

SPOTLIGHT

Sr. Kathleen O'Brien

Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost
American Islamic College, Chicago, Illinois

(Member since November 1999)



A Catholic nun serving in a Muslim College is certainly a cause for conversation, and that suits Sister O'Brien just fine. This late-career move speaks to Sister's sense of purpose and dedication to high quality education for everyone.

Sister Kathleen entered the School Sisters of St. Francis in 1962, celebrating her 50 years with the congregation a few years ago. She has spent most of her professional career with Alverno College but was born in Springfield, Massachusetts. She and her twin sister are the oldest of six children. Her siblings are now

scattered throughout the country, her twin lives in Massachusetts, a sister lives in Paris, France and one in Juneau, Alaska. One brother lives in California (as does her 96-year old mother) and another has made Virginia his home.

She earned a BA in history and math from Alverno, an MBA from Vanderbilt University in Tennessee and a PhD in Management from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She taught history and math in Nebraska and South Dakota, before returning to Alverno, retiring as the Vice President of Academic Affairs in 2015.

Yes, she retired in 2015, however, an executive search firm contacted her about helping the American Islamic College in Chicago. She first said no; she really didn't want to move to Chicago and Alverno still needed her help on some special projects. However, the search firm convinced her to at least meet with the American Islamic College to learn more about its mission. Sister Kathleen ultimately signed a three-year contract to help the emerging College earn its accreditation and to serve as its founding Provost.

She was inspired to help because she was intrigued when she learned that Chicago has a large Muslim population totaling between 500,000-600,000 long-time residents, with strong roots built

in the Midwest. At this time in history, Sister Kathleen felt the need to help support a liberal arts academic institution providing an inter-faith orientation. Presently the college offers an Islamic Studies track and will expand to a full liberal arts curriculum upon earning accreditation hopefully by late summer 2019.

Her commitment requires more than tabling her retirement, she has had to adjust her living arrangements as well. She lives in an apartment in Chicago Mondays through Thursdays and travels home to Milwaukee Fridays through Sunday.

It isn't all work and no play for this energetic woman, with a sibling living in Juneau, Alaska, Sister Kathleen has traveled there multiple times. Last February the School Sisters of St. Francis held an election in India, to name leaders of their global community. Sister Kathleen spent a month in India and met fellow sisters from around the world. While there, she traveled to a Hindu university located at the base of the Himalayans to give a presentation. What was once a medical college, now offers a diverse course of study including engineering, nursing, etc. Her observation of this land whose population will soon surpass China's is a country that can't keep up with the infrastructure its burgeoning growth demands. "High rises and squalor is the landscape of the cities."

Her years in education and travels abroad have provided keen insight into American strengths. "American higher education is still the best system in the world because there's so much choice and access to public and private institutions. I am proud that Alverno is offering a first-rate education to many first-generation college students, who haven't had the opportunities of many of their classmates. We must be mindful of the dwindling support for public institutions, they are important."

When asked what she values about her Rotary experience the good Sister couldn't choose just one thing. She loves the interactions at the Tuesday lunches, engaging on significant work with committees and the variety of Tuesday luncheon speakers on important as well as interesting, but more mundane topics.



Editor's Note:

Next week this column will feature James Ford, President, Motivational Marketing, Inc. Rotary Spotlight is written by RCM Board Member (and its Sergeant at Arms) Barbara Velez.