



Jill Katz

## The Impact of Ripples

In January of 1982 I walked into an old department store-turned-daycare to begin a two-week service project. Several St. Teresa's Academy classmates and I were assigned to work with various children in various "rooms." I worked within their two-year old "room." I put the word room in quotes because this space was a department store and not a school. Instead of walls, the spaces were divided by cinderblock and plywood shelves. This particular memory is etched in my mind as who can forget moving walls to make the space bigger or smaller, depending on the needs of the children. Another memory etched in my mind is of the nuns, Sister Berta Sailor and Sister Corita Bussanmas. While I had intended to write about a Diamond Sponsor of the 2020 Liberty & Justice Campaign in this issue, the recent passing of Sister Corita cannot go by without acknowledgment of her impact on our legal community.

Sister Corita was 87 years old when she passed on March 27, 2021. She is survived by her best friend, Sister Berta, her children, her grandchildren, her Operation Breakthrough family, and all of the children and adults that she mothered, officially and spiritually. I am, as are many others, blessed to have known Sister Corita. I am grateful to have known her and have been influenced by her. I am also grateful to have been influenced by those she influenced.

Sister Corita was the co-founder of Operation Breakthrough. OB was nurtured for 50 years by Sister Corita. For Sister Corita, OB meant providing for people in the most need. She literally took her work home with her and lived every moment thinking of others. She and Sister Berta became official and legal mothers to four children but she was the actual mother to so many, many more children, and a few adults.

Corita modeled caring, leadership, and nurturing. She eschewed the limelight. It was the mix of Sister Corita's behind the scenes work and Sister Berta's working the room that taught so many of us what it takes to be successful. We learned from Sister Corita that partnering with others is fundamental to success. We all have our own talents and can be successful on our own. But we learned from the nuns that working together impacts not only our success but the success of so many others.

During a Zoom memorial service, Mayor Quinton Lucas described the ripple effect of Sister Corita's work. I have been blessed to have been touched by so many of these ripples in my personal and professional life. Two of my early legal mentors, Claudia York and Hon. Chris Sill-Rogers, also spoke at the memorial service. These women highlighted the profound impact of Sister Corita on them. I am grateful for the impact of Sister Corita on these two women. Because of the ripple effect, these two women impacted and taught so many others, and therefore ripples continue.

Sister Corita modeled and taught that caring for others was fundamental to being successful. Once a lawyer met the nuns they never left. Once they had your phone number they continued to call. And those calls were always answered. Sometimes Sister Corita's calls were not only a call to action, but a call to parent.

Denise Phillips, a retired attorney, recalled her first encounter with Sister Corita. She reflects that this was the day she became part of Sister Corita's family. Sister Corita was scheduled to be Denise's witness in a juvenile court hearing. The child was before the court because of abuse and neglect but had recently started behaviors that edged him toward the delinquency side of the court. Denise was the Attorney for the Juvenile Officer and had never met Sister Corita before calling her as a witness. Denise remembers Commissioner David Kierst saying before the hearing that meeting Sister Corita was 'good for the soul.'

## KCMBF

Kansas City Metropolitan Bar Foundation

### Military Matters Pro Bono Spotlight



Joseph A. DeWoskin

Joseph A. DeWoskin of Joseph A. DeWoskin, P.C. is this month's honoree of the Military Matters Spotlight, a monthly recognition to distinguish the great work performed by the hundreds of pro bono

volunteer attorneys within the Military Matters network. Please go to the KCMBF Facebook page to learn more about Joseph's service to Military Matters.

### WANT TO GET INVOLVED WITH THE FOUNDATION?

Contact: Sharra Wagner,  
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Sister Berta and Sister Corita with OB children at KC MBA headquarters after performing for the LEAP Mardi Gras Luncheon (2012)

And in hindsight Denise wholeheartedly agrees. Sister Corita advocated for the child to remain in the community and presented compelling testimony about what Operation Breakthrough could and would provide to the child and his family.

And with this first encounter, Denise became part of the Operation Breakthrough village. She witnessed what Operation Breakthrough provided to children in the community because of the work of the nuns. Denise identified that Sister Corita was the rock and backbone of Operation Breakthrough. Denise tried to model this same dedication to her work as a lawyer. Denise also witnessed the love and caring that Sister Corita gave to her foster children, including mothering the children that Denise was called to adopt. The lasting and profound message that Denise received from Sister Corita is that no child is worth giving up on.

The calming influence of Sister Corita and her belief that everything will turn out fine was reflected in all that Sister Corita accomplished. She often declared she did not worry about things as Sister Berta worried enough for both of them. Sister Corita was the behind-the-scenes force who accomplished all the details that allowed all of the OB programs to thrive. But she also was the behind-the-scene force that allowed so many of us to serve the families of our community. When I was an AJO and later representing parents in juvenile court, I always knew if you saw Sister Corita in the waiting room that something was going down. She was either there to keep Sister Berta out of jail or to school a judge or commissioner on the needs of a particular child or family. Sister Corita was a baby whisperer. With her calm and nurturing demeanor, children couldn't get enough of Sister Corita. And while the children all loved and flocked to her, so did attorneys. Whether it was



Lisa Gentleman with Sister Berta and Sister Corita in 2007

a displaced child or family or a young attorney needing advice, Sister Corita was there to provide support and acknowledge the good. With the support, Sister Corita did expect something in return. She expected that we continue the work, that we continue to care, that we continue to ensure that no one is left behind, in anything we do. Sister Corita clearly understood that as we help one person, we help that one person in such a manner that we help all others. She understood that helping a six-year-old have confidence meant that when that six-year-old is sixteen that she would be talking about college and that when she is 26 she will have a job that supports herself. And that starting at six years old, she will know that she is part of a viable community that cares for her and her family so that at 16 and 26, she is making an effort to help others. This is what Mayor Lucas refers to as the ripple effect. In Sister Corita's case, I think we may need to call this a wave effect.

Each year as KCMBF hosts the LEAP Mardi Gras Luncheon at KC MBA headquarters it is abundantly clear how Sister Corita has impacted our legal community. Attorney after attorney bears witness to the work Sister Corita and OB have done for the community. And while many stories are about other people's lives, many of the stories told at the LEAP Mardi Gras Luncheon revolve around our own connections with OB as people and not lawyers. Many of the stories are of adoption and the call to parent that stems from the very core of OB, Sister Corita.



Sister Corita enjoying the LEAP Luncheon with Sister Berta (2017)

KCMBF provides many opportunities for you to start a ripple of your own. The Student Law Academy is a perfect example. Participation in the SLA touches so many lives. It touches the life of each student, and then ripples to their families, classmates, and teachers. If the student becomes part of the professional legal community that ripple continues even further. SLA also touches the lives of our colleagues. Each time we provide enrichment to another, whether a student or colleague, we model the actions of Sister Corita. Each time we identify a need and meet that need, we model the actions of Sister Corita. Each year the SLA has changed to meet the needs of the students to provide structure and stability within the program.

Just like the movable walls in the early days of OB, Corita taught us that our job is to expand and contract to meet the needs of the children in our community. And just as Operation Breakthrough had built walls in the department store, Corita has taught us that children need to have structure and stability. And just as Corita modeled, we must continue our work until our last breath. And just as Corita has shown, if we follow her example, the ripples of our work will live on, because she was the rock and the center of all the ripples. ■