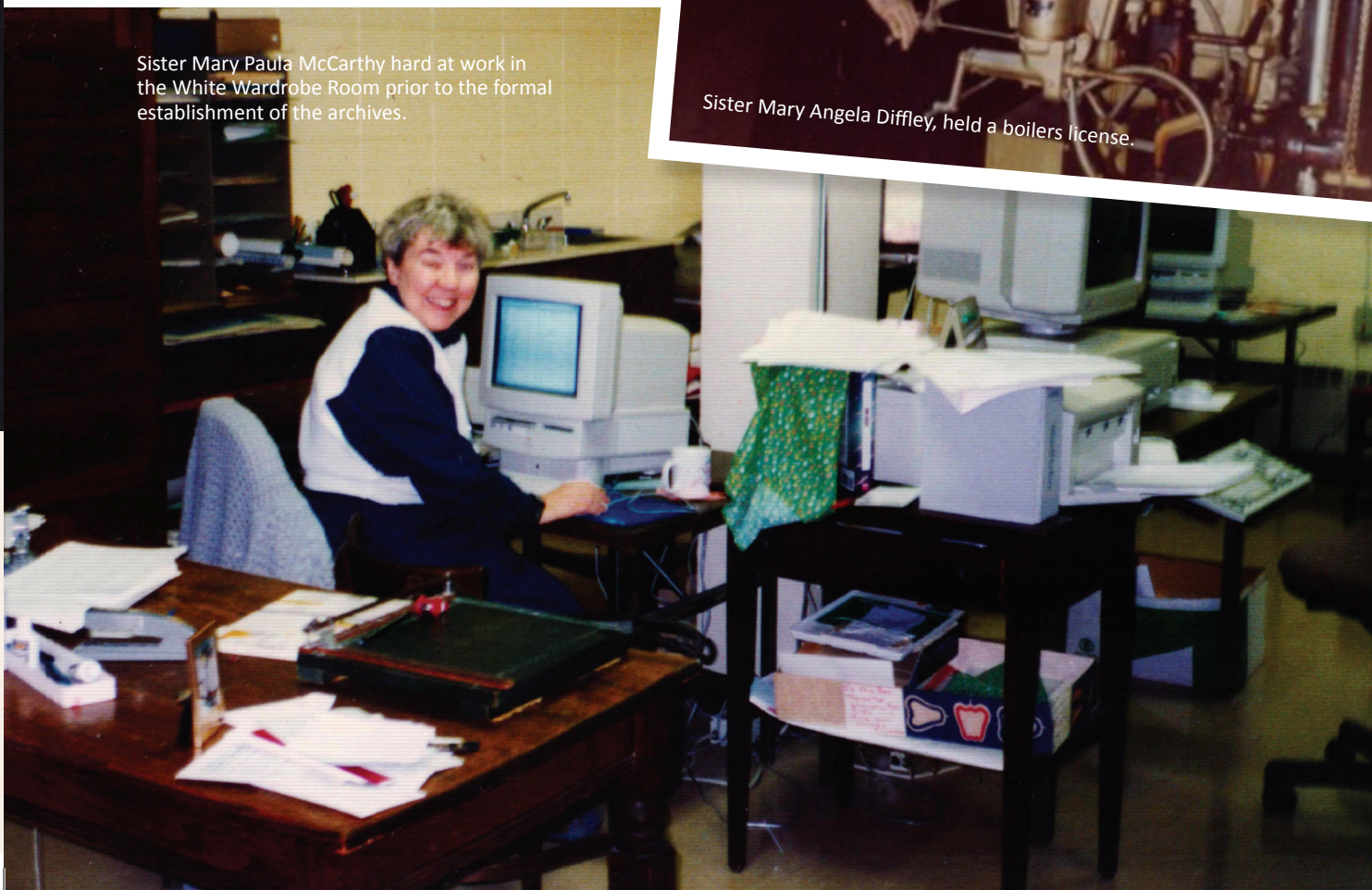
Hiring Colleen was the right move. "Colleen Hansen has been sheer gift to Visitation," Sister

