News
Ministry
Social Justice



Sr. Ann Kendrick, a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur, is seen at a Publix Supermarket in Apopka, Fla., during a 2012 demonstration for farmworkers. (CNS/Florida Catholic/Jean Gonzalez)

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Apopka, Fla. — March 30, 2021
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Sr. Ann Kendrick might not be able to dunk a basketball, but she still made it on the Magic Vision screen at center court of Amway Arena in Orlando, Florida.

That's because the Sister of Notre Dame de Namur was honored as a "Social Justice Game Changer" by the Orlando Magic Association because of her longtime advocacy for the rights of Florida's farmworkers.

"The purpose is to honor and to celebrate so many of the people in the Orlando community who are fighting for change and who commit their lives to making Orlando a better place," said Magic coach Steve Clifford. "It's just a way to celebrate them, what they stand for, and what they do for our community."

Kendrick was honored March 24 when the Magic played the Phoenix Suns. Center court is some 1,300 miles from upstate New York where Kendrick grew up, but it also is a world away from the fields where farmworkers toil in the sun and the Hope CommUnity Center where the religious sister works.

As a youth, Ann Kendrick was a popular sorority girl who went about life without a care in the world. She was busy with school and teen activities, but her life completely changed when her eyes were opened to a world outside her comfortable hometown and carefree lifestyle.

"I was an arrogant 16-year-old and thought I was the best there was," she confessed. "I won the opportunity to be part of an international exchange program. I thought I was going to France. I was all pumped up."

As it turns out, France was not on the travel agenda. The students visited Guatemala, a location without the museums, art and lovely sites that the young girl expected to be part of her educational experience.

Instead, the Central America destination had the poor, who were barely living without clean drinking water, food or a roof over their head.

"I didn't know poor people. I didn't know poverty. I didn't know oppression. The people were living in horrible conditions," she told the Florida Catholic, newspaper of the Orlando Diocese. "It was cultural awareness. I came home, and I didn't go back to being a society girl. It is amazing what God does for you."



Sr. Ann Kendrick, a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur, is honored March 24, 2021, as one of "Coach Clifford's Social Justice Game Changers" during an Orlando Magic and Phoenix Suns' NBA basketball game. She was recognized for her longtime advocacy for the rights of Florida's farmworkers. (CNS screen grab/Courtesy Orlando Magic)

God has been working in Kendrick's life ever since her life-changing experience. This year, she celebrates 55 years as a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur, and she marks 50 years of ministry serving the poor and immigrant communities in central Florida.

"I have been blessed," said Kendrick about her life's work. "These are God's good, noble, holy people."

Returning from Guatemala, Kendrick was transformed. After completing high school, she left Syracuse in New York, where she grew up and went to a Catholic women's college: Trinity Washington University.

It was at Trinity when the Lord began calling her to religious life and where she met the the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. The congregation founded the school in 1897.

Kendrick studied Spanish and psychology, but learned much more. "The sisters believed in women," said Sister Kendrick. "They taught us to be strong women. I was inspired."

Kendrick, 77, this year, was in her early 20s when she joined the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur to begin her vocation. Founded in 1804 by St. Julie Billiart, the congregation started as a teaching order for the education of young girls.

Today, the congregation continues to carry on in the footsteps of their foundress teaching in areas of the world and expanding ministry. The religious help street children, AIDS orphans, homeless, poor, abandoned and immigrants.

In 1971, Kendrick's early ministry path suddenly took her from the classrooms on a different course. Bishop William D. Borders, the first bishop of the Diocese of Orlando, invited her and her sisters to visit Florida.

They visited the small rural town of Apopka with dirt roads. It had a large population of African Americans, Latinos and Haitians. They saw the area's farms and groves and tiny businesses. They toured the migrant labor camps with wooden barracks, where the workers lived.

Borders presented the idea of starting a migrant apostolate in Florida. The sisters were hooked.

"We told the bishop that we would come and start something," Kendrick recalled. "We told him that we didn't want a job description. We said that we needed to talk to the people and find out what they needed and wanted."

With broad-based community support, grant money and the help of the Diocese of Orlando, a much-needed farm worker health clinic was established in 1973 providing basic medical needs. Then, came other projects, which the sisters were involved, keeping them busy and ministry alive.

For example, the Office for Farmworker Ministry provides tutoring, mentoring, family counseling and immigration services. Homes in Partnership makes low-cost housing possible. Community Trust Federal Credit Union helps families receive credit and loans. The Farmworkers Association of Florida addresses social, economic and health issues.

An initiative Kendrick said she is most happy about is Hope CommUnity Center, established to empower immigrants and working poor through education, advocacy and spiritual growth. She highlighted the center's service learning program aimed at volunteers.

"The program invites students from around the country to come see us, live with immigrant families, work in the fields. That is how we learn. That is how minds are changed," she said.

Apopka has grown and developed over the years. Today it is Orange County’s second largest city with nearly 50,000 residents.

Kendrick has lived out her calling sowing seeds of hope and faith in the farm fields of central Florida, but also growing in faith through the people she has ministered to and witnessed living the true Christian life.

The people, she said, "are my catechesis."

"They are beautiful, generous, hospitable and have a beautiful spirit. They honor the earth and love human beings," she said.

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Reeves is a correspondent for the Florida Catholic, newspaper of the Diocese of Orlando.

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