

St. Rose Dominican Hospitals forever in bloom in the desert after 75 years

By John L. Smith

Rose de Lima Hospital in Henderson holds a special place in many hearts, mine not least. You might say St. Rose, as it's affectionately known, had me at hello.

Like thousands of other Southern Nevadans, I was born at St. Rose back when Henderson was still a factory town and few imagined the place "born in America's defense" during World War II would one day become the state's second largest city. Two of my sisters were also born there, but that sets no record at St. Rose.

Only Hollywood's dizziest dreamers could have conjured up the storyline of how seven Adrian Dominican Sisters dressed in angelic white traveled in the heat of the summer by a Union Pacific train from southern Michigan to notorious post-war Las Vegas; how they bought the struggling Basic Magnesium Hospital standing outside the gates of a fading magnesium plant for \$1; and how they overcame withering financial challenges to carve out a legacy of compassion, care, and ethics. The faith-based mission of St. Rose has spread far and continues to reverberate after seventy-five years. In saving the hospital, the seven Adrian Dominican Sisters helped save a whole town.

Sounds like the plot of a Frank Capra movie, doesn't it?

The best part is, it's all true.

The tale begins a long, long way from Nevada. The Sisters trace their order of faith to the women who were spiritually moved by the message of devotion of St. Dominic in 13th Century France. From the first monastery of contemplative nuns who gathered in 1206 in Prouille, for more than six centuries across Europe the Dominican Sisters lived in humble service to God in the tradition of preaching through prayer, study, common life, and ministry. By 1853, the first Dominican Sisters had arrived in New York along with a generation of Catholic immigrants.



As part of the Dominican Order of Preachers (OP), in 1879 they made their way to Adrian, a town in Southern Michigan, and as part of their ministry opened St. Joseph's Hospital. Their initial efforts to help their fellow humans led the Sisters to open other medical facilities, schools, and universities in that state with an eye on nurturing body, mind, and soul.

Given their intrepid spirit, unyielding faith, and humble professional expertise, the Adrian Dominican Sisters were ideally prepared for the role they were about to play in 1947 nearly 2,000 miles West of their motherhouse.



In far-away Southern Nevada, a once-bustling government town born in World War II was fading fast. Henderson had risen quickly from the greasewood-dotted desert in 1941 as the site of a plant to produce magnesium, a lightweight, strong, and versatile metal used in the manufacture of munitions and aircraft parts. The Basic Magnesium, Inc. (BMI) complex, built for the government by the Anaconda Copper Company, in its day would be known as the largest plant of its kind in the world.



The town took shape in just 11 months with water piped in from Lake Mead, a powerline strung from Hoover Dam, a rail spur for the shipment of magnesite ore – not to mention houses, schools, stores, a market, sewerage, a church, and a hospital. More than 14,000 people converged on Henderson to work in the plant.

BMI was a resounding success, manufacturing 166 million tons of magnesium ingots for the war effort. The process was so productive, in fact, that more magnesium was made than was needed. By late 1943, the boomtown's days suddenly appeared numbered when the plant was shut down.

As the jobs went away, so did the people. Hundreds of the town's squat cinder block houses were abandoned with the exodus of thousands of workers and their families.

And what would become of the Basic Magnesium Hospital?



Here our plot thickens. Enter the Irishman.

Father Peter V. Moran had been holding Mass in Nevada towns since arriving in the state in 1937 from his native Ireland. By 1943 he found himself in Henderson opening the doors of a small church on Idaho Way. With his trademark confidence and irresistible brogue, soon enough Father Moran persuaded the government to transfer property into the Diocese's possession that today is known as St. Peter The Apostle Parish on the Boulder Highway. You might say he got it for a song.

Father Moran was not only a man of faith but was also a friend of Nevada's powerful US Senator Pat McCarran and the state's only Congressman, Charles Russell. He tapped his friendships often in the next few years as Henderson made the transition from government ownership to private hands.



By the time World War II ended, the US War Asset Administration (WAA) was preparing to sell off Henderson for surplus. That included its well-appointed hospital. Father Moran had another idea. He believed the hospital, built in 1942 by the Defense Plant Corporation, was essential to the survival of the town.



