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## On Effective Campus Ministry at a Catholic Law School: The Impact of Sister Grace Walle at St. Mary's University School of Law

Caitlin Hennessy

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## TRIBUTE

### ON EFFECTIVE CAMPUS MINISTRY AT A CATHOLIC LAW SCHOOL: THE IMPACT OF SISTER GRACE WALLE AT ST. MARY'S UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF LAW

CAITLIN HENNESSY\*

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\*St. Mary's University School of Law, J.D. 2023; The University of Texas at Austin, B.A. 2016. I wish to express my love and gratitude to Sister Grace Walle. Thank you for opening up to me and trusting me to write your professional history. It has been a great honor to spend time with you and learn from you. I thank Sarah Dysart for her edits and constant support. I also thank Professor Vincent Johnson for his edits and past Articles that helped form this Tribute.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The term “justice” encompasses various meanings and evokes fundamental questions. What is right? What is fair? Which collective and individual duties lead to justice?

Sister Grace Walle, the longtime law chaplain of St. Mary's University School of Law, grappled with these questions decades ago while defining her role as a spiritual leader of a Catholic institution devoted to justice.<sup>1</sup> Uncomfortable with growing public apathy towards misconduct by prominent lawyers, she sought to methodically improve the way lawyers behave while utilizing her theological expertise.<sup>2</sup> As important to this goal was the heightening of the legal profession's reputation among a populace that requires access to legal services.<sup>3</sup> Sister Grace framed “biblical justice”—communal aspects of the Old Testament combined with social justice of the New Testament—as the foundation to the practice of “doing justice” at a Catholic law school.<sup>4</sup>

“The real challenge is changing the law profession into a profession that deserves admiration for its service to its community,” she wrote. “The role of the Catholic law school, therefore, is to link the profession of justice with the practice of justice.”<sup>5</sup>

As Sister Grace surpasses forty years of service at St. Mary's, that influence of justice emanates from the school's ministry program. She has worked with six law school deans, and four university presidents, and many student research assistants. She has played integral roles in the development of clinical programs, study abroad programs, theology-based traditions, scholarships, and awards. When asked if she is a lawyer, she responds warmly that she is not, but she notes she knows many lawyers, judges, professors, law students, and other stewards of the law, holding them in great regard.<sup>6</sup> Once known as a “Professor of Spirituality,”<sup>7</sup> Sister Grace's work

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1. See Grace M. Walle, Essay, *Doing Justice: A Challenge for Catholic Law Schools*, 28 ST. MARY'S L.J. 625, 625–26 (1997) (“Understanding what justice encompasses may begin in books and the classroom, but justice in legal practice requires far more.”).

2. *Id.* at 625.

3. *Id.* at 633.

4. *Id.*

5. *Id.* at 634.

6. Interview with Grace Walle, L. Chaplain, St. Mary's Univ. Sch. of L., in San Antonio, Tex. (Jan.–Apr. 2022).

7. Robert H. Hu, *St. Mary's University Institute on Chinese Law and Business: Remarkable Success in the First Ten Years*, 51 ST. MARY'S L.J. 845, 883 (2020).

as a servant-leader has enriched St. Mary's University, its home city of San Antonio, Texas, and beyond.

## II. JOINING ST. MARY'S UNIVERSITY AND THE LEGAL COMMUNITY

Grace Walle was born in 1951 in Philadelphia.<sup>8</sup> Feeling called to the holy life from an early age, she joined the Marianist Sisters in San Antonio in 1972, completing her vows and earning a bachelor's degree from St. Mary's University six years later.<sup>9</sup> In 1982, she accepted a position at St. Mary's focused on retreat ministry and leadership development.<sup>10</sup> She committed to ensure students had the necessary support to achieve their educational goals.

In 1993, Sister Grace accepted an invitation to give the blessing at the *St. Mary's Law Journal* banquet.<sup>11</sup> Immediately charmed by people she considered lively, intelligent, ambitious, and social justice-minded, she sought to become more involved in the legal community.<sup>12</sup> Conversations with then-university chaplain Father John G. Leies led to a part-time position with the law school that transformed into a full-time position as the law chaplain in 1994.<sup>13</sup>

## III. SETTING GOALS

Father Leies presented Sister Grace with a numbered list of "needs concerning the campus ministry."<sup>14</sup> He tasked her with creating a clear job description for the campus minister, attending faculty meetings, securing an easy-access office near students and faculty traffic, and organizing a semester liturgy for the faculty retreat, and ensuring that Marianist values are explained.<sup>15</sup> She considered the university's Marianist tradition of education as one to "promote the Catholic qualities of respect for all people and traditions, social justice, [and] leadership for the common good."<sup>16</sup>

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8. Interview with Grace Walle, *supra* note 6.

9. *Id.*

10. *Id.*

11. *Id.*

12. *Id.*

13. *Id.*

14. Memorandum from John G. Leies, Chaplain, St. Mary's Univ., to Grace Walle, L. Chaplain, St. Mary's Univ. Sch. of L. (1994) (on file with author).

