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Sister Sheila Walsh Honored for Work with the Elderly

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Photo from the Los Angeles Times Website

April 15, 1930 – August 15, 2-13

Sister Sheila Walsh, Director of the Department of Aging of the Catholic Social Service (CSS), will receive the Koshland Award for Social Welfare in Los Angeles on July 8, 1976. Sister Sheila, one of the 45 nominees for the award, has been active in serving the needs of the aging in the diocese since she came to CSS in 1971.

“Actually, I’ve been involved with elderly people since I first became a social worker in 1959,” she says. The Koshland Award, named for Daniel Koshland, a prominent San Francisco civic leader with a deep interest in social welfare, has been presented for the past 31 years to individual social workers who make outstanding professional contributions. The recipient is chosen by a 10 member committee of the United Way of California.

“She is innovative, untiring and successful in her work with the aged,” says Shirley Branim, chairperson of the local district of the National Association of Social Workers, the organization that nominated Sister Sheila for the award. “She is very deserving of what she got.”

Hired by the CSS Board of Directors in 1971, Sister Sheila began as Director of Community Services. Working with seniors, their needs became so apparent that a special division just seemed to emerge, she says.

In the last five years, Sister Sheila has conducted workshops on aging throughout the diocese, organized the friendly visitors and established 13 Senior Activities Centers which operate one day a week.

In February of 1975, the Camellia City Center, funded by Sacramento County Revenue Sharing, opened in downtown Sacramento to serve the 1500 seniors concentrated in the area. The center is open seven days a week to respond to the needs of the downtown community. "These seniors are the poorest of the poor," says Sister Sheila, who was instrumental in founding the center.

Sister Sheila, who holds a Master's Degree in Social Work with a concentration on Community Organization and Planning, is chairperson of the Committee on Aging of the Catholic Conference of Catholic Charity Directors (CCCD). At the recent CCCD Conference in Fresno, she presented a statement on the needs of the aging and specific recommendations to fill these needs. The CCCD moved to accept this statement as their official report, and present it to the California Bishops Conference.

The Rest of the Story: Archivist's Update in 2014



Sheila Walsh was born on April 15, 1930 at Queen of the Angels Hospital in Los Angeles to Kathleen Quille Walsh and Patrick Coyne Walsh. Both parents were born in Ireland; her mother in County Kerry and her father in County Galway. Sheila's paternal cousin, also from County Galway, is Ireland's current President, the Honorable Michael D. Higgins, who lives with his wife Sabina Coyne Higgins in Galway. Her two brothers, Michael Eamon Walsh and Patrick Joseph Walsh, pre-deceased her. Her brother Patrick, until his retirement, was pastor of Saint Eugene Catholic Church in Inglewood, California.

Sister Sheila graduated from Saint Michael Grammar School and Los Angeles Catholic Girls High School. She received a Bachelor Degree in Social Work from the University of San Francisco, and a Masters in Social Work from the Catholic University in Washington, DC.

Over the years, Sister Sheila traveled extensively throughout the world, mostly with her brother Father Patrick, to locations including Ireland and England to meet family members and many parts of Europe and the Far East, as well as trips to Mexico and Canada.

Throughout her career, Sister Sheila served as a parish social worker in Saint Rafael's Parish, San Rafael and Epiphany Parish in San Francisco. After receiving her MSW, she became the director of the Department of Aging of Catholic Social Services in Sacramento. After six years in this position, she was chosen to be the director of Social Services for the California Catholic Conference where she worked with local faith groups developing programs for seniors.

Sister Sheila lobbied solely on issues affecting individuals and families living in poverty --- housing, homeless, food, hunger, immigrants, and mother and child issues. In 1987 she was inspired, with the help of the Sisters of Social Service, to found JERICHO, a lobby group dedicated to educating the public and to be a voice for justice for the poor.



Sheila and Brothers Michael and Patrick

Members of JERICHO's Board of Directors include Jews, Protestants, Mormons, Muslims, Catholics and others who believe in God and worship in different ways. Recognized for its effective work by a bi-partisan host of legislators, JERICHO is the only statewide, interfaith, non-partisan, grassroots public policy organization in California founded specifically to educate and advocate on behalf of low-income individuals and families. It has been a collaborative force from its beginning, offering people of conscience an opportunity to ensure fairness in state legislation.

In her retirement years, Sister Sheila volunteered at Clara's House, a clinic providing comprehensive primary health care services to anyone who is uninsured in the greater Sacramento area. She continued to serve on the JERICHO Board and volunteered as a member of the National Association of Social Workers.

Throughout her life, Sister Sheila worked tirelessly to improve the lives of people living in poverty. Although she has passed on to God, JERICHO and the work she began with this lobby group will continue to help people who need help, encouragement and love.



Social Service Sisters Anne, Sheila and Diane

Sister Sheila never took no for an answer; she was strong-willed, tenacious, focused, politically savvy yet personal. She would scurry around the State Capitol to speak with legislators. She was known to burst into a politician's offices to speak with him about a pressing issue and if she felt ignored or put off, she would not hesitate to phone the politician's wife for help to put the pressure on.

With declining health, Sister Sheila was forced to retire. One of the hardest things she had to deal with was being forced to give up driving her car because the car was the key to freedom and access to people.

She died in Sacramento on August 15, 2013, the Feast of the Assumption of Mary. Her long-time friend Bishop Richard Garcia of Monterey, together with a sizeable number of priests, members of her religious community and many friends and co-workers, celebrated her Mass of Christian Burial at the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament on August 21. A second Mass was celebrated at the Social Service Sisters' Mother House in Encino.

Sister Sheila was a woman with a mission. She use every resource at her disposal to lift up those bowed down by poverty to the dignity of sons and daughters of God. I doubt if there will ever be another like Sister Sheila Walsh. May she now rest from her labors and abide in God's peace.

Information for the update came in part from the obituary of Sister Sheila which was published in the Los Angeles Times in 2013.



The Walsh Family
Patrick Coyne Walsh, Father; Kathleen Quille Walsh, Mother
Brothers Michael Eamon, Patrick Joseph and Sheila Walsh

Pictures of the Walsh Family come from the Archives of the Sisters of Social Service.