

Sisters of Saint Francis



Sister Joseen Vogt: Back to the Basics

By Sister Marlys Jax

Sister Joseen Vogt is one of those “back to the basics” persons. She is down to earth (not just in terms of height), practical and common. And she goes way back – nine years shy of a century! Her 4’8” stature is no measure of her accomplishments. At the airport in Korea, a ticket agent questioned, “You are HOW old?” So her story is longer than most, and so are the miles she has traveled.

In mid-February, S. Joseen and I returned to Battambang, Cambodia for the dedication of the Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees (COERR) Language Skills Center. It was a very moving homecoming for both of us, but particularly for S. Joseen who, after 20 years of effort and hard work, saw the school she founded in the second largest city in Cambodia. She currently serves as a professional consultant. In addition to the school dedication, 744 students received certificates of advancement on that day. It was edifying and gratifying!

The Center has three classroom sites. The total enrollment is 4,853, with more than half being female— an incredible number considering the patriarchal modus operandi in the country. Of those, 993 students come to a newly-

constructed building that has 15 classrooms, 50 teachers, holding classes from 6:00am to 8:00pm.

The characteristics most revered in “S. Joseen’s” school are honesty, acceptance of everyone regardless of differences, and care and compassion as in family. Because of the corruption that exists in everyday life, bribes are very, very common. The school prides itself as fair and honest regarding exam results, assignment scores, class attendance, and teaching hours.

As it is in most of Cambodia, S. Joseen learned how to do everything “by scratch!” Yes, she wrote the textbooks and teachers manuals for all 12 Levels of educational materials used in the school. That was not an easy task for in the early days there were very limited resources, no electricity, and no such thing as a copy machine! She saw limitations as opportunities. Students learned the Franciscan values of conservation, preservation and sustainability.

This grand lady is well-seasoned in third-world culture, having been prepped in Sierra Leone, Africa, the Philippines, and the Site #2 Refugee Camp in Thailand, before repatriation

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in Cambodia. One small suitcase has served its purpose in her travels throughout Asia and Africa for over 20 years. "Tis truly a gift to be [that] simple." Her heart was always focused on the underprivileged poor, and her mind was set on educating for the future. You name it, she has developed a process of learning English in A-B-C order. Today, COERR school is considered the best Language Skills School in Cambodia!

Franciscan Sister Joseen is welcomed, respected and esteemed in this Buddhist environment. No matter what remote village we set foot in, former students appeared seemingly from nowhere. It was almost as if Cambodian TV had broadcast that Sister Joseen was back in the country! While sitting on a wayside bench in a remote border town, a gentleman covered with dust, rode in on a motorcycle, stared at us and came to kneel before us and say, "Are you Sister Joseen? Oh, you were my teacher in Site #2 Camp. I studied to Level 4 and then went to Journalism School and then became a videographer. Now I am the director of RFA (Radio Free Asia)." And another we encountered said, "Do you remember me? YOU were my teacher!" Later, at a restaurant in Phnom Penh, a middle-aged man came up

and said, "I know you! I learned my English from YOU! Now I teach English at the University of Phnom Penh." The encores continued day-after-day, all recorded with camera! As one office staff person said on departure, "I'd like to Xerox her!"



There is no expiration date on her teaching career. At 90+, S. Joseen could look back on her educational career and call it a day! But the fruits of her labor are still splendidly visible in her daily duties, as she tutors five hours per day, four days per week, at the Hawthorne Education Center in Rochester, Minnesota.

Scripture says, in Matthew 25: 40, "... whatever you do for the least of mine, you do for me." Sister Joseen has spent her life doing just that! Jesus called them "heirs." St. Francis called them "minores." She has lived among them and done what was hers to do—educate a developing country, for now they are the heirs.

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By Sister Ann Redig

The Rochester Franciscan Sisters are located in 12 states, as well as Colombia, South America.

We continue to invite single women to join us as vowed members and women and men to join us as Cojourners (lay associates). Together, Sisters and Cojourners represent our Rochester Franciscan Community... committed to Jesus' mission for today in the charism (spirit) of Saints Francis and Clare of Assisi.

For more information about becoming a Sister or Cojourner, go to our website: www.rochesterfranciscan.org. Select "We Invite You" and then select "Become a Sister" or "Become a Cojourner." To get a better picture of who we are today you may wish to visit all sections of our website.

