News
Religious Life



Sr. Nancy Schreck addresses the LCWR annual assembly Aug. 16 upon receiving the 2024 Outstanding Leadership Award. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)



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Dubuque Franciscan Sr. Nancy Schreck has worked with congregations of women religious across the country and around the world, spent years in high school classrooms, and ministered for decades with other sisters in rural Mississippi, and after all that experience she has this to say about Catholic sisters: "We are women of steel."

Schreck was speaking to nearly 800 Catholic sisters at the Leadership Conference of Women Religious assembly Aug. 16 as she received the group's Outstanding Leadership Award.

She told attendees that it may be a time of darkness, but the darkness is not to be feared. Rather, darkness is a holy mystery.

"We do this work in darkness," she said. "However long the night."

Schreck has served in leadership and formation ministry in her congregation, as well as on the LCWR national board and in the LCWR presidency, and as a delegate to the International Union of Superiors General. She has given presentations at LCWR assemblies and a national and regional conferences for groups including the National Religious Retirement Office, the National Religious Vocation Conference, the Religious Formation Conference, and the Franciscan Federation, and co-founded and is executive director of a community service organization in Okolona, Mississippi, called Excel, Inc.

She said that after working with, consulting and facilitating for hundreds of congregations, she has learned that the contemplative side of life — interior work, she called it — is vital to being able to do the exterior work the world so badly needs. Among that work is learning to be global citizens and truly seeing yourself in others.



A much younger Sr. Nancy Schreck at Mount St. Francis in Dubuque, Iowa. (Courtesy of Dubuque Franciscans)

"Can we really call it communion if we only sit at the table with people who look like me?" Schreck said to applause.

She advised sisters to never give up hope.

The future isn't clear, but what is clear is that we're going into it together," Schreck said. "We're living in a demanding and perplexing time, but so were our ancestors. My hope is that as I've worked among you, I've been able to make religious life more beautiful."

Earlier in the day, the conference made its annual leadership change, as Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary Sr. Vicky Larson became president-elect, Congregation of St. Joseph Sr. Kathy Brazda became president and Grand Rapids Dominican Sr. Maureen Geary became past-president. The conference also hosted a live-streamed contemplative prayer for the world.

Sr. Kathy Knipper, president of the Dubuque Franciscans, said she was not surprised that Schreck received the Outstanding Leadership Award.

"She did serve in leadership over the years, but she's been a leader for religious congregations in the United States and the world. She has a wide perspective of leadership," Knipper said. "And congregations continue to seek her out for advice."



Sr. Nancy Schreck addresses the crowd at a prayer service for the new Archbishop of Dubuque in 2013 at Clarke University in Dubuque, Iowa. (Courtesy of Dubuque Franciscans)

Schreck's work with other congregations has slowed in recent years; she now commits to working with only one a month.

Whether it is in convents, conference rooms or rural Mississippi, Knipper said Schreck is inspiring.

"She has a heart for justice," Knipper said. "She accompanies people to make things happen."

Knipper said Schreck would organize trips to Okolona for Iowa college students studying to become teachers, and that Schreck's time in rural Mississippi gave her a perspective that makes her a better leader.

Those trips "were very eye opening for our Midwest people," Knipper said.

Okolona has a population of about 2,600 people, 80% of whom are Black. About 36% of them live in poverty, nearly double the rate statewide. The median annual income per household is about $27,000, about half the amount of Mississippi as a whole — the poorest state in the union.

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> —Sr. Nancy Schreck
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Between stints in congregational leadership, Schreck has lived and ministered in Okolona for 35 years.

"I knew this was my place," she said in an earlier interview.