15. *Id.*

16. Barbara Hanson Nellerhoe, *50 Years of Excellence: A History of the St. Mary's Law Journal*, 50 ST. MARY'S L.J. 1, 52-53 (2019) (alteration in original) (internal quotation marks omitted).

“Every Catholic and most Church-related Universities claim that ‘educating the whole person’ is central to their mission . . . . [And the St. Mary’s focus is to educate] for practical reason and wisdom that combines a critical mind with a compassionate heart.”<sup>17</sup> Nurturing the compassionate heart of every willing law student has remained her mission.

#### IV. BEFRIENDING DEANS

Sister Grace is thankful for the support of six deans throughout her years at the law school. She has intentionally fostered friendships with each leader and sought to introduce Marianist values into the critical decisions each would confront.

Barbara Bader Aldave, whose deanship lasted from 1989 to 1998, offered Sister Grace the full-time law chaplain position in 1994.<sup>18</sup> Their friendship was immediate. The first woman dean of any Texas law school, Aldave made sweeping changes that created a more welcoming environment for minority students and professors, and Sister Grace was a steadfast supporter.<sup>19</sup> Former student Emily Fowler Hartigan described the duo as “women dedicated to a vision of social justice.”<sup>20</sup> Guided by the story and spirit of the university’s namesake, Aldave started clinical programs, boosted scholarships, and dramatically increased minority enrollment and employment.<sup>21</sup> Sister Grace’s influence over Aldave’s historic deanship was clear.

The next dean, William “Bill” Piatt, worked with Sister Grace to expand the charitable and educational boundaries of the law school. Pro bono programs over spring break started under Piatt, who served until 2007.<sup>22</sup> Piatt reminisced about one trip:

Sr. Grace led us in prayers each day before she put on her hard hat and wielded her hammer. Grace was (is) such a good sport. Food in New Mexico can be spicy, but Sister Grace chowed down with the best of them. We enjoyed posole, beans[,] sopapillas[,] and other foods, staples of the diets of the

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17. *Id.* at 53 (alteration and omission in original) (internal quotation marks omitted).

18. Interview with Grace Walle, *supra* note 6.

19. See generally Vincent R. Johnson, *The First Woman Dean of a Texas Law School: Barbara Bader Aldave at St. Mary’s University*, 54 ST. MARY’S L.J. 153 (2023) (chronicling Aldave’s accomplishments at St. Mary’s University School of Law).

20. Emily Fowler Hartigan, *Practicing and Professing Spirit in Law*, 27 TEX. TECH. L. REV. 1165, 1173 (1996).

21. Johnson, *supra* note 19, at 189.

22. *Dean’s New Mexico Efforts Net \$30,000 Scholarship Gift*, LAWNOTES (St. Mary’s Univ. Sch. of L., San Antonio, Tex.), Fall 2005, at 1, 4.

Hispanic/Indigenous people of the region. We filled our stomachs, and thanks to Grace, we filled our souls. . . . Sister Grace's presence was always such an encouragement to our students. We all returned with wonderful memories, a few sore muscles, and the lasting joy of having spent time with Sr. Grace in the service of God and the people of northern New Mexico. Thank you, Grace!<sup>23</sup>

Piatt also extended to Sister Grace her first invitation to participate in the law school's summer program in Innsbruck, Austria. Decades later, Sister Grace continues to be an avid supporter of the Innsbruck program, contributing her time and managing related law ministry scholarships.

Charles Cantú served as dean from 2007 to 2014.<sup>24</sup> Hired in 1966, Cantú was considered the youngest law professor in the United States and the first full-time Hispanic law professor in the country.<sup>25</sup> As a 1964 graduate of the law school, he personally experienced and embraced the university's religious mission.<sup>26</sup>

Sister Grace nominated Cantú for several Catholic ministry awards, recognizing his positive impact on students and faculty.<sup>27</sup> The first-year class of 1997 initiated the Charles Cantú Fund for the Future, which supports service projects, and Sister Grace has diligently managed the fund to maximize opportunity.<sup>28</sup>

Stephen Sheppard next served as dean from 2014 to 2019.<sup>29</sup> Sister Grace fondly recalled how Sheppard's inventive and creative nature guided his approach to the deanship, and his study of the history of the Marianist order revealed his dedication to the school's mission.<sup>30</sup> One professional networking event that Sheppard hosted included a scotch tasting, and Sister Grace's blessing of the event and the meal was her "first time praying over and after glasses of scotch," she laughed.<sup>31</sup>

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23. E-mail from Robert William Piatt, Professor of L., St. Mary's Univ. Sch. of L., to author (Feb. 17, 2022, 08:39 CST) (on file with author).

24. Charles E. Cantú, *An Oral History of St. Mary's University School of Law (1961–2018)*, 50 ST. MARY'S L.J. 309, 339 (2019).

