

# The Sponsored Leader

BY ED GIGANTI

**I**n his moving acceptance of the 2003 Sr. Mary Concilia Moran, RSM, Award at this year's Catholic Health Assembly, Michael Connelly acknowledged the many women religious who have been mentors for him during his career in health ministry. Connelly, now president and CEO of Catholic Healthcare Partners, Cincinnati, has worked in Catholic hospitals and systems since he took a part-time job as a security guard at St. Mary's Hospital in Milwaukee during high school. I spoke with Connelly to learn more about the role these sister-mentors played in his formation for leadership in Catholic health care.

Sr. Juliana Kelly, DC, was the first of these influential women. She was administrator of St. Mary's. "She had a commitment to innovation," Connelly said. "She was ahead of her time. She embraced HMOs as a better way to treat populations in need in the early '60s. I learned from her the importance of strategic planning and innovation and meeting the needs of your community even when your actions may be unpopular.

"And she was very sensitive to employees," Connelly went on. "She would host sessions with staff around the clock. She wanted to shake their hands, to talk with them, even in the middle of the night on the third shift. She continued doing that, even after she encountered physical limitations and it was difficult for her to participate in these sessions. Her endurance was an inspiration to me.

"She sort of adopted me, and she wrote me a reference letter for law school."

After earning a law degree, Connelly went to Chicago where he started his "first real job in health care" as administrative director of ambulatory care at Saint Joseph's Hospital. There he met Sr. DePaul Tehan, DC, who, although she was battling with cancer that would take her life within two years, continued working as an ombudsman for patients and families. "She was committed and determined to fight cancer and



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insisted on working," Connelly said. "She didn't win the battle, but in the two years I had with her, I learned from her determination and her commitment to people's needs."

## A WALK AROUND THE POND

Working at Saint Joseph's, Connelly was noticed by Sr. Irene Kraus, DC, then the leader of the Daughters of Charity National Health System. "She was a powerful personality," Connelly remembered, "a great speaker, and she gave incredibly inspirational speeches. From Sr. Irene I really learned the power of moving people, by way of those speeches, as a way of carrying out the ministry. She gave a kind of sermon that would motivate you to work harder."

Sr. Irene asked Connelly to move to California as a regional CEO of the Daughters' system. The job interview was particularly memorable. "We met in this big board room at the provincial center in California, I, Sr. Irene, and six other sisters I'd never met," Connelly recalled. "After about an hour, they decided to take a break and walk around this pond that was on the property. There wasn't an easy path to the pond, and Sr. Irene slipped and fell and broke her ankle. She was a nurse and instantly knew what she'd done. An ambulance was called, but the provincial center is difficult to find, and it took the ambulance a long time to find the place. Sr. Irene was adamant that we continue the interview, so we went back into the board room and continued while she lay out on the grass not moving for 45 minutes! In my attempt to lighten the tense atmosphere, I told the other sisters that I thought she 'really fell for me.'

"She was very tough, but tough for the right reasons. I officially started my job in California on January 1, 1990, a holiday, and on January 2, Sr. Irene called me and asked me when I was going to get this financial crisis in my region taken care of. You never forgot that she was your boss.

"But she was very dedicated," Connelly said. "What she always tried to teach was that the

resources we managed were the resources of the poor. She taught me that how we use those resources should follow the teachings of St. Vincent."

New to California, Connelly and his family were befriended by Sr. Joyce Weller, DC, then provincial leader of the Daughters in California, and Sr. Eileen Kenney, DC. "They were like family to us," Connelly said. "Sr. Joyce had the best sense of humor. She taught me how great it is to work with someone who is fun. You want to work with someone like that."

#### **MOVING TO THE MERCIES**

In 1995, Connelly moved to Cincinnati to lead Mercy Health System (now Mercy Health Partners). "It was a bit of an adjustment," he remembered. "The culture of the Mercies was different. I knew what the Daughters were like; I had been with them all my life." (Connelly's father worked for the Daughters of Charity in Milwaukee.)

Connelly credits Sr. Beverly McGuire, RSM, then mission leader for the system, for helping him understand the nuances of Mercy culture. "She was a wonderful teacher and friend," he said. "I could ask her anything." When other religious congregations joined with the Sisters of Mercy to form the cosponsored Catholic Healthcare Partners, Sr. Beverly was an important guide for him and his team as well as for the sponsoring groups, Connelly said. "She was so helpful in her approach to cosponsorship, literally drafting the models for it, really helping all of us understand what it meant to cosponsor. There is an intellectual side to that understanding, but there is also a feeling, the intuitive side. You can intellectually go from single sponsorship to cosponsorship, but still feel uncomfortable. She helped everybody go through that."

In his acceptance speech at the Assembly, Connelly named Sr. Marie Hartmann, RSM, as one of his mentors, calling her "the ultimate cosponsor in every sense of the word." When he and I talked, he told me that he has learned

from Sr. Marie's wisdom and from her modeling faith. "It always seems that she has thought of everything. She is willing to look at different points of view, quietly and patiently, and she is willing to change, even when making the change isn't easy.

"She has helped me recognize that we don't control anything, that it's in God's hands," Connelly said. "She has been a religious adviser to me, a spiritual adviser supporting my faith, helping me to see what I have to deal with in the context of my relationship with God."

Reflecting on the many women religious he has known throughout his career, Connelly said, "What is always amazing is how hard they work. They read everything. They attend meetings that seem to go on forever. They put in 16-hour days and do whatever it takes to get it all done.

"They are incredible idealists and incredible pragmatists, not in the sense of compromising their values, but in surviving realities that we can't ignore while pursuing the ideal world. They balance the tension so well."

At the assembly, Connelly told the audience, "This award is not about an individual's career. It is about recognizing the importance and the influence of women religious on our lives and more importantly on Catholic health ministry. My career has been guided and supported by those women who taught me their values, their pragmatism, and their passion, for a ministry that wasn't their career, it was their life.

"We talk a great deal these days about sponsorship," he said in his speech, noting that much of current thinking about sponsorship was developed by Sr. Concilia Moran. "I believe that this award is also about sponsorship, but it is about personal sponsorship, the sense of individuals supporting each other, sponsoring each other on the journey through the health ministry. So I would like to accept this award honoring Concilia Moran on behalf of all the women religious who sponsored me on my personal journey through life and through the Catholic health ministry." □

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