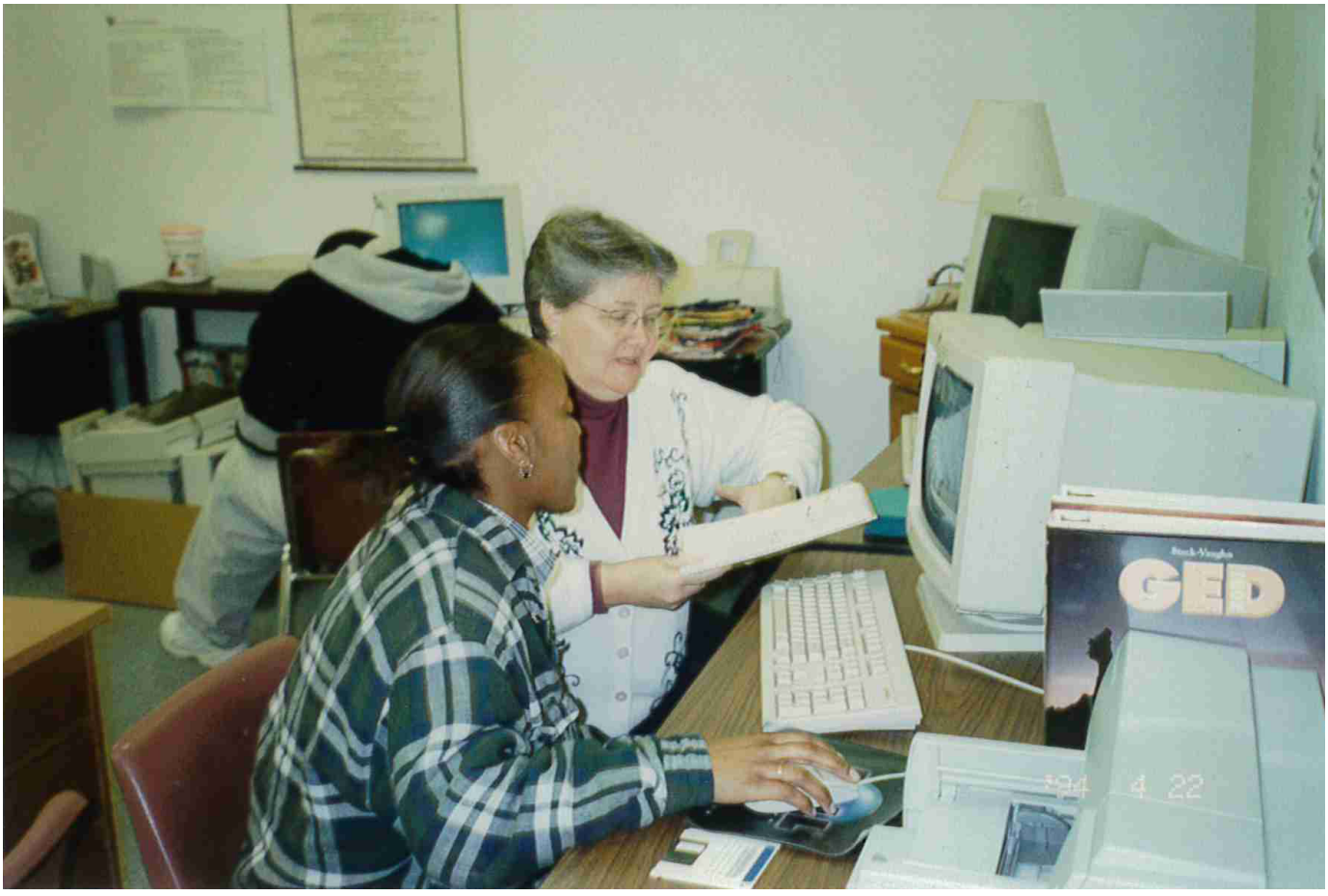
What would eventually become Excel, Inc., began with a summer enrichment program for children in 1986. Sr. Liz Brown, a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet*,

arrived in Okolona the year before; both were working in area parishes.

The summer program was a success — seemingly the first success the town had seen in recent memory.

"The first grant we ever received was from a foundation in Tupelo, and when the man from the foundation came down to interview us for the grant, he said they'd been trying to pour money into Okolona for years, but they always say it won't work there," Brown said.

But it did work, and it has grown to where Excel dominates the downtown with a community center, a resale shop and a coffee shop and the nearly two dozen programs it runs. In addition to Brown and Schreck, there are four other Dubuque Franciscan sisters and a sister of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary working in Okolona.



Sr. Nancy Schreck (right) at Excel, Inc., in Okolona, Mississippi, in 1994 (Courtesy of Dubuque Franciscans)

Brown and Schreck both said it works because Excel is not about sisters coming to help the residents, but coming to help residents help themselves.

"We decided it would not be white people doing for Black people," Brown said. "It was a different way of doing things."

Schreck said the secret to doing so many things is that other people are doing them.

"Someone wanted a cancer support group. So I said I've never had cancer, but you could start that, and I'd help you organize it and get it going," she said. "We'll collaborate with anyone willing to do this kind of work."

One of the newest Excel programs offers training for certified nursing assistants, thanks to donations and a partnership with a local community college. In a county where the unemployment rate is nearly double the state figure, nearly every single graduate is hired.

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"You can contribute to a food pantry and feed people for a day or two, or you can help them get a job," Schreck said. "There's hardly a person that's not employed the minute they get their certification."

Brown said it was not easy at first. Okolona is in northeast Mississippi and has few Catholics and fewer Catholic sisters than along the coast and in the Delta.

"It was a very hostile environment. I never knew if it was because we were Yankees, or a woman as the head of a parish, or because we were Catholic," she said.

But people came around when they saw amazing things happening. Brown said it was also Schreck's personality.

"I always say to her she could tell someone to go to hell and they'd thank her," Brown said. "She just has a nice way about her."

They also learned how to navigate the local culture.

"I think part of our success over the years is our inclusion across racial, religious and economic lines," Brown said. "Us being outsiders working with insiders, there were some things we could pull off that they couldn't, and some things they could pull off

that we couldn't."



Sr. Nancy Schreck addresses the 1995 LCWR assembly during her term in the organization’s presidency. (Courtesy of Dubuque Franciscans)

One of the things they pulled off was hiring Thelma Davis, the first person you meet when you enter Excel. Schreck said Davis grew up in a wealthy family, but her father owned a store that catered to people who were poor, so she knows everyone of every status.

"When I first went to work for them, well I was raised Baptist, and I told them the only things I knew about Catholicism I learned from 'The Godfather,'" Davis said. "From there we went."

Davis said the impact Excel has had on Okolona is immeasurable.

"If you can envision a small town in Mississippi with the same mindset of a hundred years ago, it's kind of a challenging situation," she said. "But they have taught this

little Baptist girl a lot about people and looking at others through the eyes of God instead of through the eyes of whatever your religion is or your family values were in years past."

Davis said Schreck's work has let the town live up to its motto.

"Okolona's motto is 'The little city that does big things,' and Sr. Nancy has really proven that," she said. "I don't think you could put somebody out here that didn't have the qualities that Sr. Nancy has to be a leader."

Schreck said in her remarks after accepting the award that the work women religious are doing reminds her of the words of Sojourner Truth: "I'm not dying honey, I'm going out in a blaze of glory!"

**This story has been updated to correct Sr. Liz Brown's congregation.*

This story appears in the **LCWR 2024** feature series. View the full series.