News
Religious Life

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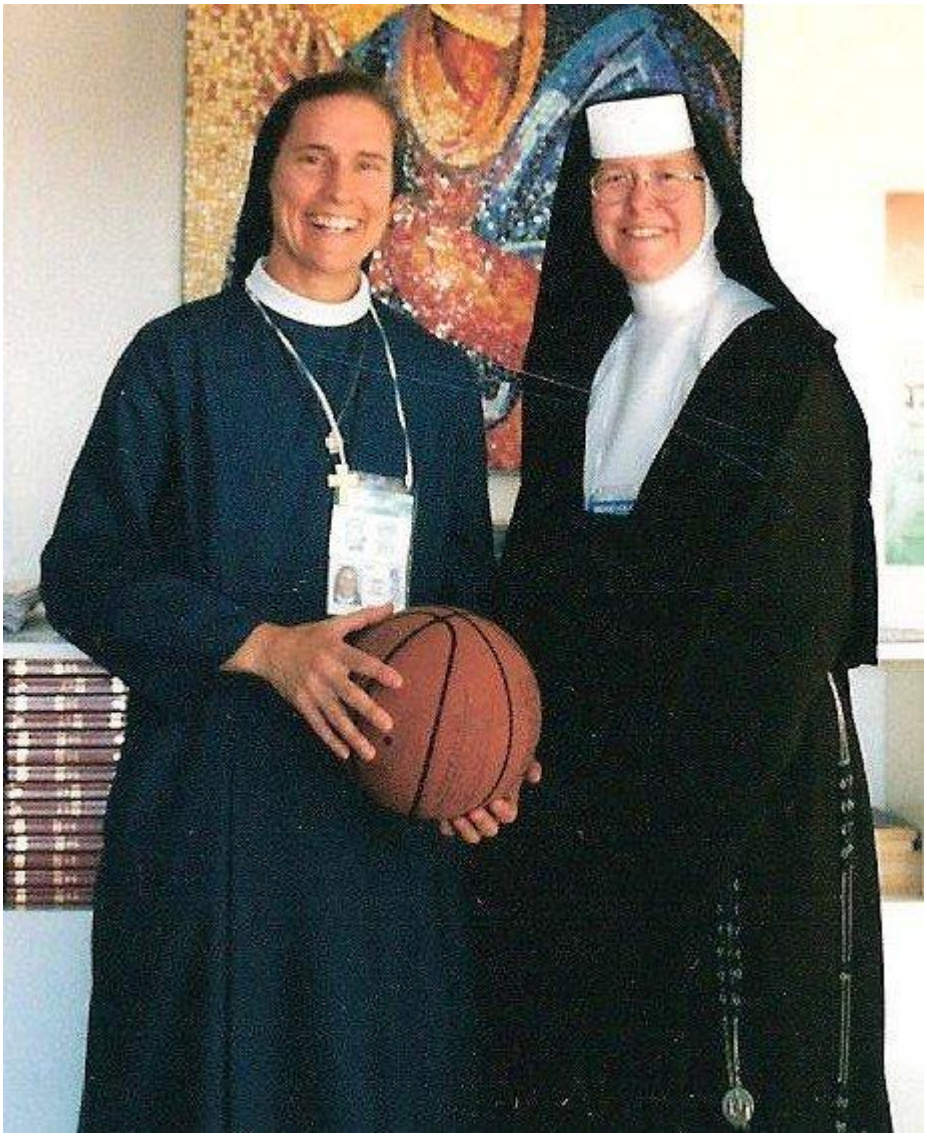


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Sister Irene Regina of the Daughters of St. Paul, left, and Sister Margaret Ann of the Carmelites of the Most Sacred Heart of Los Angeles in an undated photo. (OSV News photo/Courtesy of Sisters Irene Regina and Margaret Ann)

Divine intervention may be the only explanation for how two college teammates graduated, ventured off on different career paths miles apart and then, 40 years later, ended up on the same journey in Miami, both wearing habits.

"I think we met at the first practice on the basketball court," said Pauline Sister Irene Regina, reflecting back to college days at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, where she first met Carmelite Sister Margaret Ann.

The two are rekindling their friendship after Sister Irene was assigned to the Pauline Book and Media Store in Miami. Sister Margaret Ann is principal of Miami's Archbishop Coleman Carroll High School. Sister Irene's move to Miami marks the first time the two women have lived in the same town and in visiting distance since college days.

"We were freshmen and both looking forward to playing college basketball," said Sister Irene about that fall semester back in 1979, when Sister Irene and Sister Margaret Ann met as Mary Hoernschemeyer from St. Louis and Brenda Laechelin from San Antonio, respectively.

They both had landed basketball scholarships. Sister Irene came from an all-girl high school, Ursuline Academy in St. Louis, where she played softball, basketball and volleyball. She took photos for the yearbook and wrote for the newspaper.

Sister Margaret Ann attended East Central High School, a large public school in San Antonio, where she was involved in basketball and track. She made high marks, took honors classes and was a sports editor for the school paper.

