

M. PATRICIA OLIVER

Advisory Board chair is ‘Ursuline’ at heart and by association

Mary Patricia Donnelly was a two-time vocation contest winner at Our Lady of Peace School in Erie, Pennsylvania. While her religious vocation never advanced beyond the two days she spent with the Sisters of Saint Joseph – her prize for winning – her regard for vowed religious women has never wavered.

Today, M. Patricia Donnelly Oliver is a wife and a mother of four grown children. She is an attorney and a partner in the law firm of Tucker Ellis, specializing in financial services, securities and capital markets, corporate governance, mergers and acquisitions. She is also the chair of the Ursuline Sisters’ Lay Advisory Board.

Pat and husband Jim, also an attorney, reside in Lakewood. A particular point of pride is that youngest son James is following in her footsteps, enrolled in his first year at Case Western Reserve Law School, Pat’s alma mater.

Pat’s association with the Ursulines dates back to the early 1980s. Fresh out of law school and having completed a summer internship with Squires Sanders & Dempsey, she was offered and accepted a job with the firm. Colleague Bob Maynard brought her onboard to assist with the sale of the Villa Angela Academy property the firm was negotiating for the congregation. “With a name like Mary Patricia Donnelly,” he said, “you have to be involved with the Ursulines!” Pat still laughs at the memory.

“I’ve grown up with the Ursulines,” she says. Working on the sale of the Villa Angela property afforded her a lot of experience she might otherwise not have had. “I was a young lawyer. The sale had many aspects to it. I had to deal with the city, with the diocese and with the



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Environmental Protection Agency. I learned a lot.”

In the early 90s then general superior Sister Maureen McCarthy established the advisory board and invited Pat, still serving as the congregation’s legal counsel, to be part of it. Years later, Sister Maureen recalls Pat’s professionalism and her support of the community at a very difficult time. “She was the first person to arrive on the scene in the aftermath of the March 1995 murder of Sister Joanne Marie Mascha. Pat is still with us as friend, board member and family.”

Pat remembers feeling honored to be called upon to serve on the inaugural advisory board. “I was impressed that the sisters were savvy enough to consider the business angle of their operations and open to having advisors.” But the endeavor was not

without the usual growing pains. “Early on, because it was new, no one seemed certain about how to proceed. We had all the pieces but weren’t sure how to utilize them.”

Since then the board structure has evolved through many iterations and a series of administrative teams. Under the leadership of Ursuline president Sister Susan Durkin the board has been refashioned into a committee structure. Pat, chair of the entire board, also serves on the Property & Facilities Committee. “Pat was our first choice for chair,” Sister Susan notes. “She understands the culture of religious life and what we treasure most as a congregation. She generously shares her expertise, asks great questions and ultimately is helping us to navigate some very challenging times.”

“The Board is very different now,” Pat says, with genuine excitement in her voice. “It’s very forward-thinking

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– Sister Susan Durkin

and actively engaged. We have highly experienced professionals who are not only interested in the community, but eager to demonstrate their support and to help however they can.”

The sisters, too, are more forward-thinking, she notes. They still attend to the Mission, but they attend to Mission in a more fiscally responsible way, looking to the future and to fashioning a legacy. “Together we are smarter, more aware of present realities in our planning.”

Involvement with the congregation has been “nothing but a positive experience,” Pat says. “I have been blessed through my relationship with the sisters. I have made many wonderful friends.” Among them is Sister Joanne Gross, also an attorney. “Joanne is a wonderful colleague and friend. Between the two of us we have pretty much the whole modern history of the Ursulines.”

Sister Joanne holds a mutual regard for Pat. “She has been a personal friend and an ‘informal’ professional mentor for more than 30 years ... Pat’s steady, savvy and compassionate advice has seen the Ursulines through several major decisions and complex legal issues.”

Also counted among the special Ursulines Pat has known are Sister Rose Angela Johnson (from the Villa Angela sale), Sister John Mary who in her days as congregational treasurer taught Pat much about finance, Sister Maureen and those who followed her, Sisters Virginia DeVinne, Angelita Zawada, and Susan Durkin.

Pat says she is especially grateful for the witness of the sisters’ lives. “As a lay person I sometimes get hung up on my commitments as a professional woman, wife and mother, all things having to do with me. Then I see the sisters. By virtue of their lifestyle and commitments, they naturally think beyond themselves, acting on behalf of others. They have a broader, less selfish perspective. That helps me stay more grounded.”

Pat Oliver’s thoughts of a religious vocation may not have advanced beyond her prize winning essays, but

she remains indebted to the sisters. “I am a much better person for having known the Sisters of St. Joseph and the Ursulines,” she asserts. “They have created an environment for me and for others to be our best selves.” And her best has indeed been a boon to the Ursuline community.



Pat and Sister Susan Durkin at a recent committee meeting

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