

Someone to know | One woman's blessed, active, beautiful life

Spending decades educating students is a significant life achievement for many people but for Marion Johnson, it was just the beginning. This 94-year-old has been a teacher, a world explorer, an innovator, a champion for women, a supporter of ecology efforts and to top it off, a nun.

Sister Marion Johnson, RSM, has led a life that has taken her from her Midwest roots to see volcanoes erupt in Costa Rica, tortoises living in Galapagos and doctors treating Chernobyl victims in Russia. She is the epitome of a life long learner who never passed by an opportunity to explore oceans, deserts and any other ecosystem in her path.

An unexpected career path

"I attended Mercy High School in Milwaukee and about 10 of my classmates and I entered convents after graduation," begins Sister Marion. "I really wanted to be a nurse." However, shortly after completing course work to enter nursing, she was given a different challenge. "I was told that teachers were needed and was given a class of 72 first graders at a school in Janesville, Wisconsin. It was something to behold because I really didn't know what I was



Sister Marion Johnson (seated center) with other Mercy Circle residents and members of Mother McAuley Liberal Arts High School's knitting club.

doing at first," she recalls.

Sister Marion rose to the challenge and continued to accept additional teaching assignments in Wisconsin, Iowa and finally at St. Xavier University in Chicago where she taught classes in Ecology, General Biology, Botany and Microbiology for 35 years.

One of the perks of being an educator is having summers free. Sister Marion used her summers to explore new avenues of study through science programs at numerous universities. "President

Kennedy at the time supported so many programs through the National Science Foundation and they were amazing opportunities," she notes. Sister Marion was accepted to a program at Stanford University to study sea life at the Hopkins Marine Station. She furthered her deep sea experience through ocean studies at the University of Oregon. She camped out in the desert to learn about that unique ecosystem through a program at Arizona State. She spent four weeks studying mushrooms in the Smoky Mountains.

"One of the highlights of my studies was going to Galapagos Islands," recalls Sister Marion. "For two weeks, I was part of a group of 12 teachers who lived on a small boat and toured the islands. On one 15 minute walk, I counted 300 tortoises all in their natural environment. And we saw the waved albatrosses just throw themselves into the wind and soar. It was wonderful to be part of a group of people who all loved biology."

Sister Marion also traveled on her own with friends. "I wanted to go to countries where other people often don't go, so I visited Czechoslovakia, Egypt, Turkey, Romania. I think of them as forgotten countries," she explains.

Interacting with others

Observing nature has always been a major interest in Sister Marion's life but she also became

involved in learning about different cultures. "I joined the Jane Addams Conference and learned about women in other countries. We took a trip to the Honduras and Nicaragua and it was terrifying to see what they are going through. We invited five Soviet women to come to Chicago and see our country. Then, they invited five of us to go to Russia. We asked to meet with doctors who treated victims of the Chernobyl accident and it was so tragic to hear about the illness. We all just sat and cried. It was 1990 and the lines of people waiting to get food in Russia were so sad to see. It is one thing to read about troubles in other countries and it is very different to actually see it." Whenever she could, Sister Marion supported efforts to help others in need around the world.

Sharing the knowledge

The Association for Innovation in Higher Education was one of the many organizations that Sister Marion joined. Inspired by its mission, Sister Marion designed a program for St. Xavier students that allowed them to move beyond the classroom and textbooks. During a four week winter break each year, Sister Marion took 10 students camping in Florida. "We would start in Key West and then move up the coast. We tented, cooked our own meals and lived in nature."

After five years of trips to Florida, Sister Marion met a

woman working in Costa Rica and moved the program to that location for the next six years. "The students loved seeing Costa Rica. We watched volcanoes erupt and saw all the monkeys. Taking them (students) outdoors is such an experience that they never forget," says Sister Marion.

Reflecting on a bountiful life

Of all the places she has visited, Sister Marion says she would love to revisit Galapagos Island. "I've hiked the Grand Canyon, climbed quite a few mountains, been to China, Hong Kong, Thailand and Singapore but I haven't seen Iceland," she muses. "I would like to go there. I haven't been to Japan or Australia either. There is just so much beauty on this earth and I have been able to see so much."

Among her many honors, Sister Marion was named a Lifetime Trustee for Mother McAuley Liberal Arts High School in Chicago in February. There is also a Lake Marion named in her honor at St. Xavier University. She mounted hip boots and a campaign to clean up the lake several years ago to make it a campus highlight. But as she reflects on her life experiences, she says that she is "most proud of the pre-med program that I started at St. Xavier that has sent so many into the medical field."

"She has always been an adventurer," says her younger sibling, Sister Margaret. "We both started out teaching but she has traveled so much more than I. I love traveling with her, though, because she knows so much about places we visit. I remember touring the south with her and she explained all about Spanish moss in the trees. She loves to see new places."

Sister Marion has memories few others can claim. She can remember seeing a penguin for the first time and talks about the joy of snorkeling in the ocean. She shares that the original Old Russian word for Red (krasnyi) in Russia's Red Square translates to beautiful. She continues to champion women doing significant environmental work. As Sister Marion says, "I've had a wonderful, blessed life."



Carey Templeton Harrington (right), Mother McAuley Liberal Arts High School's president, presented Sister Marion with a plaque in February in recognition of her being named a Lifetime Trustee of the school.