

Sister Barbara St. Michaels, AZ



As I begin writing this reflection, the words from the prophet Hosea fill my thoughts: “I will lead her into the desert where I will speak to her heart.” Little did I know how true these words would become. Most of my adult life I have been interested in Native American spirituality. Their deep connection to the sacredness of life and their willingness and determination to learn from Mother Earth inspired me.

In 1991, Sister Caryl, who was my regional coordinator, alerted me to a new position being offered at St. Michael Indian School <http://www.smis1902.org/home.php> in St. Michaels, Arizona. This school was built by St. Katharine Drexel in 1902 and is the only Catholic school on the Navajo reservation. The elementary school principal was looking for someone to coordinate the religion curriculum and to plan the liturgies and prayer gatherings. I came to St. Michael’s for an interview and have been here since July of 1992. Prior to my coming, I attended a training experience entitled, “Basic Directions in Native American Ministry,” held in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Several other members of CSA attended also. For a number of days, we, along with other participants from across the country, were immersed in the spirituality of Native America. There, culture and the Catholic Church came together. We learned so much from Native American women and men religious as well as dedicated lay people. It was a very sacred time.

My years here at St. Michael’s have been adventurous, challenging, and deeply fulfilling. My ministry for 18 years was to lead the students, staff, and parents in prayer, but they have taught me so much about praying. As we experience the harshness of our northern desert climate, we learn together to trust and recognize beauty in that harshness. Together we watch the fierce winds literally blow everything to life. We feel the grit in our hair and mouths and know that spring is here. We rejoice when it rains, knowing that the parched fields will come alive with flowers and grass for the livestock. Ordinary and extraordinary events of daily life are celebrated with cultural religious ceremonies.

Now I minister as the guidance counselor for the elementary school. Every day I have the opportunity to listen with my heart as well as my head. Students and staff share their dreams, their joys, and their pain. The trust between us is rewarded with their beautiful smiles. I passionately believe in living each day with a positive attitude. I also believe that there is a hidden blessing within each of the challenges we experience. Part of this blessing is finding an inner strength we never knew we had. Many of our families experience the devastating effects of poverty, alcoholism, and gang violence. Looking for the blessings and being proud of who we are help the students and me grow in being the best we can be.

I wouldn’t trade my desert experience for anything. Each day, our students, staff, and parents teach me how to “walk in beauty.”