Both were from Catholic families, tall, athletic and loved the game of basketball. They hit it off right from the start.

"We could talk about anything," said Sister Irene in an interview with Florida Catholic Media, a multimedia communications services provider in Florida. "We were dedicated Catholics and would go to daily Mass together on campus. Even on road trips, the two of us would go to Sunday Mass. Our coach was Catholic, and he always found a nearby Catholic church for us."

Both were excited to be part of the school's class of 1983 and the Lady Rattlers.

"We easily became friends," said Sister Margaret Ann. "We shared almost everything. She shared her meal card with me, and I gave her a set of keys to my car. We did not talk a lot about God or our faith. We just lived it together."

On the court, both women played the post position and often had to play opposite each other during practices.

"We were co-captains — her brains and my brawn," said Sister Irene jokingly. "She is the reason I became such a good player. Many times, we had to practice against each other, with all the elbowing and bruising that goes with that, and we're still

friends."

They helped each other with their game.

"She was an amazing basketball player. She was strong under the basket and played with great determination. I was not the athlete. I was more of the student of the game," said Sister Margaret Ann.

The Lady Rattlers won two games and lost 18 that first year, but the losses did not dampen the women's spirits.

"By the time we were juniors, it was completely reversed," said Sister Margaret Ann.

In their final year, the girls were the only seniors on the team, and both were selected by the coach to serve as co-captains. Then their relationship became even closer.

The doctors discovered a malignant tumor near Sister Margaret Ann's third rib and reports were not good. During a long surgery, the medical team removed the tumor along with half of her second, third and fourth ribs.

"Sister Irene was a huge help," said Sister Margaret Ann. "She helped me think about living and not so much about preparing to die. With Sister Irene's help, one month after surgery, I played — really just made a showing. Sister was the strength I needed. She really helped me carry the cross."

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Sister Irene initially majored in engineering but switched to physical education thinking it was a better fit, but not aiming at a specific career. Upon graduation, she returned home to look for a job.

"I remember being interviewed for a job at a Catholic high school," she said. "The religious sister interviewing me took me over to the convent. I thought that was funny because I was interviewing for a job, not a convent."

Sister Margaret Ann initially majored in math but switched several times before settling on English. "I decided to be a basketball coach and teacher. I had done some coaching with young children and really enjoyed it."

After graduating, she landed a job at Troy State University in Troy, Alabama. "I was able to coach college basketball and get a master's degree in 11 months. I then returned to San Antonio and coached high school basketball and taught English for four years in large public high schools."

Sister Irene continued her search. She found out the Archdiocese of St. Louis was holding its first vocation retreat for young women. That's where she met the Daughters of St. Paul.

"I felt like the congregation was a perfect fit. I didn't find a job, I found a community," she said.

She entered Nov. 1, 1983, in Boston and took her first vows in 1987, with her good friend cheering her on.

"She may have had an inkling that I would enter religious life," said Sister Irene about her teammate. "Near the time we graduated, she told me that our coach wasn't worried about my future. He told her that I would probably be a pilot or a sister, and that either way I'd be close to God."

Sister Margaret Ann continued coaching and teaching — her dream jobs — at public schools but felt something missing. She continued to discern God's will. "I wanted to do and be whatever he had created me to do and be."

When some of the students in her school asked her to start a Bible class, she knew God was answering her prayers and working in her life.

"My principal was willing to permit it as long as it was low-key," she said.

Her Bible class was packed, the students engaged and interested. "It was the hunger for truth, goodness and beauty that I saw in their eyes that brought me to ask God what I needed to do to best help them. I knew that God had created me to be a religious sister."

She visited the Carmelites of the Most Sacred Heart of Los Angeles, and after discerning, made her first vows in 1993, with her good friend there lending support.

Sister Margaret Ann has served at Archbishop Carroll High for seven years, and during her tenure her dedication to her students and the school community has not gone unnoticed. The former Lady Rattler gained fame in 2017 when a video of her

cutting down trees in the aftermath of Hurricane Irma went viral, amassing more than 7 million views on Facebook. Her followers nicknamed her "the chainsaw nun."

Her popularity continued after another video surfaced of her and her religious sisters showing off their basketball skills in support of the Miami Heat. The Globetrotters spotted the video and made her and her team players honorary picks during their draft.

As a Daughter of St. Paul, Sister Irene's ministry has taken her to Anchorage, Alaska; Philadelphia; San Diego; San Francisco; Cleveland; Toronto; New York City; Chicago; Honolulu; Los Angeles; and, now, Miami.

Both women remain active and go on the courts from time to time to shoot a few hoops.

"A good friend is a gift from God," said Sister Irene. "Even though we didn't see each other for long stretches of time, just knowing that someone is out there praying for you and hoping for your good is a boost. As religious sisters, we spur each other on to holiness."

"We started as teammates on the basketball court and now we are religious sisters — truly sisters — helping each other on the road to heaven," said Sister Margaret Ann. "Now our goal is much more than a basketball trophy. Someday we will spend eternity together in God's heavenly court."