

Spotlight at St. Mark

JEANNE WHITESELL

“I keep coming back to St. Mark because there is such a warmth about the people here, and I also like to support the Peace and Justice Commission in its work for social justice.”

Background: Jeanne was born in Aberdeen, SD, and graduated from high school there. She then took a job as a teletype operator with American Airlines, and worked first in Washington, DC, and later in Chicago. After a few years, she decided working shifts was not conducive to a social life, so she left the airlines and moved to the Los Angeles area. There, she did office work until she met her husband, Joe, on a blind date set up by a friend.



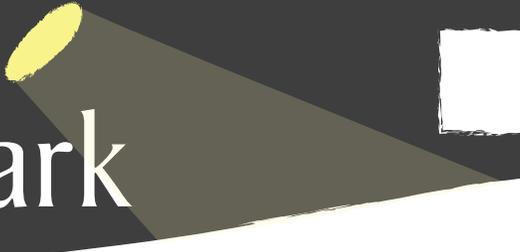
They married in Long Beach, and after the birth of their first son, they moved to Naples, FL (Florida was Joe's original home). While living in Naples, their second son, Dan, was born. The family then moved to Gainesville, where Jeanne and Joe attended the University of Florida. Joe received his PhD in plant physiology, and Jeanne received her BA in education. Their daughter, Beth, was also born during this time. After graduation, the couple moved to Little Rock where Joe taught biology and botany at the University of Arkansas (UALR), and Jeanne taught first and second grades and reading for 25 years in the Little Rock School District in the inner city schools. Jeanne also received her MA in education with a reading specialty at UALR.

Joining the Peace Corps: After Joe died, Jeanne decided to pursue a long-time interest at the age of 68: joining the Peace Corps!

“I've always had a passion for peace and justice, which was encouraged by the Benedictine nuns at the Catholic school that I attended from fourth through ninth grades,” she says. “The Peace Corps began just after our first son was born, and I thought it would be wonderful to participate in something like that. When in the 1970s I read that President Jimmy Carter's mother, Lillian—who was in her 70s—had joined the Corps, I realized that someday I might still be able to follow my dream. After I retired, a friend in Little Rock who was thinking of joining encouraged me to do so as well, and even though she didn't go through with it, I did. It was wonderful and a once in a lifetime experience.”

Jeanne served from July 2001 through August 2003 as a school and community resource volunteer in a village in South Africa. She says, “One of the major things I got

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from that was how little one could live with and do well, particularly coming from our culture that focuses on defining us by the stuff we have. It was kind of a spiritual experience.”

She worked with two schools in her village and tried to help the teachers with their teaching skills. It was frustrating at times because the approach to work and life was more laissez-faire than she was accustomed to, but Jeanne learned to appreciate the differences and how to “live and let live.” She established two libraries in the schools, and also led community HIV/AIDS education in the community, which was a first at that time. Jeanne says the group of volunteers she worked with still keeps in touch, and she is enjoying a reunion with them in Huntington Beach this month.

Finding St. Mark: After returning from South Africa, Jeanne moved to Huntington Beach, where two of her sisters and their families live. Another sister and her family live in the San Diego area. Two of her children, Dan and Beth, were also living in the area by that time.

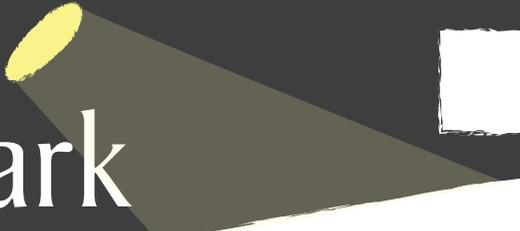
“As a lifelong Catholic, I looked for a church community where I could be part of a group of people who were dedicated to working on social justice issues as part of their faith journey. Unfortunately, I never seemed to fit!” says Jeanne. “I then found a Yellow Pages ad that described St. Mark as a church with open minds and open arms. I visited and was immediately welcomed as a member of the Peace and Justice Commission, and became a member sometime in 2004. I continue to be a member of the Peace and Justice Commission. I also worked with the Nicaragua Committee for a few years and traveled to Nicaragua with a St. Mark delegation on two different occasions when we were still working with CEPINO. Lately, I've been focusing on Fair Trade, participating in our Fair Trade chocolate sales and got the ball rolling to get St. Mark registered as a Fair Trade Church with the Fair Trade Campaign.”

Family and Fun: Jeanne is the eldest of five girls, four of them who still have homes in Southern California. Her son Pete and his wife, Mary, live in Gainesville, FL. Son Dan is living with Jeannie while he pursues his PhD at UCLA. Her daughter, Beth, lives in Long Beach and teaches middle school, and is the mother of Jeannie's two “favorite little ones, Dylan (almost 4) and Gracie (almost 2).

Besides family time and church time, Jeanne enjoys reading, creating ceramics, teaching in the literacy program in Huntington Beach, and gardening.

We are fortunate that Jeanne's passion for social justice found a home at St. Mark and we thank her for her continuing contributions to our church family and the wider world!

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A graphic of a spotlight with a yellow lens and a dark grey beam pointing towards the right.