Sister Caryl Hartjes, CSA

Freedom in Her Life

As told by Sister Angela Behen, CSA
Caryl (pronounced Carol) Hartjes was born at St. Elizabeth Hospital in Appleton, Wisconsin, just in time for breakfast. Caryl jokes that this is probably why she’s been “hungry all my life” – hungry for freedom and justice and peace as well as food.

Caryl was welcomed into the world by her parents, Theodore and Alice Susan Ronning Hartjes, and Juanita (“Juany”) who was thirteen months older. Little Jean came nine years later.

Caryl’s great grandmother came from Germany and lived with Caryl’s mother’s family. So Caryl’s mother’s grew up knowing about the German culture – holidays, food and isolated German words. Although Mr. Hartjes’ father came from Holland (Hartjes is a Dutch name), the family never spoke about their Dutch heritage. In 1991, after her parents had died, Caryl, Juany and Jean went to Holland to find out about the Dutch side of their family.

Alice Ronning met Theodore Hartjes while she was directing a play in which he had a lead part one summer in Little Chute, Wisconsin. Mr. Hartjes was a bookkeeper, a credit manager at a
furniture store, and several other places, including his brother’s business. When the family needed money, he was able to do odd jobs like sell insurance for the Knights of Columbus. Even so, the Hartjes girls did without many things other children had but it didn’t bother them. Although Mrs. Hartjes was a stay-at-home mom, before her marriage she taught in a one room schoolhouse as well as traveled around the country doing plays in the summer. She passed her love of music, dance and education onto her three daughters, especially Caryl who started taking piano lessons in the third grade. They had a piano in their home – a Christmas gift from their dad to their mom. Even though her mom was a pianist, the family didn’t play music together. However, the girls practiced reading poetry and prose while their mother ironed. Mrs. Hartjes insisted on good diction and Caryl learned to love reading. Every Saturday she would go the public library and come home with an armful of books. She never bought a book and even to this day she doesn’t buy books, (unless they’re needed for a class) or much else, for that matter.

A simple life style became part of Caryl’s existence during these early years. She was happy although the family didn’t

*Caryl (right) with her cousin, Rose Marie*
have much in the way of worldly goods. Her dad taught her the value of money. She babysat and did odd jobs for 25 cents a week. Her dad brought her a moneybag with a drawstring and a bankbook in which to record her income and expenses. Every penny had to be recorded. Her first purchases were a basketball hoop and basketball.

In the fourth grade Caryl began playing the violin. She could rent a violin for $2.00 a year. She studied violin at the same time she was taking piano lessons. As a result, she didn’t learn either well. She preferred the violin to piano so she stopped taking piano lessons and continued taking violin lessons with the same teacher through high school.

During grade school Caryl began thinking about being called to religious life. Some day she’d like to be a Sister. She went with her parents to an open house at a convent close to her home. In the eighth grade, Caryl was five feet, nine inches tall. It seemed to her that everyone at the convent was short, drab and sad. There was no music and no color, only black and white. No, that life wasn’t for her!

In high school, music was Caryl’s life. She bought a violin for $100 and joined the orchestra as well as a trio – piano, cello and violin. She played the violin for forty years until she stopped playing in the 1980’s. While she was in New York her good violin was stolen and no other violin seemed the same to her. Also she got so busy, that she didn’t have time to practice. Rather than not sound as good as she wanted, she quit playing.
Although music was so important to her, she never considered playing professionally. Rather, she always wanted to be a nurse. Her mother had taken a home nursing course and was able to take good care of her family.

However, Caryl wanted to be a nurse TOMORROW. She entered St. Agnes School of Nursing in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin right after graduation from high school because they promised her that she could be with sick people in six weeks.

Caryl was indeed engaged in nursing activities within six weeks. Moreover, she had a brand new experience – living in very close quarters with many other women her age. The rules at St. Agnes School of Nursing were very strict. Up until this time the role of a nurse was looked down upon and schools of nursing tried to upgrade the status of nursing. It was extremely important that no one, not even a student nurse, would embarrass the profession.