25. *Id.* at 314.

26. *Id.* at 313.

27. Interview with Grace Walle, *supra* note 6.

28. Cantú, *supra* note 24, at 373.

29. *Id.* at 339.

30. Interview with Grace Walle, *supra* note 6.

31. *Id.*

Vincent Johnson, who has shared the last forty years at St. Mary's alongside Sister Grace, served as interim dean from 2019 to 2020.<sup>32</sup>

A nun without a habit, but with a sense of humor and a penchant for travel . . . [Sister Grace] is a consummate professional, quietly but energetically building the ethos of the law school, making it a welcoming place that is both collegial and productive. During the past [twenty-five] years, no one has made a bigger contribution to St. Mary's University School of Law than Sister Grace.<sup>33</sup>

When accepting the position as interim dean, he could not have foreseen the challenges ahead associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. Sister Grace describes Johnson as the man that “kept the ship steady” during the darkest days of the pandemic.<sup>34</sup>

Johnson and Sister Grace have shared many memories during their travels with study abroad programs. During a thunderstorm in China, students invited the pair to the famed glass elevator of the Shanghai Tower; “law students are truly fearless,” she recalled. Instead, the two opted for a glass of wine at the Ritz Carlton.<sup>35</sup>

Dean Patricia Roberts began the position amid the pandemic in 2020.<sup>36</sup> Sister Grace was heartened to see a female dean back into the position. She especially admires Roberts's communication skills and ability to adapt to student needs. “Sister Grace is a large part of what makes St. Mary's so special,” Roberts said. “She is equal parts historian, faith minister, cheerleader, ambassador, and entrepreneur for St. Mary's.”<sup>37</sup>

## V. CELEBRATING RED MASS

Red Mass dates back to 1245 in Europe as a marker of the beginning of the judicial season.<sup>38</sup> The color red worn by priests and judges symbolized

32. *Vincent R. Johnson*, ST. MARY'S UNIV. SCH. OF L., <https://law.stmarytx.edu/academics/faculty/vincent-johnson/> [https://perma.cc/XV9Y-BZVA].

33. E-mail from Vincent R. Johnson, S. Tex. Distinguished Professor of L., St. Mary's Univ. Sch. of L., to author (Feb. 1, 2022, 12:25 CST) (on file with author).

34. Interview with Grace Walle, *supra* note 6.

35. *Id.*

36. *Patricia Roberts*, ST. MARY'S UNIV. SCH. OF L., <https://law.stmarytx.edu/academics/faculty/patricia-roberts/> [https://perma.cc/9ZF4-DGYU].

37. E-mail from Patricia Roberts, Dean, St. Mary's Univ. Sch. of L., to author (Feb. 3, 2022, 11:36 CST) (on file with author).

38. Seth B. Sullivan, *Red Mass: A Celebration of Law and Faith*, LEGAL MINUTE (St. Mary's Univ. Sch. of L., San Antonio, Tex.), Fall 2013, at 1.

the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>39</sup> For this ceremonial mass, local church members and the judiciary committee would gather and pray for blessings upon the new season.<sup>40</sup> In America, Red Mass celebrations began in New York City in 1928 and have since been popularized among Catholic legal communities.<sup>41</sup>

For the past seventy years, the Catholic Lawyers Guild has hosted Red Mass at San Fernando Cathedral in San Antonio.<sup>42</sup> Under the leadership of Professor Harold Gill Reuschlein, St. Mary's University began participating in 1983.<sup>43</sup> Reuschlein, a founding dean of Villanova Law School and long-time St. Mary's professor, was a devout Catholic whose dedication to Red Mass formed the basis of the tradition.<sup>44</sup> University faculty members enter in the procession, and the university music department provides instrumental and choral performances.<sup>45</sup> Judges, attorneys, professors, law students, and the entire legal community keep the tradition strong today.

After Reuschlein's retirement and interim leadership from Professor Johnson and Professor David Schlueter, Sister Grace became the liaison and champion of Red Mass.<sup>46</sup> Due to her advocacy, evening law school classes are canceled the day of Red Mass, removing an attendance barrier for students, faculty, and staff. Her student assistants created red banners celebrating the many legal organizations in the community; these are placed at the altar. She also works to make the event as inclusive as possible for people of all faiths.

The tradition has led to meaningful opportunities and lifelong friendships. Sister Grace formed a special Red Mass committee of legal professionals to enhance community involvement alongside the sponsorships of the Catholic Lawyers Guild, the Archdiocese of San Antonio, and St. Mary's University.<sup>47</sup> Then-Chief Justice Alma Lopez of the Fourth Court of

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39. *Id.*

40. *San Antonio to Celebrate 69th Annual Red Mass*, ARCHDIOCESE OF SAN ANTONIO <https://archsa.org/news/san-antonio-to-celebrate-69th-annual-red-mass/> [https://perma.cc/NAR6-ZU5T].