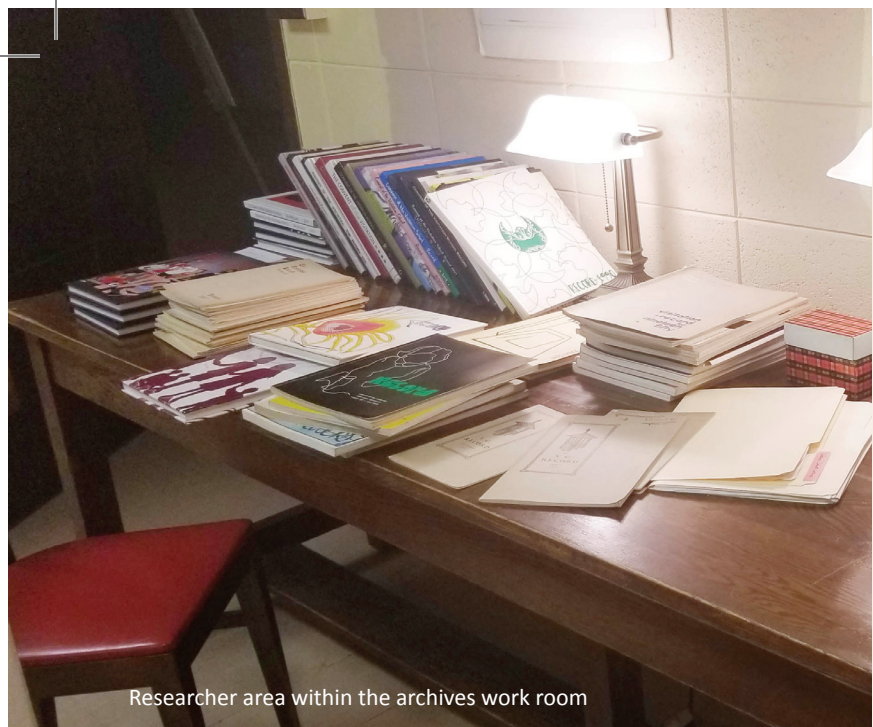
Mary Frances Reis said. "She came already formed in Salesian spirituality without even knowing it herself! Her gentle, humble, kind spirit is a treasure. Not only does she have all the credentials for this job, she realizes it is the power of Story that ultimately carries the spirit of the Visitation."

When Colleen started the job, the Sisters' belongings had already been sifted through by their dear friend Helen Wilkie, who spent hours determining what could be donated and what should be saved. The amount saved was staggering. It ranges from a large collection of relics to piles of lovingly rendered needlework and calligraphy.

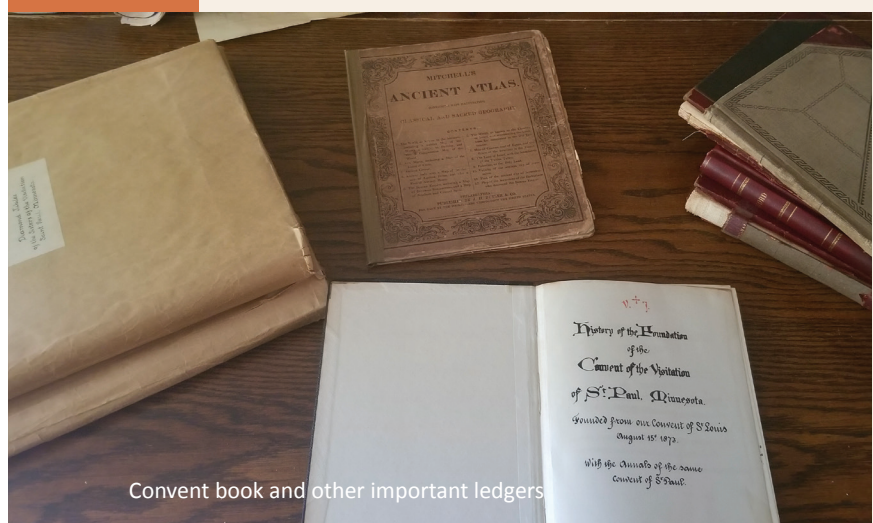
Sister Mary Paula McCarthy hard at work in the White Wardrobe Room prior to the formal establishment of the archives.

