

“Living together and praying together gives witness to God’s love and presence.”-
Sister Juanita Bernard

When the IHMs arrived in Sister Juanita Bernard's small town in Puerto Rico in 1948, she was struck by their courage, coming to serve people with a different language, culture and lifestyle. She was introduced to the “beautiful spirit” of the IHM Sisters when they taught at her high school.

She participated in the school choir and was also a member of a book club. An IHM led both groups, and that's where Sister Juanita says, “I fell in love with their missionary spirit and the risk they took to serve the people.”



She privately inquired about becoming an IHM; she didn't want her family to know. Her father had aunts in another order, and he told her the work was too much. Her 11 siblings worried they would lose their sister if she became a nun. (They now know they gained a whole community of sisters as part of their family.)

Like the IHM Sisters who inspired her, Sister Juanita demonstrated bravery by being one of the first women outside U.S. borders to join the IHM community when she and Sister Teresita Marie Nazario made their way from Puerto Rico to Monroe in June of 1952.

“We took a train from Miami to Monroe and arrived at 6 a.m., already dressed for the postulate. It was an interesting experience for us all, meeting people from another country with another language.

“I didn’t think about how hard it was going to be. I felt called to be part of the IHMs and didn’t think about what was going to happen. I loved what was happening.”

Sister Juanita’s first mission was at Detroit's Holy Trinity. After her profession, she returned to Puerto Rico to teach first grade at Academia de Santa Teresita (Santurce). She taught kindergarten and primary grades at other schools in Santurce and Adjuntas, including Caserio Llorens Torres School, part of the housing projects of Santurce. This was done with the intention to provide quality education to the population with less access to resources.

Sister Juanita later ministered as a secondary school counselor; served as inter-congregational formation directress; and became the first woman chaplain in Puerto Rico when she ministered in a hospital in Caguas.

She served in parish and pastoral ministries in Ceiba and Loiza. Currently, she accompanies people in different ways as they seek her out for counseling and advice.

Reflecting on her years with the community, its spirit has had the most impact on her life.

“I feel like living together gives passion – to our energy, our stories, our conversations – and gives life to our professed role. It allows the spirit to guide our journey and give it flight.

“Walking together has transformed me and the people I serve. I am grateful to my IHM Sisters for accompanying me. They have made me who I am.”