41. Sullivan, *supra* note 38, at 1.

42. *Id.* at 1–2.

43. Vincent R. Johnson, *Turning Points in the History of St. Mary's University School of Law (1980–1988)*, 50 ST. MARY'S L.J. 521, 553 (2019).

44. *Id.* at 553–54.

45. *Id.* at 554.

46. *Id.* at 557.

47. *Red Mass*, ST. MARY'S UNIV. SCH. OF L., <https://law.stmarytx.edu/student-services/events/red-mass/> [https://perma.cc/XD4J-HTJL].



Appeals volunteered for the committee and quickly formed a bond with Sister Grace. After participating in Red Mass for years, Chief Justice Lopez converted to Catholicism and asked Sister Grace to be her *madrina*, or god-mother.<sup>48</sup>

Amid the chaos of the pandemic and under Sister Grace's leadership, the organizers managed to host Red Mass in 2020. Sixty attendees wearing red face masks socially distanced in the cathedral while others participated virtually.<sup>49</sup>

#### VI. REMAINING A *PILLAR* OF THE COMMUNITY

In the early 1990s, Dean Aldave instituted clinical programs for law students to help low-income individuals while gaining critical legal experience.<sup>50</sup> These programs established the law school as a pioneer of Texas pro-bono legal services.<sup>51</sup> Geographically placed across San Antonio, the three clinics focused on juvenile justice, capital punishment, and poverty law.<sup>52</sup> Practicing attorneys worked with the students to help these real clients with real issues.<sup>53</sup>

The clinic programs celebrated a new chapter on Valentine's Day 1996 when the three programs were aggregated into one building a half-mile from the law school campus.<sup>54</sup> The new physical space for young legal minds of San Antonio was significant. The building was owned and operated by the Marianist Sister ministry as the Our Lady of the Pillar Retreat House.<sup>55</sup> It was where nuns, including Sister Grace, lived and worked. In her article, *A New Dream: The Marianist Sisters and the School of Law*, Sister Grace described the difficult conversations among her order of sisters about giving up their building to the university, calling it a time of "loving confrontation."<sup>56</sup> Above all, the Sisters wanted the essence of the retreat center to remain. They understood that the city's traditionally marginalized populations

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48. Interview with Grace Walle, *supra* note 6.

49. *San Antonio to Celebrate 68th Annual Red Mass in New Virtual Format*, ST. MARY'S UNIV. (Oct. 20, 2020), <https://www.stmarytx.edu/2020/68-red-mass/> [<https://perma.cc/DFM8-Q8JV>].

50. Sue Bentch, *A History of the Law Clinics at St. Mary's University School of Law*, 46 ST. MARY'S L.J. 285, 286 (2015).

51. *See id.* at 314 (describing the programs' swift recognition from the legal community).

52. *Id.* at 289, 294.

53. *Id.* at 287.

54. *Id.* at 300.

55. *Id.*

56. Grace Walle, *A New Dream: The Marianist Sisters and the School of Law*, 2 MARIANIST SOUNDINGS, no. 2, Spring 1998, at 32, 32.

needed better legal representation, and the law had promised to provide it. She takes solace and pride in the growth and success of the clinics being housed in a place with great history to the Marianist Sisters.

The 28,000-square-foot retreat house was moderately renovated to ensure the clinical programs could operate efficiently. The former dorm rooms now serve as offices where students call clients and prepare cases.<sup>57</sup> The chapel where many nuns took their vows and regularly attended Mass is now the clinic's courtroom where students practice opening statements and prepare for trials.<sup>58</sup> Stained glass, tiled mosaics, and Marianist tapestries decorate the halls and serve as a reminder of its history and mission. The Sisters moved to a house adjacent to the retreat house, but their presence is still felt.<sup>59</sup>

On October 15, 1997, the feast day of St. Theresa of Avila, the transition was marked with a celebration.<sup>60</sup> Sister Grace gave a special blessing for the future of the clinic and the Sisters of Our Lady of the Pillar.<sup>61</sup> The university began publishing *The Pillar*, a bimonthly newsletter detailing events, awards, and stories of law students in the clinical programs.<sup>62</sup> It is yet another recognition of the Marianist sisterhood, which continues to inspire the legal services students provide for the community.

The Sisters also formed the Marianist Sister Sharing Fund in 1996 to support the clinical services and their clients.<sup>63</sup> Administered by Sister Grace and the St. Mary's campus ministry team, the fund covers legal fees imposed by the court.<sup>64</sup> Clients can submit requests for assistance to any of the clinic's staff or supervising attorneys.<sup>65</sup> Outside donations and a revolving loan program keep the fund alive, and it has remained a valuable asset in continuing the clinic's mission. The following year, the American Bar Association awarded St. Mary's the Public Interest Law School Award in recognition of the clinics.<sup>66</sup>

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57. Interview with Grace Walle, *supra* note 6.