Sister Mary Angela Diffley, held a boilers license.





Researcher area within the archives work room



Convent book and other important ledgers

"It's central to the Sisters' wishes that we understand their way of life, that we know how to live before God with humility and gentleness," said Anne Williams, director of Salesian Studies. "To have Colleen put evidence to that, collecting and preserving those stories – it feels like putting hands and feet on the things that matter."

Those things include an array of religious artifacts – rosaries, crucifixes, missals, hymnals, liturgical files – and items used for daily living – silverware, antique furniture, grandfathers' clocks, reams of fabric.

The habits themselves tell a story. They were custom-made for each Sister upon profession. A laundry number was stitched inside each habit beside a red cross.

"Sister Mary Regina was so little yet so fierce," Colleen says.

So far, Colleen has created 100 archival boxes – and has dozens more to go. She's currently archiving the architectural plans for past buildings that served as a monastery and school. The Sisters' latest residence was in Mendota Heights. They settled into the 40,570-square foot monastery attached to the school in 1966, when the Sisters numbered 45.

The archivist position was built on the need to create a bridge for the Sisters to make their lives and community existence accessible for years to come. They always hoped the work begun by their beloved historian Sister Mary Paula McCarthy would one day be handed forward to the lay people.

Sister Mary Paula's vast knowledge was paired with her keen intuition that the Sisters' belongings ought to be saved. Both proved vital.

"The archives started with Sister Mary Gabriel Walls, who basically just saved things," Sister Mary Paula said. "Sister Mary Regina McCabe also kept a lot of items of importance. When she became superior and after our move to Mendota Heights, she asked me to take on the role of official archivist."

Other communities started to do the same. Sister Mary Paula collaborated with her counterparts in communities in St. Louis and Rock Island, Ill. This relationship became especially important as VHM monasteries began to close and the records of their histories needed to find new homes. Today, Colleen has a similar relationship with her counterparts at St. Louis Visitation and Georgetown Visitation.

Colleen feels indebted to Sister Mary Paula for being so generous with her time and wisdom. Consulting Sister Mary Paula three times a month via Zoom is an enormous help, Colleen said. "Her knowledge of Visitation is priceless."

Sister Mary Frances Reis agreed. "Sister Mary Paula McCarthy is our walking archive. We're grateful she Zooms with Colleen and offers such valuable input. The living legacy of the Sisters will live on! For this we are so grateful."



Building plans

Personal connections

Sister Mary Frances and the other Visitation Sisters in Minneapolis remain apprised of Colleen's work, which occasionally uncovers cherished personal items, such as a Mexican cross given by Sister Katherine Mullin's parents in 1969.

What's remarkable is how connected Colleen now feels to the Sisters whose earthly lives never intersected with hers.

Occasionally, Colleen is struck by a sense that the Holy Spirit is guiding the work. "I feel like I know these people, they're part of my life in some spiritual way," she said. And she calls on them when the moment strikes. "When I had car trouble, I was like, 'Sister Mary Angela, please help me!' She would have known how to fix it. She might've taken out a wrench."

Anne Williams knows that feeling well. "The legacy continues to instruct us," she said. "You find those moments in life where all of a sudden you recognize you're doing something because it's been imparted in you, and you can name it and give it credit and say, 'Thank you, Sister!' or 'Thank you, Sisters!' or 'Thank you, Visitation!'"

The Sisters' archived belongings reveal their daily routines and inner thoughts – from the prayer shawls



Stack of ledgers

they knit to the margin notes they scrolled in old books. The items demonstrate their humility, frugality and faith.

"They did everything with intention and in a Salesian way," Colleen said.

They were often ahead of their times, making sacrifices to procure state-of-the-art science equipment for the students.

The undertaking requires many stages, but Colleen is eager to make the archives accessible to all. She's brainstorming with Vis staff on how to share it in coming years – through programming, displays and social media, among other platforms.

The impact will be profound. "There are many treasures that were sanctified by the sisters," Anne said, "and when you pull them together and view them with fresh eyes, there is such awe."