When he learned that the hospital was being made available for sale, he reached out to McCarran and Russell. In a 1954 interview Father Moran would recall that Russell was a "great help in Washington. He convinced WAA of the feasibility of turning over the hospital to some non-profit organization."

Meanwhile, Father Moran also contacted Bishop Thomas K. Gorman of the Catholic Diocese of Reno for support. Gorman embraced the idea of saving the hospital, and knew just the right person to contact to get the job done: Mother Gerald Barry, OP, Superior of the Adrian Dominican Sisters.

In a May 20, 1946, letter to Mother Gerald Barry, Bishop Gorman presented the hospital perched on the edge of the desert in a foundering municipality in the best possible light, enthusing in part, "The hospital is the last word in equipment, including even dental facilities. The whole plan would be turned over to begin with at a nominal lease of one dollar per year, which would include free water and power. ... The hospital is centrally located to serve the whole of Clark County, being equidistant from Las Vegas, a rapidly



developing community, on the one hand, and Boulder City, the site of the great Boulder Dam, on the other.” It was, he noted, the only first-class private hospital for miles around.

Father Moran followed with his own letter of support, stating his belief that “the majority of people, whether Catholic or non-Catholic, are inclined to patronize a Sisters’ Hospital.”

In an interview, Father Moran would recall, “Bishop Gorman, through Cardinal Mooney in Detroit, obtained the Dominican Sisters of Adrian, Michigan, to assume the obligation.”



By the end of May, the decision was made. On May 31, 1947, the Adrian Dominican Council voted to accept the proposal.

As the weeks dragged on, however, the transfer moved too slowly for Father Moran, and he lost his patience with WAA project administrator John Mueller. The priest had little time for red tape as the process dragged on, and Mueller grew tired of being pestered, at one point telling Father Moran to “please get off my back, it’s being done.”

To which Father Moran replied, “Johnny, when I get hold of the deed and can throw it into the air and watch it flutter to the ground, then I’ll believe it.” Just to make sure he’d made his point, as former Henderson Mayor Bill Byrne recalled in a loving tribute in 1975, the priest followed up with a phone call to his friend McCarran.

Two weeks later, the deal was sealed. By May 1947, the Sisters agreed to own and operate the hospital in exchange for one dollar and the assumption of its \$300,000 debt to be repaid over twenty-five years. The Sisters were on their way to Nevada.



They would call it Rose de Lima Hospital in honor of the beautiful woman who joined the Third Order of St. Dominic in the early 1600s in Lima, Peru and was known for her deep devotion to God and ministry to the ill and poor. She was canonized St. Rose de Lima in 1671 and became the first saint in the Western Hemisphere.

Even with all their faith, one can only imagine how the original Adrian Dominican Sisters felt when their train pulled into the Las Vegas Station around midnight. Father Moran met them at the station and drove them to their humble quarters.

“In the morning I opened the blinds to see what was next to us. Nothing ... nothing but sage brush,” Sister Anne Wasco (Sister Angelita) later recalled. “I remember thinking that if somebody would have said, ‘Go home,’ I would have gladly walked back.”

Instead, this original Sister stayed and helped make a legend.

Rose de Lima Hospital opened its doors on June 27, 1947 without pomp or fanfare. There was much work to be done, and the seven Adrian Dominican Sisters chosen for the arduous task brought a faith-based mission and professional skills to their new desert home.

In preparation for the new assignment, Sister Mary Carolyn Harrison (Sister Carolyn) studied operations on-the-job at a hospital before becoming Rose de Lima's first administrator. It was Sister Carolyn who wrote to Mother Gerald Barry at the end of that long and much-anticipated late-June day, "So far everything seems to be going along smoothly – *Deo Gratias*. The Sisters are all wonderful, and all act as if taking over a hospital was an everyday occurrence." It was Sister Carolyn who worked to integrate the hospital's patient wards at a time the rest of Henderson was largely a racially segregated community. As former hospital office manager Bettylou Anderson fondly recalled Sister Carolyn saying, "If you are a medical patient, you go to a medical ward."



Sister Madonna Maier served as an operating room anesthesia nurse. Registered nurses Sister Marie Augustine Seissinger and Sister Daniel Theresa Smith brought experience to the group. Sister Marie Daniel Lundy (Sister Marie Daniel) served as a no-nonsense, one-woman neonatal unit. Sister Mary Felicia Haidysz (Sister Felicia), Sister Marie Joyce Smith (Sister Marie) and Sister Angelita served in multiple capacities.