58. *Id.*

59. *Id.*

60. *Id.*

61. *Id.*

62. THE PILLAR: NEWSL. OF THE ST. MARY'S UNIV. SCH. OF L. CTR FOR LEGAL AND SOC. JUST. (St. Mary's Univ. Sch. of L., San Antonio, Tex.), 2000, at 1.

63. Interview with Grace Walle, *supra* note 6.

64. Information Sheet for the Marianist Sisters Sharing Fund (on file with author).

65. *Id.*

66. Interview with Grace Walle, *supra* note 6.

## VII. FEEDING THE SOUL

At the start of each academic year, Sister Grace welcomes back students by hosting luncheons with heartier and healthier options than fast food.<sup>67</sup> Gathered together as 1L, 2L, and 3L sections, law students take this time to meet and mingle with classmates, faculty members, and the ministry team.<sup>68</sup> Faculty members and Sister Grace's research assistants answer student questions, provide information for volunteer opportunities, and give sage advice about the many facets of law school.<sup>69</sup> Through these events, Sister Grace uses her ability to create connections and ensure all students know they are not embarking into law school alone.

At the suggestion of Father Jim Tobin, then-campus minister of the university, she set up a coffee table for students outside her office more than twenty years ago.<sup>70</sup> Serving "compassion in every cup,"<sup>71</sup> Sister Grace's coffee area is well-known among St. Mary's students who gather over coffee and foster connections. San Antonio's law firm Miller, Sisson, Chapman and Nash PC—now Jackson Walker LLP—donated to the first coffee fund.<sup>72</sup> Today, multiple law firms and the ministry itself support the area.<sup>73</sup> Understanding that law students are often stressed, low on cash, or just too busy to make lunch before class, Sister Grace also set out jars of peanut butter and grape jelly with loaves of bread.

Known for feeding the souls of students, Sister Grace extends her reach to San Antonio children as well during Halloween at an event called "Boo Bash."<sup>74</sup> This campus fall carnival serves nearby communities and children's shelters. She challenges law students to collect and donate candy in the week prior to the event, ensuring treats and smiles for the children. Local legal organizations also help Sister Grace provide for the event.

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67. *1L Section A Meet-Greet-Eat*, ST. MARY'S UNIV., <https://stmu.emscloudservice.com/calendar/EventDetails.aspx?EventDetailId=5493690> [<https://perma.cc/PQ7A-FC4Y>].

68. *Id.*

69. *Id.*

70. Interview with Grace Walle, *supra* note 6.

71. *Id.*

72. *Id.*

73. *Id.*

74. *School of Law Mini Boo Bash*, ST. MARY'S UNIV., <https://stmu.emscloudservice.com/calendar/EventDetails.aspx?EventDetailId=8538141> [<https://perma.cc/3KVE-6ERX>].

The Office of Law Campus Ministry, the Law Alumni Relations Office, and the Office of the Dean also host Fiesta Farewell for graduating classes.<sup>75</sup> Named for its place on the calendar during San Antonio's beloved Fiesta Week, the event gathers graduating law students in the campus courtyard for a ceremony honoring their accomplishments and celebrating their transition into the legal profession.<sup>76</sup> Sister Grace offers a blessing for the soon-to-be graduates and presents law ministry service awards recognizing students who have made significant contributions.

#### VIII. VOLUNTEERING OF TIME AND TALENT

Sister Grace has long sought to motivate law students to volunteer off campus whenever possible. To do this, she coordinates service-oriented volunteer and pro bono trips during spring break each year.<sup>77</sup> Since 1999, various on- and off-campus organizations have funded these service projects.<sup>78</sup> Locations include the Rio Grande Valley, New Mexico, Washington, D.C., and more nationwide areas in need of volunteer work.<sup>79</sup> Scholarships managed by the law ministry cover student expenses, and participants have a celebratory meal afterwards.

One of the inaugural programs was a spring break trip to New Mexico in partnership with Habitat for Humanity.<sup>80</sup> After a natural disaster left a family without a home, then-Dean Piatt and Sister Grace organized the event and helped provide needed legal and physical resources.<sup>81</sup>

In Hurricane Katrina's aftermath, students went to New Orleans to help self-represented victims with legal property issues and partner with other recovery organizations, including the Louisiana Bar Foundation.<sup>82</sup> Law students partnered with the local Habitat for Humanity to rebuild homes for

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75. *Fiesta Farewell: Graduation Class Picture and Celebration of Service Awards*, ST. MARY'S UNIV., <https://stmu.emscloudservice.com/calendar/EventDetails.aspx?EventDetailId=93575> [<https://perma.cc/VYJ9-ZGEP>].

76. *Id.*

77. *St. Mary's Law Campus Ministry*, NEWMAN MINISTRY, <https://www.newmanministry.com/colleges/st-marys-school-of-law> [<https://perma.cc/E4XL-2DSF>].