When Caryl was a freshman, she met Sr. Corinne Heimann, CSA. To Caryl, she was everything a nurse and a sister should be. One time Caryl saw Sr. Corrine jump over a hedge and Caryl realized that sisters could be playful. Caryl began thinking about becoming a sister again. She also believed that in addition to a call to religious life, a woman could receive a call to a specific community.

In January, Caryl made her first retreat. It was three days after that retreat that she and another student nurse, Rosanne Van Lanen, talked about going to the Congregation of Sisters of St. Agnes. Rosanne entered in the fall but Caryl waited until after
she finished her nurses’ training. Rosanne did become a sister; she took the name Sr. Anne Jude.

When Caryl told her dad she wanted to become a sister, he liked the idea. Her mom said that was because he wouldn’t have to share Caryl with any other man.

During nurses’ training, Caryl had fallen playing basketball and hit her head which resulted in a concussion. She was hospitalized for a while and missed two months of school so she couldn’t graduate with her class. Although she graduated in October, she had to work until January so that she could afford the fees and items to enter the convent. The sisters at St. Agnes Hospital made all of her new clothes. Caryl always said that going to the convent was not as big an adjustment as starting nursing school.

Sister Caryl on the day she made her first vows as a Sister of St. Agnes
Caryl received the name Sister Theodine after her father Theodore. She became the night supervisor on the medical floor and Sister Theodine was happy about that and alternated being head nurse with Sr. Anne Jude because Sr. Anne Jude was her big sister in nursing school. During this time she had a variety of nursing experiences which was a great help to her future. After six years in Fond du Lac, she was went to work at St. Anthony Hospital in Hays, Kansas. She didn’t get back to work in Fond du Lac for thirty-five years.

While in Kansas, Sister Irene Kohne invited her to develop a countywide home health agency. Sister Theodine loved it in Kansas, the driving back and forth to work, the hot, sunny weather and the German culture. She discovered the need to connect between the hospital and home health care. Home health care instructions needed to be followed up in the home, not just given in the hospital.

Sister Theodine was sent by Sister Irene Kohne to Kansas City to learn how to set up an Intensive Care Coronary unit. While she was in the process of developing this unit, she was sent to work in Spanish Harlem in New York City.

By this time she had decided to resume the use of her baptismal name of Caryl and she learned that she was called to develop programs, not just to maintain them.

In order to work in Spanish Harlem with the Puerto Ricans, one summer Caryl took a Spanish language intensive program at St. Lawrence Seminary in Mt. Calvary, Wisconsin. The next summer she participated in a diocesan Spanish language
program being offered in San Juan, Puerto Rico. She spent two months studying at a university and the third month living with a Puerto Rican family.

While walking the streets of Harlem, Sister Caryl learned about different Spanish cultures, health care on the streets, the connection between poor housing and poor health, and that serving the poor was really serving Jesus. When she saw a gentleman sitting in his doorway, these words came to her, "What you do to these you do to Me."

The Little Sisters of the Assumption in Harlem asked Sister Caryl to design a "Grandmother Program" to train women who had raised their children to become mentors to other mothers so they could learn health and child care. She coordinated this program for three years but worked in Spanish Harlem for many years.

Even when Sister Caryl was in Kansas, she began to realize she was being called to a specific kind of ministry. She worked with her superiors to match her skills with the needs of the
Church. While she was in Harlem, she became part of a group of people with different religions who studied non-violence. They looked at the examples of men like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi. They wanted to bring these principles of non-violence to local people. Sr. Caryl also began to examine the areas of violence within her.