Lacking a nursing degree but gifted with abundant initiative, Sister Angelita heeded the call to serve from Mother Gerald, who told her, "Now just do God's work in the new place." Sister Angelita would serve as the hospital's dietician and kitchen supervisor and would become known from Henderson to Minneapolis for her golden-brown loaves of "Angel Bread" Serving as metaphor as well as meal, the loaves were sold in great abundance – some 600,000 -- to support Rose de Lima.

The Sisters made friends and admirers from the start. People who met them couldn't help being impressed by their work ethic and professional devotion.



Of the original seven Sisters, perhaps Sister Marie Daniel is best remembered for her indefatigable presence and “take charge attitude” in the obstetrics unit and maternity ward. She was well trained in labor and delivery. “She maintained a nearly twenty-four-hour vigil over these infants with only brief moments away from the crib side,” recalled hospital physician Dr. Harold Miller.



The good Sister made an especially indelible impression on Betty and Joe Foley.

“My mom had nine children in 10 years,” former Nevada legislator and longtime Las Vegas government affairs professional Helen Foley recalls. “My mom said, ‘I would have had no idea how to do all of that. I had total confidence in sister Marie Daniel, and she was the OB nurse. From the time you went in there, she gave you such confidence that everything would be great.’”

No one ever had to wonder whether Sister Mary Daniel was in charge of “her babies.”

“She could be a bit gruff,” Foley says. “She even told my mother, and told other people, ‘Now you have given birth to this baby, but until you leave the hospital this is my baby. All of them are my babies until you leave.’”

That dedication manifested itself in long hours and love for mother and child. “Some nights she wouldn’t even go to bed,” Foley says. “She would just rock babies and love them and be prepared for any child that was ready to be born.” The Sisters were there for the joy of a healthy newborn and the pain of a baby not meant for the world, as she recalls. “It wasn’t just the physical care you received from the Sisters, but the spiritual care, the compassion, the understanding. Things weren’t always rosy for my family.” Of her mother’s nine children, “one died at three days and another of leukemia at age four.”



Sister Marie Daniel was steadfast through it all, so it was probably only natural that one of Betty and Joe’s children would be named Daniel after the dedicated nurse and dear family friend.

“Sister Marie Daniel didn’t even ask my mom,” Helen Foley says, laughing. “She just named

Daniel. She put his name on a birth certificate and handed it to my mother.”

Sister Marie Daniel also remains a presence in the Smith family. She helped my mother, Jan Smith, in the birth of my sister Margaret Mary in 1954 and sister Marie Danielle in 1957.

“The Sisters were so much a part of our lives. We could trust them. We could rely on them for physical, mental and spiritual guidance and support,” Foley says, speaking for many. “We had such total confidence in the work that they did, and in the mission they had: to love and serve.”



Given that connection, it’s probably only natural that Daniel “Danny” Foley would dedicate many years on the hospital’s community board and serve as the chairman of its foundation board. When it came time for him to step down, his sister Helen stepped up and currently serves on the hospital’s board.

Clark County Commissioner and former Henderson Mayor Jim Gibson has his own special family connection to Rose de Lima, one that provides a reminder of the compassion of the Sisters and the hospital’s vow to embrace patients of all faiths.

Gibson’s grandfather, Fred D. Gibson, was among the engineers to travel to Great Britain to learn the process of preparing magnesium for the production of munitions. Gibson’s father, James I. Gibson, was the president of one of the plants in the civilian version of the BMI complex and served as a state legislator for nearly three decades. He played an integral role in supporting the hospital both as a lawmaker and as a member of the Rose de Lima board of directors. Commissioner Gibson has also had a long relationship with the hospital and the remarkable development of the Dignity Health-St. Rose Dominican Hospitals in Southern Nevada.



Like so many, Commissioner Gibson’s connection to Rose de Lima is personal and begins in childhood. He was afflicted with a form of kidney disease and found professional medical care at the hospital and genuine comfort and concern from the Dominican Sisters. “I was hospitalized in the original building when I was 11 years old,” Gibson recalls. “It meant so much to me and to my family. We just loved the Sisters, the first ones and those that have come in turn. Their commitment has been remarkable and consistent.”