78. Interview with Grace Walle, *supra* note 6.

79. *See Dean Leads Spring Break Trip to New Mexico*, LAWNOTES (St. Mary's Univ. Sch. of L., San Antonio, Tex.), Spring 2004, at 5 (describing one of Dean Piatt's many service trips with students to New Mexico); *see also Constructive Spring Break*, LAWNOTES (St. Mary's Univ. Sch. of L., San Antonio, Tex.), Spring 2010, at 6 (detailing a spring break service trip to New Orleans, where students worked on housing issues).

80. *Dean Leads Spring Break Trip to New Mexico*, *supra* note 79, at 5.

81. Interview with Grace Walle, *supra* note 6.

82. *Constructive Spring Break*, *supra* note 79, at 6.

families affected by the hurricane. The homes were then sold to families at no cost and financed with no-interest loans.<sup>83</sup>

In McAllen, St. Mary's law students partnered with Proyecto Azteca, a nonprofit organization that works to build communities for low-income families who face barriers to homeownership.<sup>84</sup> Law students helped build homes, solve various legal issues, work with translators, and sponsor a fun afternoon for local children.<sup>85</sup>

The spring break service trips are now led by the pro bono arm of the law school, and Sister Grace continues to scout possible locations for these volunteer opportunities.<sup>86</sup> After the law school instituted a thirty-hour pro bono graduation requirement in 2018, the spring break trips became even more popular, but also fulfilling, among students.

The programs have now expanded through the work of alumni. Anietie Akpan, who volunteered in the Rio Grande Valley each of her three spring breaks in law school, partnered with Sister Grace to offer a similar opportunity in Houston.<sup>87</sup> Describing the programs as “the shining part of my law school experience,” Akpan has worked to forge the Houston program as a special experience for students. Work includes physical volunteer work through community gardening and pro bono work helping eligible persons apply for U.S. citizenship.<sup>88</sup> The law ministry team collects pictures and stories from each trip to personally thank donors and build momentum for the following year's trip.

In 2009 and 2020, the Texas Access to Justice Commission gave St. Mary's the Access to Justice Award, which is given to schools that complete a significant amount of pro bono and community service work.<sup>89</sup> In 2020,

83. Grace Walle, *Students Use Free Time to Help Others*, LEGAL MINUTE (St. Mary's Univ. Sch. of L., San Antonio, Tex.), Mar. 2010, at 5.

84. *Id.*

85. *Id.*

86. *Pro Bono Programs*, ST. MARY'S UNIV. SCH. OF L., <https://law.stmarytx.edu/academics/special-programs/center-legal-social-justice/pro-bono-program/> [https://perma.cc/4A4E-8DRV].

87. Telephone Interview with Anietie Akpan, Compliance/Transactional Staff Counsel, Metro. Transit Auth. of Harris Cnty. (Feb. 4, 2022).

88. *Id.*

89. *Texas Access to Justice Commission Honors St. Mary's Law for Pro Bono Service*, ST. MARY'S UNIV. (Nov. 19, 2020), <https://www.stmarytx.edu/2020/pro-bono-service-award/> [https://perma.cc/6BWQ-745D]; *Law School Honored for Commitment to Service*, ST. MARY'S UNIV. (June 15, 2009), <https://www.stmarytx.edu/2009/law-school-honored-for-commitment-to-service/> [https://perma.cc/9QLM-GJLY].

the Commission also awarded St. Mary's the Law School Commitment to Service Award.<sup>90</sup>

#### IX. STUDYING ABROAD IN INNSBRUCK

St. Mary's offers study abroad opportunities in Innsbruck, Austria, and China.<sup>91</sup> In 1985, the school formed its Institute on World Legal Problems in partnership with the University of Innsbruck; this led to student exchange programs between the schools the following year.<sup>92</sup> The Innsbruck summer program is financed in part by scholarships funded by donors and faculty members.<sup>93</sup> Realizing the importance of making the experience accessible to all students, Sister Grace and the law ministry team manage those funds.<sup>94</sup>

As a St. Mary's student, Sarah Thompson attended the Innsbruck trip and had "the time of her life."<sup>95</sup> After returning, she tragically died in a hit-and-run accident during her third year of law school in 2005.<sup>96</sup> Her mother, Carol, and Sister Grace formed a strong friendship and bond after the accident.<sup>97</sup> They created the Sarah K. Thompson Memorial Fund for students to attend the Innsbruck program and honor Sarah's memory, keeping her spirit and legacy at the forefront.<sup>98</sup>

Sister Grace worked with Sarah's friends to write the scholarship requirements.<sup>99</sup> The essay question is designed to identify a student who embodies Sarah's character, spirit, and enthusiasm.<sup>100</sup> They include questions about community impact, support of fellow law students, and any ties to Sarah's alma mater of Texas Tech University.<sup>101</sup> Sister Grace, who also manages the funds, ensures the scholarship is carefully awarded and organizes a

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90. *Texas Access to Justice Commission Honors St. Mary's Law for Pro Bono Service*, *supra* note 89.