After this non-violence training, she began to follow the revolution in Nicaragua, a country in Central America. When the revolution was over, Sister Eileen Mahony, CSA, who was nursing in Nicaragua, asked Caryl to come to Nicaragua to take her place. Sister Caryl agreed to go to Nicaragua because she wanted the experience of living in a country that was being reconstructed after a war. In Nicaragua she experienced another culture – the Miskito Indian culture. She was a nurse in the clinic in Waspam, Nicaragua. While Sister Caryl was in Waspam, she encountered a particular circumstance that made her feel as if she were really serving Christ's poor. During Lent a woman came to the clinic every week to have

*Sister Caryl (center back) with the staff at La Clinica Santa Inez in Waspam, Nicaragua*
her blood pressure checked. Her son was put in prison by the
government and his mother was very worried about him. As
Sister Caryl shared this mother’s painful story, she felt as if she
were walking with Christ and Mother Mary as He went through
His passion. When the prisoner was released on Easter morning,
Sister Caryl felt as if she had gone through the Way of the Cross
with Christ’s Mother through the Crucifixion until the
Resurrection.

After Sister Caryl returned from her thirteen months in Nicaragua
– a “year of learning” - she went to Maryknoll School of Theology
to get a Masters Degree in Theology with a concentration in
Justice and Peace. It was a wonderful experience for Sister Caryl.
She studied with people from all over the world and learned
about their different ways. She had chosen this course of studies
because she believed that people in countries like Nicaragua
were suffering as a result of some of the policies of the United
States Government. Going to school at Maryknoll in New York
State helped her to realize that there might be some truth in this.

Newburgh (upstate) New York was the next place that Sister Caryl
went to serve poor people. Her friends had gone there

\[\text{Sister Caryl with friends in Newburgh, NY}\]
\[\text{Both young men are deceased due to the violence of the inner city.}\]
the year before to open up a "drop in" center for people who lived on the street. It was Sister Caryl’s first experience living with five sisters from other religious communities. She learned that she didn’t need to do things for poor people but to help them know how to help themselves. There she founded an organization that would rebuild houses.

Sister Caryl (right) and friends visit the home of Perline Begay, (back row, second from left) a Navajo weaver

At this time Sister Caryl realized that she was being called to do two more things in her life – work with Native Americans as well as people who had AIDS. Next she went out to Navajo, New Mexico which was a lumber company town on a Navajo reservation. She worked with Sr. Josephine Goebel CSA teaching religion. This was a year of great internal growth for Sister Caryl. She realized that the Native American reality was much different than what is taught in United States history. Every person in the world can make a contribution. Respect for the earth and prayer of the universe became important to her. Her prayer life had grown and expanded everywhere she had been. She had prayed with yoga and dance in New York.
In New Mexico she incorporated playfulness into her prayer life.

After a year in Navajo, Sister Caryl was appointed to be one of the leaders of the Sisters of St. Agnes. This happened at a good time in her life and she was glad to be back in her own culture. For four years she worked with Sisters of St. Agnes in the Southwestern United States, Kansas, Boyle Apostolic Center and St. Agnes Convent in Fond du Lac.

Then she had a year’s internship in a Washington, D.C. AIDS group. She lived with people with that disease and learned a lot about it. After that year she went to Pennsylvania where some people she knew from Newburgh had opened a hospice for AIDS patients. For four years she treasured walking the death journey with people there. When new drugs decreased deaths from AIDS, her work became more focused on the addictions and lifestyle, which were responsible for people getting AIDS.

So Sister Caryl once again experienced God’s call. This time she felt the urge to come back to Fond du Lac where a new Hospice Home of Hope had been opened. Geographically, she had come “full circle.”

Meanwhile, Sister Caryl had been watching the “School of the Americas” in Fort Benning, Georgia. It is now called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC). She had seen the effects of this school while she was in Nicaragua. Native soldiers would torture and sometimes kill their own people, using the training they had received at WHINSEC.
Also, while she worked with the Navajo on the reservation, she learned the value of the earth and the damage that was done by the violence of nuclear testing. One year a whole group of Sisters of St. Agnes went to the Nevada test site and had a prayer service there. Sisters Caryl and Marie Scott, CSA were arrested for defying the authorities. Although the charges were eventually dropped, the two of them were confined in the hot desert sun for several hours. This was Sister Caryl’s first taste of frustration with the United States Justice System.