It was a level of care and kindness that neither he nor the grateful Gibson family ever forgot.

In its first five years, the hospital served more than 8,600 patients. By its eighth anniversary, the Sisters were joined by 70 employees and counted 17,374 admissions, 2,350 births, and 5,700 operations.

The hospital also had a major impact on the growing community.



The late Lou LaPorta, tireless booster of Henderson and its beloved hospital, saw Rose de Lima's presence as "the beginning of something dynamic" in the town. It breathed new life into the place at just the right time. And Jim Gibson adds, "When we became a city (incorporated in 1953), we were so proud to have a hospital in our city. Starting a community and knowing you don't have to attract a medical facility is a big deal."

Close-knit by cloth and calling, long work days drew the Adrian Dominican Sisters even closer in their faith. They understood that a lot was riding on the survival and success of Rose de Lima. "We knew we had to build a reputation for the hospital," Sister Angelita recalled.

And they did, patient by patient, day by day, while never losing sight of their mission.

"They were not given amazing power," Sister Molly says. "Rather, they were willing to commit to doing the ordinary with faith and extraordinary love."

They called magnesium the "miracle metal." The tireless Sisters proved that the real miracle was in their mettle.

At its heart, Rose de Lima Hospital's was built on healing and carrying out the true meaning of the Order of Preacher's ministry—to be instruments of Christ's word, love, concern and compassion for humanity. Although St. Rose Dominican Hospitals and their related medical facilities and community wellness centers have reached across economic, racial and denominational lines to meet the growing needs of Southern Nevada and beyond, the mission of the original seven Adrian Dominican Sisters has remained steadfast: "We promote wholeness of body, mind and spirit in the



Dominican tradition of working with others to improve the health status of the community in a shared pursuit for justice and truth with a commitment to those with special needs.”

Some things never change.



This is where Damon Runyon takes over the script, inserting some “guys and dolls” and indefatigable characters from the bygone “Golden Age” of Las Vegas. What does Sin City have to do with a saintly hospital? Well, if you were trying to fundraise for a not-for-profit hospital run by Adrian Dominican Sisters on the outskirts of Las Vegas, you would have to go where the money is – into the heart of the raucous gambling culture of the 1950s and 1960s.

Although the Adrian Dominican Sisters bought the hospital they named Rose de

Lima for \$1 and signed a twenty-five-year note promising to pay off a \$300,000 debt, they never put business ahead of compassion.



They were prudent and worked tirelessly. Sister Felicia, the hospital’s administrator from 1953-1959, was particularly patient centered. Fortunately, from the start they had Henderson bank executive Selma Bartlett in their corner. Bartlett understood that the town’s own fortunes were in no small part dependent on Rose de Lima’s.

The banker also understood Sister Felicia, of whom she said, “always forgave the medical bills of those who could not afford care.”

That forgiveness includes a bill marked “Pd. in full” written from Sister Felicia to my mother in September 1954 after the birth of my sister Margaret. Sister Felicia added, “I want you to realize that this is between God and me.”

By the mid-1950s, the hospital offered 65 beds and had served more than 10,000 patients. Although all faiths flocked to Rose de Lima, it remained a favorite with growing Catholic families. In 1956, Sister Felicia reported an average of 50 babies per month being born there. The maternity ward was bursting at the seams, and some newborns were kept in the top drawer of a bureau.

When surgeon Rueben Lockitch became associated with Rose de Lima, he noticed the medical facility had only one anesthesia machine. And he did what any well-connected Las Vegas physician would have done in that era: He hit up a casino man, in this instance the El Rancho's Beldon Katelman, to help find a way to pay for a second machine. Soon enough, Katelman's \$1,000 was matched by members of his fraternity, and the machine was secured. Lockitch later served as the hospital's chief of staff.



The Sisters' devotion, not to mention the fact they lived in a dormitory designed for World War II factory workers, made them favorites for enthusiastic press accounts. As a *Las Vegas Review-Journal* reporter described them in 1957, "Try to picture six patient, tolerant selfless Sisters of the cloth working around the clock ... to stem a flood of sickness and injury, death and accident, birth and life that descends on them without letup, twenty-four hours a day. That is the story of Rose de Lima Hospital."

As the town grew, and with it the hospital's reputation for quality care, there soon came a time when more space was needed for an increasing influx of patients. That meant raising funds, and that's where Sister Felicia proved to be ideally suited for her job. She set up a St. Rose women's committee that included Katlyn Mowbray and Lucy Foley, who gathered other devout Catholics and their many community allies to a meeting to hear Sister Felicia's plea for help. As Lucy's sister-in-law Betty Foley later recalled it, "We asked a few friends to join us, and Sister Felicia pleaded her case for the hospital so convincingly that one of our neighbors wrote her a sizable check."



That was J.A. Tiberti, whose check sent a message to many. *Las Vegas Sun* publisher Hank Greenspun joined in with a donation and his newspaper's powers of editorial persuasion. Las Vegas insurance man Harley Harmon, who sold policies to the casino industry, began pressing the flesh and raising funds, and soon enough the crowd at the Sands Hotel and Casino was involved. And the Mardi Gras fundraiser was born.

Few casinos dared to disappoint the Sisters, and the Major Max C. Fleischmann Foundation donated \$100,000. The Ford Foundation and Damon Runyon Cancer Fund added to the pot, and a charity golf tournament featuring Bob Hope and Bing Crosby, whose "Road" comedies had America laughing during the era, reminded locals that when it came to supporting Rose de Lima all roads led to Henderson.

The biggest Strip headliners turned out, and the donations rolled in from grateful locals and gruff casino men perhaps hoping a little of the Dominican Sisters' spiritual luck would grace them. The Mardi Gras celebration carried Rose de Lima through challenging years and enabled an early expansion and the financing of an addition that broke ground in April 1958.



But when it came to capturing the hearts of those who held Rose de Lima dear, no promotion came close to the plan hatched by legendary Sands publicist Al Freeman, who was a patient at the hospital after suffering a heart attack and was blessed to taste a piece of golden-brown bread as part of a daily meal. When he discovered hospital dietician Sister Angelita was also the medical facility's baker, the idea for "Angel Bread" was born. As only Freeman, creator of the "Floating Crap Game" photo promotion that advertised Las Vegas to millions, could paint the picture of Sister Angelita, "She is an angel in the kitchen, by name

and occupation." Some 600,000 loaves of Angel Bread were sold to help raise funds for the expansion of the hospital. When Rose de Lima's three-story tower greeted its first patient on October 28, 1960, they could have proposed a toast with toast.

There would be other additions in years to come, including a desperately needed, 20-bed neuropsychiatric unit in 1962, but the time of growth was only beginning. As the population of Las Vegas boomed, and Sunrise Hospital became an option, patients gravitated, or were ushered to, the private hospital on Maryland Parkway. There was even talk of moving Rose de Lima to Las Vegas. Other stresses would come after US President Lyndon Johnson's 1965 creation of the Medicaid and Medicare public insurance programs for low-income patients and seniors.

Through these challenges, the community's support and generosity not only allowed the Sisters to provide for those in need and expand the hospital, it also allowed them to make good on the original \$300,000 debt, which was paid on time and in full in 1972.

Sister Georgeanne Duggan served as Rose de Lima's hospital administrator from 1965 to 1978, some of its most challenging years. Working closely with banker Selma Bartlett, Sister Georgeanne juggled increasingly complex administrative duties with the necessity of



traveling throughout the region to medical association meetings as a representative of the hospital. She eventually served as Nevada Hospital Association president.

Her formation of a hospital advisory board served Rose de Lima well as it expanded important alliances in the faith, business, and political communities. It was no secret that the rapidly growing corporate hospital culture was focused on growing market share.

There would be safety in numbers. When Catholic Healthcare West was formed in 1986 in California, St. Rose would join. That relationship led to the acquisition of raw real estate in what was then the farthest reaches of development in fast-growing Henderson. St. Rose hasn't stopped growing since.

As they had fifty years earlier, the spirit of the Dominican Sisters made its presence known from the ground up with the announcement in June 1997 of ambitious plans to build a \$100 million, four-story hospital and medical office building to be called St. Rose Dominican Hospital, Siena Campus. The full-service, acute-care medical facility featured a Cardiac Center of Excellence featuring two catheter laboratory suites and two open-heart surgery suites that set a high standard in Southern Nevada. With its historic California mission architectural style and its 100-foot-tall bell tower visible from a great distance, it has become a symbol of compassionate healthcare in the area.



St. Rose Dominican, San Martin Campus, the third acute-care medical center in the Southern Nevada marketplace, broke ground on a hot summer day reminiscent of the one the first Adrian Dominican Sisters had taken in stride so many years earlier. It was appropriately named in honor of Juan Martin de Porres Velazquez of Peru, the patron saint of mixed-race people and, notably in a valley full of hotels, innkeepers and public health workers and all who seek racial harmony. As a Dominican brother, Martin was of African descent and devoted his life to caring for the poor by establishing a hospital and orphanage. His name was an inspired choice in one of the nation's most ethnically blended metropolitan areas. When it opened in November 2006, St.

Rose Dominican, San Martin Campus served a new generation of Southern Nevada patients who might not have known the Sisters' story, but surely felt the tradition.



At the dawn of the new century, and in collaboration with the Greenspun Family Foundation, St. Rose Dominican opened the Barbara Greenspun WomensCare Center of Excellence in January 1999 and in doing so brought a new level of healthcare outreach to women throughout the Valley. The concept blossomed into two other WomensCare/Outreach Centers and three Wellness Centers that today serve thousands with a remarkable variety of services ranging from cancer screenings and free mammograms for the uninsured thanks to the Engelstad Foundation R.E.D. Rose Program to birthing and parenting classes, an eclectic array of fitness courses, mental health, wellness, support groups, and Ryan White HIV-related programs.



The wellness centers' importance to the community was accentuated during the months of isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. The centers quickly managed to shift from in-person classes to Zoom meetings, from face-to-face chats to Facetime and phone calls checking up on hundreds of friends who had come to depend on the centers for everything from yoga classes to a mixer for new mothers.

Three full-service hospitals made for a lasting legacy, but it had always been the Dominican Sisters' calling to reach communities of greatest need. With that in mind, Dignity Health-St. Rose Dominican has opened four Neighborhood Hospitals in previously underserved areas to meet emergency medical care needs.



St. Rose Dominican Hospital, San Martin Campus President and CEO Kimberly Shaw finds inspiration in the example the Adrian Dominican Sisters set.



"It's pretty incredible that a group of women religious came out here in the middle of the summer 75 years ago and bought a hospital for a dollar," Shaw says. "This is the legacy that they have left behind so far, and the legacy continues to grow. I think it's pretty inspirational to be a part of that. The Sisters always had a habit of going into areas that were literally a healthcare desert, and this was definitely a healthcare *desert*. Everywhere else that they've gone they've done the same thing. They went into areas that other people didn't want to go into, and they built hospitals, they built educational systems, and they built a legacy."

Looking back from the vantage point of the remarkable success of not-for-profit Dignity Health-St. Rose Dominican's operation, it's easy to underappreciate the many challenges it overcame. Its years of growth were at times financially and politically tumultuous, and increased competition from for-profit hospital corporations in booming Southern Nevada could be nothing short of cutthroat.

III

As Dignity Health-St. Rose Dominican grew in the new century, maintaining the founding mission of the sisters was more important than ever. Sister Phyllis Sikora, Vice President of Mission Integration from 2009 to 2021, led the effort to meet that challenge. Now semi-retired, Sister Phyllis serves as a chaplain at the Adrian Dominican motherhouse.

For her, the words of St. Rose de Lima never lose their meaning.



“St. Rose, who the hospital is named for, used to say, ‘When we serve the poor and the sick, we serve Christ,’” she says. “We never know who we’re serving. We never know what their experience has been.” The greater question is, “How will they experience us as Catholic health care? Through the actions that we give them what they need.”

Caring for persons of all walks of life means more than practicing medicine, but also outreach into the community and a level of cooperative effort in the hospital that transcends professional standards.

“I think right from the beginning, the early Sisters understood that they would not be able to carry out their mission of introducing Catholic health care without the help of the volunteers, the staff, the doctors,” Sister Phyllis observes. “It was like they knew that they depended on our staff, our doctors, the community, and that we were just a part of that healing ministry. We weren’t the whole part, and that we needed each other to carry out that mission. I think that’s the other piece that I’m always struck by when I learned more and more about the early days of the community...we didn’t think that we had to do everything, and we knew that we couldn’t. So, how do you carry out the mission? How do you inspire others to be part of that? I think that’s what they were so gifted at.

“People trusted them. I think that’s the piece for me that when I went to the hospital, to know how much our staff trusted us. And entrusted to us.”

That trust in times of almost overwhelming stress and loss became especially important in the wake of the mass shooting on October 1, 2017 on the Strip, and the withering grind of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic.



“I felt it after the 1 October shooting on the Strip, just that sense of being so much a part of the community, and the other piece was knowing that we were not going to charge the families of the patients above and beyond what their insurance company covered,” Sister Phyllis recalls. “That just spoke volumes to me because I know many times the early sisters would write off a debt. They expressed their belief that God has really taken care of us, and it’s our responsibility to take care of our community.”

During the pandemic, she adds, “I was just inspired by our staff. We didn’t know anything about this pandemic. We didn’t know how our staff would be impacted, and I just felt that they were always moving toward facing that fear in order to help someone else. I saw that every day from our staff.”



Sister Victoria Dalesandro (Sister Vicki) has been affiliated with St. Rose Dominican hospitals since 1992 as a director of mission services and counselor. She first glimpsed the original St. Rose during a brief retreat at St. Peter's Parish in Henderson in 1968. From that perspective, she was able to experience the incredible growth of Southern Nevada and the important part St. Rose Dominican has played in it.

"When the Sisters first came, they knew what their mission was," Sister Vicki says. "They lived the mission. As we've grown, we've hired all kinds of other people, and it's important that they know the mission of the hospital, what it is all about. So, we still have people that do that."

It's common to see employees in the hospital chapel before and after their long workdays. Some employees appreciate the mission so much they have become associate members of the Adrian Dominican Sisters.

For more than a decade Sister Kathleen McGrail, OP (Sister Katie) has worked to promote the vision and values of St. Rose, and the Adrian Dominican Sisters and Dignity Health throughout the hospital system. From conducting new employee orientations to developing programs, Sister Katie spreads the message of faith and humanity that's such an integral part of the St. Rose Dominican story.



Employee orientations express the importance of bringing passion and purpose each day.

"You'll ask them, 'What brought you to St. Rose?' And they offered beautiful testimonials. Someone would say, 'I was born at St. Rose,' or 'I had a baby at St. Rose.' Or, 'My grandmother was sick and ended up dying at St. Rose.' Others would talk about their wonderful experience. This isn't just a career or a profession they're here for, but it's a calling and it's a vocation, and that's what inspired me in our employees because they saw it that way."

That devotion is felt by patients, she says.

"When I would go visit patients, they wouldn't talk about this wonderful machine over there or the equipment that I knew we had spent probably millions to get," Sister Katie says. "But they talk about how they were treated. And we tried to share that in orientation. What was always an inspiration to me was, that's why people were here, because we're a faith-based organization."

“It’s more than their training or their technical skills. We spent a lot of time in those orientations about what each meant. About the healing mission of Jesus: mind, body, and spirit. We’re there for the people that we’re serving, that we’re here for others.”



Sister Judy brings experience as a clinical psychiatric counselor to a duty that often finds her in emergency rooms coming to the aid of patients suffering from a mental health crisis. From that vantage point, Sister Judy saw the hospital’s mission in action.

“There certainly seemed in the Emergency Room, which is where I was, primarily, a family sense,” she says.

The feeling isn’t the product of chance, St. Rose de Lima CEO Tom Burns says. He began his medical career as a registered nurse and administers the hospital where two of his four children were born. For Burns, it’s personal.

“We have a little thing at Rose de Lima, ‘Rose de Lima is family,’” he says. “That’s what the staff likes to say. That’s how they talk about themselves. That’s how they talk about the patients we serve. Rose de Lima is family.”

Although the original hospital is no longer the largest facility, its importance to the community – and especially the those in need – hasn’t diminished.

“Starting out as a registered nurse, being part of that profession, it’s stayed with me this entire time because in the end, if you look at our medical mission, is to serve the underserved,” Burns says. “At Rose de Lima you really get an opportunity to do that, even in 2022 because there’s always people that need help.

Having that kind of perspective has kind of helped me shepherd the facility over these last seven years to where we’re still focused and we’re reminding ourselves every day of how important it is to do the work that the Sisters started 75 years ago and to really take care of those patients and those families.



That family came together during the COVID-19 crisis with faith community outreach and healing prayer gatherings to help bolster spirits during trying times. Long shifts and the weight of human tragedy was wearying, Kimberly Shaw recalls, but the mission remained steadfast. It’s something that she believes sets Dignity Health-St. Rose

Dominican Hospitals apart from other medical facilities.

“That’s just so key of who we are that we all come into this wanting to make a mark, and leave it better than the way we found it,” Shaw says. “And I think that’s something that lives in us from the Sisters, and I think that we try to carry on.”

That includes growing for more than growth’s sake.

“I think that when we look at growth it’s not just about market domination, or making a buck. I think we try to look for areas where there’s need. For example, when we did our neighborhood hospitals, the very first one we opened was in North Las Vegas. Well, North Las Vegas was another healthcare desert. It had really no specific healthcare services in their area. And we filled that void. And that location is wildly successful. But it’s because of that same thought process. We’re not just trying to put a flag up and take market share away from other hospitals. We’re trying to provide a service and a community benefit. And we do a lot.”



After spending many years as Dignity Health Division President in Central California, Jon Van Boening accepted the top market position at the St. Rose Siena Campus at 3001 St. Rose Parkway in a part of Henderson that didn’t even exist back when the first seven Adrian Dominican Sisters came to Southern Nevada. He admits he didn’t fully realize the legacy he was walking into when he accepted his new duty.

“I was so pleased to learn its history and to see the impact it’s had on the community,” Van Boening says. “The Adrian Dominican Sisters, establishing the first St. Rose hospital 75 years ago, began a wonderful tradition... We are very proud of our service to the poor and underserved and of the community at large.”

In more than two decades as CEO of St. Rose Dominican Hospitals, Rod Davis played an integral part of the growth of the health care system, but never forgot its foundation.

“I thought there was an opportunity to assist St. Rose in becoming a full-service community hospital,” Davis says. “But when I got here, over time I bonded with the Sisters. I mean, it resonated with me internally that the best environment to provide healthcare is one that is highly competent and highly specialized, very well trained and has excellent medical professionals. But combine that with the values system that was created by



the Sisters. They created an environment that we always called a healing environment. We didn't just heal the physical aspects of disease or injury; we healed the spiritual and emotional aspects of the person feeling the trauma. And in doing so, there's empirical evidence that demonstrates that if you create an aura of positivity and emotional connection the healing process is actually enhanced.



"I just felt like the environment that the Sisters offered, especially in Southern Nevada, which does not have a predominance of faith-based health care, which is different from many communities across the country, that it would be an opportunity to set St. Rose apart as an alternative for people seeking high-quality health care combined with that healing environment, and a caring, compassionate environment. I believed in the sisters. I believe that's the best environment for health care overall. So, my objective was to continue to enhance the clinical offerings at St. Rose, and at the same time enhance the culture where people cared. They cared for each other and they cared for their job, they cared for the Sisters, they cared for the patients. And it showed when they rendered compassionate care that goes above and beyond just taking care of people as if they're a widget or a nonentity."



With that, I'll end on a personal note.



Southern Nevada has changed dramatically through the years, and St. Rose has changed along with it. When an accident a few years ago left me with a couple broken bones needing surgery, the procedure was performed at the original St. Rose Hospital Campus in Henderson. Stepping gingerly through the front door on crutches, I was swiftly led into the operating room by friendly medical professionals and prepped for surgery. I was put at ease long before the anesthesiologist arrived.

I smiled at the thought of returning to my hometown hospital and mentioned to the nurse that I'd been born there. As the anesthesiologist began to put me into dreamland, the nurse said that the very surgical suite I was in was located where the maternity ward once stood.

“Yes,” I replied. “I thought it looked familiar.”

The angels of mercy at the St. Rose-Dominican Hospitals continue to carry the message and the mission of the Adrian Dominican Sisters after 75 years, and the story continues.

John L. Smith is an author and longtime columnist. He was born in Henderson at St. Rose de Lima Hospital. His family’s Nevada roots go back to 1881. His stories have appeared in Time, Readers Digest, The Daily Beast, Reuters, and Desert Companion, among others.