91. *Academics*, ST. MARY'S UNIV. SCH. OF L., <https://law.stmarytx.edu/academics/> [https://perma.cc/XC6L-39XR].

92. See Vincent R. Johnson, *Tribute, Rebnquist, Innsbruck, and St. Mary's University*, 38 ST. MARY'S L.J. 1, 2 n.5 (2006) ("The creation of a law program in Innsbruck was unanimously approved by the St. Mary's law faculty in 1985.").

93. *Summer Study Abroad Scholarship*, ST. MARY'S UNIV. SCH. OF L., <https://law.stmarytx.edu/academics/special-programs/austria/> [https://perma.cc/WFA2-DPBR].

94. *Id.*

95. E-mail from Carol Thompson to author (Nov. 15, 2021, 16:41 CST) (on file with author).

96. *Summer Study Abroad Scholarship*, *supra* note 93.

97. E-mail from Carol Thompson, *supra* note 95.

98. *Summer Study Abroad Scholarship*, *supra* note 93.

99. E-mail from Carol Thompson, *supra* note 95.

100. *Id.*

101. *Summer Study Abroad Scholarship*, *supra* note 93; Interview with Grace Walle, *supra* note 6.

special thank-you note each year to Sarah's family.<sup>102</sup> "She models Jesus'[s] presence on earth to us all," Carol said.<sup>103</sup>

#### X. CREATING CONNECTIONS IN CHINA

The St. Mary's University School of Law Institute on Chinese Law and Business in Beijing began in 2010.<sup>104</sup> Dean Cantú and Professor Robert Hu identified an opportunity to introduce students to the Chinese legal system, international business, and international contracts.<sup>105</sup> Over the five-week study-abroad program, students attend class, perform internships, and engage in the cultural life of China.<sup>106</sup> Alumni of the program worked with Sister Grace to create the Charles E. Cantú China Pioneer Scholarship to allow other law students to have the same experience.<sup>107</sup>

Sister Grace attended the first iteration of the program as the resident "Professor of Spirituality."<sup>108</sup> She attended classes, toured the country, and provided the St. Mary's spirit as a friend and resource to participants.<sup>109</sup> She became so comfortable in China that she started leading small groups of students on tours to neighboring cities and landmarks.<sup>110</sup> Sister Grace's hallmark contribution to the program is an unconventional dinner she hosts yearly at Annie's Italian Restaurant.<sup>111</sup> During the first year abroad, the group stumbled upon this restaurant after wandering the streets of western Beijing.<sup>112</sup> Tired, hungry, and mostly lost, they were amused by "something resembling an Olive Garden."<sup>113</sup>

#### XI. CELEBRATING HER LEGAL SISTERS

As she became closer to the legal community and the law school, Sister Grace recognized the increasing number of female law students and their challenges. Her law ministry team began to focus on supporting women

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102. Interview with Grace Walle, *supra* note 6.

103. E-mail from Carol Thompson, *supra* note 95.

104. Cantú, *supra* note 24, at 386–87.

105. *Id.* at 387.

106. Kierran Britt, *Study Abroad: China, Offers Hands On Experience*, LEGAL MINUTE (St. Mary's Univ. Sch. of L., San Antonio, Tex.), Fall 2013, at 1–2.

107. Hu, *supra* note 7, at 869–70.

108. *Id.* at 883 (internal quotation marks omitted).

109. *Id.*

110. *Id.* at 883–84.

111. Interview with Grace Walle, *supra* note 6.

112. *Id.*

113. *Id.*

law students as they prepare to enter the profession.<sup>114</sup> Within a profession that remains male dominated,<sup>115</sup> Sister Grace has taken special care to make sure women in the law are recognized for outstanding accomplishments. Sister Grace organizes the nominations for these prestigious awards and consults with panels of judges, attorneys, and professors to best decide which students embody the qualities of the women behind each award.<sup>116</sup>

Partnering with a generous donor and the Bexar County Women's Bar Association, Sister Grace helped create the Single Parent Scholarship in 1997.<sup>117</sup> This award recognizes and empowers single mothers who pursue their law degrees and simultaneously support their families.<sup>118</sup> She also created the Women in Law Leadership Award in honor of St. Mary's alumna Chief Justice Lopez upon her 2009 retirement. At annual receptions, award-ees receive a certificate of recognition, a scholarship, and a place of honor on the awards wall in the Law Classroom Building.

In 2014, Sister Grace created the Rock of Justice Award to honor the retiring Chief Justice Catherine M. Stone of the Fourth Court of Appeals.<sup>119</sup> This award is given to women law students who demonstrate advocacy for the poor, show respect and dignity for all individuals, exhibit a commitment to public service, and hold devotion to faith and family.<sup>120</sup>

The latest award honoring a distinguished female judge is the Mentoring for Excellence Award, inspired by Chief Justice Sandee Bryan Marion—also a St. Mary's alumna.<sup>121</sup> The award is presented to women law students who demonstrate a commitment to mentorship and servant leadership.<sup>122</sup> In

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114. See Grace Walle, Speech at the 2022 Bexar County Women Bar Association Gala: Why is BCWB Sponsoring a Single Parent Scholarship (Nov. 3, 2022) (explaining how Sister Grace worked to create an award to support single mothers in law school).