For the past ten years, Sisters of St. Agnes and associates had gone to WHINSEC to protest their methods of training soldiers. They would join thousands of others who would stand outside the gates of Fort Benning to ask the United States Government to stop their teachings of violence.

Then in 2002, while she was at the annual demonstration, God opened Sister Caryl’s ears to really listen to the speech of a woman from Guatemala who had lost members of her family to violence. Sister Caryl heard the woman say, “Stop training our soldiers to rape, torture, kidnap, and murder our people. Jesus says, “What you do for them, you do for me.”

Sister Caryl knew she had to do something to try to close that school. Although she was “frightened out of her wits” she knew she had to commit an act of civil disobedience, that is to cross the line of federal property. That action would certainly end in her arrest.
Sister Caryl was arrested, fingerprinted, photographed and taken to the local jail in wrist and ankle chains. She wanted to get across the message that the school needed to be closed. She was arrested by a United States Army officer and kept in jail overnight. The next morning she was taken to a judge. The Sisters of St. Agnes had to post five hundred dollars bail and Sister Caryl was released.

She returned two months later before the same judge in the same courtroom. There were sixty-five in the group but ten were underage so fifty-five were given sentences. The five hundred dollars were returned upon request. Sister Caryl was sentenced to serve 3 months in a Federal Woman’s Prison in Danbury, Connecticut.

Sisters Stella Storch, OP (left) & Carole Gurdak, CSA (right) help Sister Caryl celebrate her birthday in prison

In Danbury, Sister Caryl had two life-changing experiences. Number one, of course, was prison itself. Her first four days were spent in maximum security because she was considered “a risk” even though there was nothing in writing that said she
was a risk. She stayed the next two months in medium security, which was a little less restricting. While in prison, Sister Caryl experienced a torn retina in her eye. She was taken in chains between two guards to the eye doctor. It was hard to see other people’s reaction to her. They looked at her like she was a criminal. The last month of her prison term, she was permitted to be in minimum security which was where she was supposed to be in the first place. One of the things about prison that bothered Sister Caryl the most was the constant noise. Noise is violence. During all this time Sister Caryl was supported by prayer, letters, and visits from Sisters of St. Agnes, friends and family.

The second amazing event that happened while she was in prison was that she received a letter stating that in 1930, Alice Susan Ronning delivered a baby girl at Cook County Hospital in Chicago and she was adopted by a Catholic family. The writer of the letter was this adopted baby who was raised as an only child, lived a normal life, married her high school sweetheart and had four boys. After her adoptive parents died, Delores (Dodi) wondered if she had siblings.

_Sister Caryl (right) with her sisters Jean, Dodie, Juanita_
of a family. She looked for twenty years without results. She contacted a genealogist and looked at the 1930 census to find an Alice Susan Ronning in Ashland, Wisconsin. She looked up the current U.S. census and did not find an Alice Susan Ronning. She did find an obituary for (Grandma) Anna Ronning which listed a daughter Alice, wife of Ted Hartjes, and grandchildren Juanita in Appleton, Jean in Canada and Sister Caryl Hartjes. Delores got a tour of St. Agnes Convent, got Sister Caryl’s address and then wrote to Sister Caryl in prison. Dodie is now living in Milwaukee and was warmly welcomed into the family by Juany, Jean and Sister Caryl.

Today Sister Caryl volunteers at Hospice Home of Hope in Fond du Lac, gives talks about her prison experience, tries to get across the message that WHINSEC needs to be closed,

During a workshop on peace in Gethsemane, KY, Sister Caryl and friends make origami peace doves

participates in the weekly peace rallies at Veterans’ Park in Fond du Lac and she also volunteers at local prisons. She visits with Juany and her “new sister” Dodie and Jean when she comes from Canada. Unfortunately Sister Caryl is on the Federal Criminal List since her arrest at Fort Benning so she cannot travel to Canada. This shows that all of our choices have long-range consequences.
Above all, Sister Caryl appreciates her precious freedom – freedom to live her life as she sees right, freedom to continue to answer God’s call as a Sister of St. Agnes and freedom to go where she is led next, wherever that may be.