



Mary Celi Correa, Our Faithful Pharmacist

When Mary Celi Correa was applying for college, she was shown a list of the courses of study available at all the government-subsidized universities in Venezuela. "Indicate your top five preferences in order on the form," she was directed. Looking over the list, the first four selections were easy...two programs in medicine, one in biology, and a fourth, appealing to her interest in literature, as a Spanish professor. But then she was stumped. What to include as her fifth preference? Scanning the list again, a pharmacy program offered at the Central University in Caracas caught her eye. Until five years previous when her dad had resettled the family to San Felix where jobs were more plentiful, Caracas had been their home. She had grown up and still had friends there. It would be familiar territory. "And that's how I became a pharmacist," she chuckled.

Tuition at the university was free, but Mary Celi still had to cover her living expenses. Her dad told her not to worry. Money was tight, but he would wire enough each month to take care of her. So, in the fall of 1979, Mary Celi rented a room close to the university and embarked on the road to becoming a pharmacist. While home for the holidays, however, even before having completed her first semester, it almost came to an abrupt halt when her dad died unexpectedly the day after Christmas. How could she go back to the university? There was no money, and she felt she should stay and help the family at home instead. Mom insisted, however, that Mary Celi return to the university to complete her studies. She would find work ironing and cleaning homes and wire what she could each month. Between mom's help and a grant from the university, Mary Celi not only got by but, after five years of studies, graduated at the top of her class in 1984 as a licensed pharmacist.



Mary Celi at an event she organized as director of Fundailusión fulfilling dreams of children suffering from incurable illnesses

After working for a few months in Caracas, Mary Celi heard of an opening at a pharmacy in El Roble, a neighborhood in San Felix close to where her family lived. She applied and got the job. That meant moving back home. The family's initial house there was what Venezuelans call a "barraca", a hut in English, with an earthen floor, tin roof, and walls of rough-hewn posts and horizontal bamboo poles, packed with a mixture of mud, straw and manure, plastered with clay from the river, and whitewashed. As the family could afford it, they replaced their barraca with a concrete block structure with concrete floors and a laminated roof. Water lines and electricity came a few years later. One thing Mary Celi remembers in particular was how the house would shake whenever the train from the iron ore mines rumbled by, whistle blowing, "three times a day around 7 in the evening, midnight, and 5 in the morning," as she recalled. It was the discovery of extensive iron ore deposits, one 30 miles to the south near El Pao, the other 85 miles southwest at Cerro Bolivar, that led to the transformation of San Felix from a sleepy river town into the industrial city of Ciudad Guayana...from a population of under 4,000 people in the mid-1950s to over 150,000 when the Correa family arrived in 1975 and nearly half a million by the time Mary Celi returned as a university graduate ten year later.

Mary Celi still lives in the same house with her mom, a younger sister and nephew. She never married, being more intent on taking care of her mom, repaying her for all the love and sacrifice getting Mary Celi through the university. For many women who never marry, the time and attention that would otherwise be dedicated to one's immediate family gets redirected in ways that benefit a much broader "family". Such has certainly been the case with Mary Celi for our parish community. Whenever we need a volunteer, she is there, as a lector at Mass and serving on parish committees, but it is with her background and experience as a pharmacist that she provides the greatest service.

The story of Mary Celi's service to our parish and the broader community in our region of Venezuela will be continued in next week's article.

Points to ponder

In what ways do you think Mary Celi's concern dedication to the service of others was formed by and reflect the lives and values of her parents? What are some of the values instilled in you by your parents?

These "Did you know?" papers are designed to give you a better understanding of life in Venezuela and to strengthen connections between the parishes of the Archdiocese and their archdiocesan mission during our 50th anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at ddempsey@churchofstdominic.org or 651-368-7324.