

FOLLOWING THE GOOD SHEPHERD

‘It was about a deeper call’

By Mary Beth Bracy
Contributing Writer

PLATTSBURGH – “From the time I was a young child I believed I was called to be a religious,” shared Sister Debbie Blow, a Dominican. “Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena taught me and also taught at schools in the North Country. Sister Stephanie Frennette, OP was a teacher and mentor for me. But, I thought, ‘I can’t be a Sister, I don’t know how to sing and I don’t think that I can sleep in a habit and a veil.’”

Sister Debbie grew up mostly in Ellenburg, the second oldest of 10 children and the oldest girl, and she was in the first graduating class of Northern Adirondack Central High School. Following, she attended Mater Dei College in Ogdensburg for a semester in 1971, but became seriously ill.

“I knew that I needed to stop running from the call,” she said. “Sister Steph came to Mater Dei and brought me back home to my parents’ house.”

Then, Sister Debbie worked as a bookkeeper for Agway Petroleum for about two-and-a-half years.

“I was pumping gas one day and said, ‘this is it, I’m done running, and I need to let my boss know.’ He looked at me and said, ‘if you stay, I will double your salary.’ That was the moment that I knew becoming a sister was right for me. I knew it wasn’t about the money, it was about a deeper call. What drew me to the Dominican Sisters is that they stood for



Sister Debbie Blow, a Dominican Sister of Hope, holds Salome, a malnourished infant at a disability center supported by North Country Mission of Hope.

truth, justice, hospitality, and joy.”

Sister Debbie said her mother was supportive of her decision and continues to serve as a source of inspiration in her life.

“The morning I was leaving to enter the convent my mom had handwritten me a note and wanted to make sure that I didn’t miss it,” she said. “She said I was doing what I always wanted to do, to go and be happy. And, if it doesn’t work out, then we’ll always be here. She taught me devotion to the Rosary and devotion to Mary. I pray the Memorare. My mom died at beginning of Covid with a Rosary in her hands. My mom was faithful to the end. She was a strong, courageous woman who faced a lot of obstacles in her life, a lot of pain and struggles. She continues to guide and inspire me as well. I also have the blessing of being able to care for Sister Steph, giving back for all of the times that she put up with me as a student.”

Sister Debbie attended an intercommunity Do-

minican novitiate in Dover, Massachusetts, on January 12, 1974. In 1978, Sister Debbie received her bachelor’s degree from Providence College, and in 1984 she earned her master’s degree from St. Michael’s College. Sister Debbie was awarded an honorary humanities doctorate from Providence College in 2009.

Initially, Sister Debbie was sent to Plattsburgh to teach at St. Peter’s. She later became vice-principal and principal. After St. Peter’s, she worked at Seton Catholic as a campus minister and Scripture teacher.

Then, there was a hurricane in Nicaragua. A family who went to St. Peter’s and attended Seton at the time was from there.

“When I first went over to Nicaragua, I didn’t think of it as founding the mission,” Sister Debbie said. “I thought of it as doing the right thing, not a long time commitment. I brought a student who I was told was going to be trouble. As we were coming down the mountain in an old rickety bus, I was

sitting with this kid and he said ‘Sister you know what the greatest sin would be? If we never came back.’ It was at that moment that I knew it couldn’t just be a one and done. We would never be empowering them or serving them in the way that they need to be served.”

So, Sister Debbie sat down with Yamilette Flores and Eve McGill, and North Country Mission of Hope was born. Sister Debbie still operates Mission of Hope today. That was 75 trips ago.

“I am still deathly afraid of flying, don’t like the heat, spiders or snakes,” she said. “That’s when you know that you’re being sustained, responding to a personal call by something greater than yourself. My ministry and vocation are intertwined.”

In 1995, when communities were merging due to dwindling numbers of sisters, the Vatican permitted her order to revolve in a new congregation – Dominican Sisters of Hope.

At one point in her early 40s, Sister Debbie had breast cancer.

“I struggled if God was calling me to stay in the religious life,” she said. My greatest sacrifice is not having my own children. My greatest joy is not having my own children, so that I’m not restricted. I was able to see all the kids I’ve ever taught or encountered differently.”

Sister Debbie encouraged anyone who is considering a vocation to religious life to explore the calling and learn more.

“I encourage those who

are discerning to talk to nuns and sisters of different ages,” she said. “Find out what makes the blood pump in them, what is their passion in life. By doing that you understand if it’s for you. I am incredibly blessed in being a Dominican Sister of Hope because we are often on the cutting edge in response to injustice. Our sisters worked in rural Mississippi, in Oklahoma with Native Americans, and in schools, inner city ghettos, health-care for the poor, and my ministry. I love being a Dominican Sister. We aren’t afraid to ask hard questions and speak the truth to empower. I am truly inspired by so many sisters in my congregation. They are truly a delight for me.”

Sister Debbie said she views her religious vows as instrumental in developing a relationship with Jesus and others.

“The vow of obedience is really about listening with one’s heart and asking about how to live in the congregation,” she said. “Poverty of spirit allows us to be open handed, like what Jesus spoke of in the Beatitudes. Celibacy isn’t lessening but widening my circle of love.”

Sister Debbie also loves photography, writing poetry, and watching sports. She often played with the students when she was younger – even football and dodgeball.

“I want people to say she’s real: what you see is what you get,” Sister Debbie said. “I always tried to be that, as a teacher and principal. I’ve always tried to say that someone can approach me or talk to me.”