

GUEST: SISTER JOAN OF ARC SOUZA

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There's a small, Catholic school in Manoa — right behind UH — that used to offer classes for girls in grades 6 thru 12. But a progressive, new principal came in and changed all that. Under her direction, the school began admitting boys, added a preschool and increased its offering of extracurricular activities. Who is this progressive principal? She's a graduate of the school. And a nun. A devout and dedicated, yet witty and candid nun — who we'll meet next.

Sister Joan of Arc Souza calls St. Francis School, “the best kept secret in Manoa.” But those who know her might say she's one of the best-kept secrets as well. Since 1991, she's guided the school through major changes with innovative leadership.

I can't let a moment go by without asking you about your name. When I heard your name twenty years ago, I thought, Wow, that is a name.

[chuckle]

Sister Joan of Arc Souza.

M-hm. When you enter the community, you have choices; at least back when I did it. And you had to choose a name of a saint; and there was just something fascinating about Joan of Arc. She was a leader of men; she stood up to bishops. And in the end, she gave her life for her beliefs, for her faith, for her church. So she's just a remarkable saint, and I fell in love with her, and chose that name.

First thing I thought was, she was burned at the stake.

True. [chuckle] