

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Respect Life Month: Disabilities Awareness

I want to thank Father Fred and Mary Kelly for inviting me to speak with you today.

Family-Friends-Faith

These are three gifts my parents gave me that I have carried with me throughout my entire life.

I was born into an Irish Catholic family whose faith was the center of their universe. When faced with the challenge of raising a child with a disability, they vowed that I would have the same opportunities as their other children.

My life is like a torch that has passed from one generation to the next: from my parents to my brothers and sister, from them to their spouses and partners, to my nieces and nephews and my godchildren – and now to my grandnieces and grandnephews. All have contributed in very special way in making my life possible.

My parents had a vision. Before there were laws, they had the inspiration that anyone who has a vision of a way to make things better can make that vision a reality if they have the courage and perseverance to see it through.

My parents wanted to create a better life, not only for their son, but also for other children with disabilities. They refused to accept what was and worked instead toward what could be.

My father always told me “you live in the world the way it is, so you have to figure it out. Your advocacy will be for those coming up behind you.”

My family taught me the value of family, friendship and faith which enabled me to develop a self-image that saw humor and irony in the world around me.

As I looked back on my life I realized that life is a journey filled with peaks and valleys. Often times when faced with doubts and fears I found myself having conversations with God, asking questions we all ask such as: Why? What do you want from me?

Often times when everyone around me would tell me that I was wrong or that something cannot be done, I would go to bed at night and wake up in the morning still convinced that I should move forward

Throughout my lifetime there are unexpected events that take place that will impact future opportunities.

Which brings me to my journey to All Saints.

In 1953, my family moved from Auburn to Syracuse, New York where I attended Percy Hughes school, a school for the physically handicapped. I attended Percy Hughes from the 3rd to the 10th grade.

During the 7th and 8th grade, I started attending CCD classes once a week. A young priest would come pick me up from school to drive me to class. I remember he was Chaplin to the fire department which I found fascinating at the time. We would have wonderful conversations during our drive from school to church and he remained my friend and mentor throughout my life. His name was Father Harrison.

In the late 1970's I was asked to serve as a member of the diocesan committee on the handicapped chaired by Father Joe Chaplin. As we all know Father Chaplin was a wonderful human being and spiritual leader.

During one of our meetings, Father Chaplin was discussing a certain Sunday that would be devoted to disability issues. He was asking for suggestions of topics for sermons.

I remember saying "Father Joe, I am 32 years old and have never been in the Mother church. Should we not have at least one church in the diocese that is accessible to all?"

Father Chaplin took this comment to heart, along with the discussion that followed and brought it to the Bishop: Bishop Francis Harrison.

What goes around comes around.

A story was written in the Catholic Sun about the relationship between myself and Father Harrison. As a result of this article, the funding was raised to make the Cathedral accessible. We were also able to get many of the parishes in the diocese to survey their properties to ascertain whether or not there were places that could be made accessible for mass. Thus, began the journey to full inclusion by the diocese

When I visited with Father Fred last week, I thought, how ironic that All Saints had a center named after Bishop Harrison and that the Parish has a program dedicated to disability issues.

How far we've come in 40 years.

One of my favorite paintings that I own is Pope John the twenty-third walking hand-in-hand in heaven with John Kennedy. They have been two of my role models in seeing what could be.

One of my favorite quotes is:

“There are those who look at things the way they are and ask ‘WHY’...I dream of things that never were and ask, ‘WHY NOT?’”

All Saints has answered the question: “Why Not?” !