

## Love in the midst of struggling

Returned missioner Sheila Matthews continues a life of service and accompaniment

| BY PATRICK NORBERTO |



rom an early age, Sheila Matthews knew that she was called to a life of service, accompanying people at the margins of society. A trained hospital nurse, Sheila wanted to work with those who lack access to health care. She considered joining the Peace Corps but ultimately decided against it because "I wanted to be part of a faith-based mission community."

Working in Vermont as part of Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), it shocked her to see that many people with limited means believed they did not have the right to access health care.

Volunteering with a local home health agency, she learned that it is important to remember that "you need to listen to what people want," she says. "We don't come with all the answers."

When Sheila joined Maryknoll Lay Missioners as part of the Class of 1980, it was a great fit. It helped that Sheila's family already had strong ties to the Maryknoll community. Her mother's best friend in college was Maryknoll Sister Betty McDermott, and her sister and brother-in-law introduced her to Maryknoll Father Steve Judd, who told her about Maryknoll Lay Missioners

Sheila considers herself

blessed to have met lay missioner Jean Donovan during orientation. Jean inspired Sheila and the rest of the class with her powerful presence and faith. Only a few weeks later, on Dec. 2, 1980, Jean became one of the four U.S. church women martyred in El Salvador. Forty years later, Sheila continues to draw inspiration from her too-brief encounter with Jean.

As a lay missioner in **Guate-mala**, Sheila worked with an innovative health promoter training program started by Maryknollers for rural villages in the Petén Jungle.

After moving to El Salvador in 1993, Sheila worked with Ann Greig in the soy nutrition program and parish health ministries.

Maryknoll lay missioners, sisters, brothers and priests were true companions on the journey. During her time in mission, both countries suffered through bloody civil wars. Despite the turmoil.

Sheila learned a valuable lesson from the villagers with whom she worked. "They helped me to remember that you can celebrate God's love in the midst of struggling," she recalls.

In 1996, Sheila was called to a new challenge when she was elected to a leadership position with the Maryknoll Mission Association of the Faithful. For the next seven years, she played a pivotal role in molding the association into the present-day Maryknoll Lay Missioners.

Having been in mission for 16 years, Sheila understood better than most the challenges and issues lay missioners face every day. That experience enabled her to support new missioners as they adapted to new languages, foreign cultures and customs, and government structures. Sheila encouraged missioners to listen to local people, "appreciate the fuller picture"

and "learn about the needs of the local communities"

Mari Humphrey, Maryknoll Lay Missioners' director of missions, points to Sheila's kindness, compassion and integrity as her core strengths. "Sheila is very strong with accompanying people in their struggles. She is always present," Marj says. She has also witnessed Sheila's deep and abiding commitment to peace and justice. When violence and unrest surrounded Marj during her mission work in southern Sudan, Sheila comforted and supported her.

In the 15 years since she left Maryknoll Lay Missioners, Sheila has continued a life of service and accompaniment. She cared for both of her elderly parents, when their health was declining. Her mother died in 2005, and her father in 2012. She has also continued to be actively involved with the organi-



zation. In 2006 and 2008, she guided "Friends Across Borders" mission immersion trips to El Salvador for dozens of participants and she continued to give church talks.

Sheila's generous heart has also inspired her to make monthly contributions as a "Companion in Mission" (CIM) sponsor — something she started while still a lay missioner. Today Sheila

is a chaplain and faith community nurse at St. Anne's Hospital, an acute care Catholic hospital in Fall River, Massachusetts, founded by the Dominican Sisters of the Presentation. Working with patients with limited means. Sheila continues to believe.

"It is important that we listen and allow them to find their own voice to express their needs and issues." Sheila is active on her

Shella is active on her parish's social justice committee and is involved with Pax Christi and the National COMPANIONS IN MISSION

Shrine of Our Lady of La Salette. She is also a student at the Boston College Graduate School of Theology and Ministry. Studying Pope Francis' renewal of the mission of the church has led her to reflect on her own time in mission, especially in light of the pope's recent document Ouerida Amazonia.

Sheila is quick to point out that during her time in Guatemala and El Salvador, she learned more from her neighbors than vice versa.

In one Guatemalan village, Sheila accompanied a severely malnourished child to the hospital. As the father and the child boarded Sheila's jeep to head to the hospital, friends and neighbors came to see them off, wishing them well and also contributing money to help with the child's 's medical expenses. They shared what little they had, which consisted mostly of coins. Sheila realized that she was not bringing the girl

to the life-saving treatment at the hospital; their village was sending them. By this act of generosity and compassion, they would accompany the little girl and her family.

"When we help, we do so as a community," says Sheila There is no better definition of mission.

## Patrick Norberto is the Donor Relations Officer of Maryknoll Lav Missioners.

Opposite page, left: Sheila Matthews, with returned missioner Jane Redig and Carmen Che de Caal, on their way to one of the villages in the Petén jungle of Guatemala to hold a clinic with a health promoter (c. 1990). Carmen, an indigenous Q'eqchi' woman, went on to become the director of the health program.

Opposite page, right: Sheila at the Kerigma Quetzal educational center in Poptún, Guatemala, with neighbor kids (c. 1985).

Left: Sheila at St. Anne's Hospital in Fall River, Massachusetts.



## walk with us — become a 'companion in mission'

As a **COMPANION IN MISSION**, you are part of our generous donor family who give financial gifts on a regular, ongoing basis. Your invaluable, continuing support allows us to be reliably present with our neighbors living at the world's margins.

Not only does your donation help cover the expenses sustaining our missioners, you also share a deep bond with them and their communities.



For more information about COMPANIONS IN MISSION, please contact Jepi Rivera at jrivera@mklm.org or (800) 867-2980.

Or visit

mklm.org/become-a-companion-in-mission

10 • VOICES OF COMPASSION • maryknoll lay missioners