

## REMEMBERING MADRE ROSA

A HISTORY PROFESSOR ENSURES THE STORY OF HOW A GROUP OF MARQUETTE-EDUCATED NUNS SERVED A RURAL GUATEMALAN VILLAGE IS NOT FORGOTTEN.

BY DELLA O'HARA, JOUR '70

Sister Rose Cordis, M.D., a Maryknoll nun born Dorothy Erickson in Boston, was an experienced physician when, in 1961, she arrived on muleback to start a hospital in Jacaltenango, a Maya pueblo in the Western Highlands of Guatemala.

The people of this rural town had asked Maryknoll, which had already assigned priests and schoolteachers to Jacaltenango, to send a doctor as well. "Madre Rosa," as the Jacaltecs affectionately called Sister Rose, Med '51, had worked for eight years in Bolivia at the first hospital established by the Maryknoll sisters in Latin America. A graduate of Marquette University's medical school (now the Medical College of Wisconsin), she was a logical choice to lead this new mission. Other nuns, including Sister Mary Annel, M.D., and other Marquette alumnae, later joined her.

Shortly after Sister Rose arrived, Guatemala descended into a long, brutal civil war, but the nuns persevered and built their 50-bed hospital, treating half a million people by 1987, immunizing 182,000 children, training local people to help serve their community's health care

needs and becoming a beloved community partner in the process.



"Their model of service was very respectful. They made a lifelong commitment. We talk a lot about service at Marquette, and this project makes you think very hard about what it means," says Dr. Laura Matthew, associate professor of history, whose research focuses on Mexican and Central American history.

Sister Rose died in 1992 and is buried in Jacaltenango. A local school is named



Maryknoll Mission Archives

for her, and she is depicted in a mural in front of the town market, says Matthew, who stumbled across her story on a 2017 research trip.

"As a historian, I think a lot about what is left out of the historical record," Matthew says. "It seemed to me on that first trip that the stories I was hearing were important to preserve. I also wanted to remind the Marquette community of this past connection it has to Guatemala."

Two cohorts of Marquette students, all heritage Spanish speakers, worked on the Remembering Madre Rosa project, most as part of independent study courses with Matthew, beginning in 2018. Their activities included conducting preliminary research at the Maryknoll Mission Archives outside Ossining, New York, and a number of subsequent trips to Jacaltenango, funded by the college's Mellon Foundation, to interview

townspeople who remembered Sister Rose. Each cohort produced its own report.

Student Isabelle Soto was a member of the second cohort. When she traveled to Jacaltenango in spring 2019, Soto was impressed with what the Maryknolls had accomplished in the town, and with the many good things she heard from the townspeople about the nuns' dedication and generosity.

Soto, whose own family roots are in Mexico, appreciates that, even while Sister Rose and the other nuns brought Western medicine to the town, "They weren't saying, 'This is the only way.' They allowed the people to perform their own rituals and traditional type of medicine, too. They were willing to go outside their comfort zone."