

Early Catholic roots returns nurse who joined the corporate world to her ideal job: hospital chaplain

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Louise DiMattio spent 20 years in the business world, working for Dow Chemical and PacBell. She capped off her working life as a chaplain at the California Pacific Medical Center.

That might seem an abrupt switch, but it was a natural conclusion for someone who spent 12 years in Catholic schools, she said. Personal service was embedded in her consciousness. â??Jesus said to give to others,â?• she said, â??I was an idealist; I bought the party line.â?•

In college, she majored in philosophy and theology. She came to embrace liberation theology, a religious political activism marshalled against poverty. She admired social activist Dorothy Dayâ??s Catholic Worker Movement to house those on the margins and the pacifist brothers Daniel and Phillip Berrigan, both priests who protested the Vietnam War.



DiMattio was ordained as an interfaith chaplain at The Chaplaincy Institute in Berkeley. (Photos courtesy of Louise DiMattio)

Nudged by her father to be able to support herself financially, she chose nursing. Her first job was at the Langley Porter Psychiatric Hospital in San Francisco. After seven years, she got married and stepped into the corporate world â?? in health- and bio-tech-related jobs. But after two decades at PacBell, DiMattio, at 50, was ready for a new challenge. Offered early retirement packages, she and many other managers left the company.

â??Truly holy groundâ??

Retiring in 2015, she took a refresher course in nursing and ended up working in a place she called â??truly holy groundâ?• â?? the Birth Center at San Francisco General Hospital, which was running a pilot program preventing HIV moms from passing the virus to babies at birth.

She had also learned how much nursing had changed in the last 20 years. â??I was amazed,â?• she said. â??There were so many more career opportunities than when I left the field in 1980.â?• Registered nurses had gained much more responsibility, such as medication management, patient advocacy, liaising between medical teams and explaining care to the patientâ??s family. New specialties emerged, including intensive care nurse, clinical nurse specialist, traveling nurse and advanced nurse practitioner.



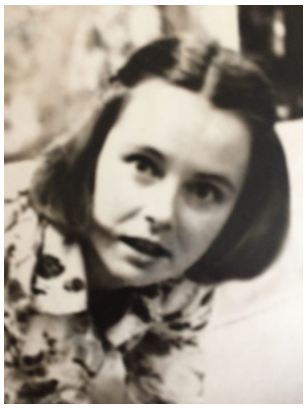
DiMattio and her grandson, Adam.

Seeing the way nurses were called upon to soothe and advocate for their patients, DiMattio decided to become an interfaith hospital chaplain. Trained and was ordained at The Chaplaincy Institute in Berkeley, she was chaplain at the California Pacific Medical Hospital from 2017 to 2019, mostly in the neonatal intensive care and pediatrics. She also was part of a hospice care team at UCSF working with terminally ill children, infants and newborns with birth defects.

â??After 20 years in the business world, I came back to who I really was with my last job. Iâ??ve always been so happy and proud to be doing service work,â?• said DiMattio, now 70.

Saying good-bye to her first-generation Italian parents and a cold and grimy Boston, DiMattio went off to college and nursing school in St. Louis, Mo., where the weather won her heart. â??I loved the early spring with massive blossoms everywhere, and the late summer when huge thunderstorms rumbled late in the afternoons, often accompanied by tornado warnings; it was very dramatic!â?•

Nice weather and social activism



DiMattio in 1975.

Wanting no more of Boston winters, she moved to San Francisco and her job at Langley Porter in the early 1970s. And she was also drawn to Bay Area activism. She got involved in the United Farm Workersâ?? unionizing efforts. â??I participated in a lot of marches and picketing outside supermarkets,â?• she said.

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She joined a communal living situation with a Quaker group in the Haight Asbury district. She experimented with becoming a vegetarian. â?•I was aware of social and political ideas, but I hadnâ??t heard of vegetarianism,â?• she said, adding that she found the lifestyle â??unforgiving, and felt it wasnâ??t for me.â?•

Missing the joys of high school chorus, she brought music back into her life. She began taking voice lessons at San Francisco State University, where she met her future husband, a music professor. For many years, she sang soprano with the San Francisco Civic Chorale, which performed with the San Francisco Symphony and at the Bill Graham Auditorium and San Francisco Opera House. And she was a member of The Jeanne Walsh Singers, a popular chamber group at Christmas events around the Bay Area.



Bill Corbett-Jones, DiMattio and their daughter, Laura.

She stopped performing in 1983 to join her husband, William Corbett-Jones, for a year in Taiwan. A concert pianist who traveled extensively, he was invited to be guest professor at the Taiwan Conservatory of Music. While there, DiMattio taught English as a second language.

When they returned, a job at Dow Chemical offered her the chance to gain new skills, be on the technological front â?? and travel. She went all over Europe and the Middle East demonstrating its newly patented dialysis machine. â??I stayed a year, when I had had enough of living out of a suitcase,â?• she said.

Drawn to the technology boom

When she returned to San Francisco in 1979, companies like Genentech were growing in leaps and bounds. Hospitals were merging and patient records were being computerized. The Internet burst onto the scene. DiMattio wanted to be in on the technology boom.

In 1980, she joined a PacBell group focused on the healthcare and emerging biotech sectors.

She worked with a team of engineers designing and coordinating the installation of fiber optic lines between and in facilities. They sold phone and voicemail systems to hospitals as well as smaller doctorsâ?? offices and clinics. â??Working at PacBell gave me managerial experience; I was always looking for interesting challenges,â?• she said.



DiMattio and her husband, Bill, a concert pianist, at his 90th birthday celebration.

While working for PacBell, she took another international break, joining her husband in Singapore and placing their five-year-old daughter Laura in kindergarten there. â??I took the year off to be with her; it was the favorite year of my life!â?•

Today, she is missing her daughter, who moved with her husband to Hawaii once his company allowed remote work. On the plus side, she and her husband were able to celebrate his 90th birthday recently at a festive gala attended by lifelong friends and many of his students at San Francisco State.

But her life is busy with other passions. Since retiring, she has been active with the Great Books Council of Northern California, coordinating event planning and leading community book groups as secretary of its executive committee. She also serves on the board of the Older Womenâ??s League.

And sheâ??s not done with pastoral work. Sheâ??s looking forward post-pandemic to returning to work as a chaplain.

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