115. See AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION, ABA NATIONAL LAWYER POPULATION SURVEY (2022), [https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/market\\_research/2022-national-lawyer-population-survey.pdf](https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/market_research/2022-national-lawyer-population-survey.pdf) [<https://perma.cc/S2TM-2R7G>] (indicating 62% of American attorneys were men in 2022).

116. Interview with Grace Walle, *supra* note 6.

117. Grace Walle, *supra* note 114.

118. *Id.*

119. *Significant Ministry Activities During the Spring Semester*, ST. MARY'S UNIV., <https://law.stmarytx.edu/student-services/spiritual-life/> [<https://perma.cc/R7R3-3ZHQ>]; Interview with Grace Walle, *supra* note 6.

120. Interview with Grace Walle, *supra* note 6.

121. *Women in Law Leadership Award Ceremony—March 25, 2021*, ST. MARY'S UNIV. (Mar. 29, 2021), [https://mediaspace.stmarytx.edu/media/Women+in+Law+Leadership+Award+Ceremony+-+March+25%2C+2021/1\\_lj7fyrpv/44657672](https://mediaspace.stmarytx.edu/media/Women+in+Law+Leadership+Award+Ceremony+-+March+25%2C+2021/1_lj7fyrpv/44657672) [<https://perma.cc/A8TJ-RJLT>].

122. *Id.*



2021, student Natalie DeCesare won the first award for creating a student mentorship program called SM1LE, in which second- and third-year law students volunteer to mentor incoming first-year students.<sup>123</sup> The program has quickly led to lasting friendships and professional connections.

## XII. KEEPING FAITH THROUGH THE PANDEMIC AND MOVING FORWARD

The 2020 transition to virtual learning was met with disappointment, confusion, and complicated feelings from the community. But overall, the school administration was thankful to allow law students the opportunity to start or continue their legal education, even in unthinkable circumstances caused by Covid-19.<sup>124</sup>

The 2020 fall semester was especially challenging. Kayla Trevino, a law ministry research assistant, was particularly helpful to the law ministry team. She and Sister Grace worked to provide a meaningful experience to 1L students beginning their legal education amid unprecedented times.<sup>125</sup> They hosted virtual meet-and-greets, facilitating connections many feared could not be made.<sup>126</sup> Sister Grace sent Starbucks gift cards to participating students along with a prayer and list of contact information for the student health center, campus police, and the resources available to students.<sup>127</sup>

“Although it was a big and difficult transition to go online during a pandemic, Sister Grace really made the transition feel as close to the actual, in-person experience as she could,” Kayla later said.<sup>128</sup> As a masterful connector of people, Sister Grace has a talent for understanding an individual’s needs, abilities, and potential. She has created many job opportunities between alumni and current students, leading to permanent placements after graduation. Her former research assistants frequently check in with her, especially when needing some *grace* in the chaos of their careers.

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123. *Id.*

124. See *Pivoting With Excellence: St. Mary's Law Adapts in Response to Pandemic*, ST. MARY'S UNIV. (Jan. 12, 2021), <https://www.stmarytx.edu/2021/law-pivoting-to-excellence/> [<https://perma.cc/78FD-68MV>] (“Faculty, staff, students and alumni have adapted to new challenges not just at the onset of COVID-19 in the spring, but throughout the summer and fall semesters by holding virtual advocacy competitions, deepening classroom discussions online, embracing remote work experiences and providing pro bono legal aid to health care workers.”).

125. E-mail from Kayla Trevino, Former Rsch. Assistant for Sister Grace, St. Mary’s Univ. Sch. of L., to author (Dec. 19, 2021, 16:46 CST) (on file with author).

126. *Id.*

127. *Id.*

128. *Id.*

Since her 1982 arrival, Sister Grace Walle has made a significant impression in the community, receiving many honors and thanks along the way while living out her calling. Though her contributions are many, she maintains that she simply seeks to create opportunities for others to have the opportunity to serve and give back. Her ability to lovingly lead, lift, and inspire those around her is a gift that exemplifies why she is the heart of St. Mary's University School of Law.

Sister Grace set out to unite those entering the profession with a higher calling: a calling to justice.<sup>129</sup> She spent the last forty years building bridges for students and the community, giving those in her path the opportunity to serve, helping students create lasting relationships, and challenging them to always walk the moral high ground, personally and professionally.

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129. See Walle, *supra* note 1, at 634 (“Catholic law schools can make an important contribution by embracing Jesus’s mission of extending the Kingdom of God by doing justice.”).

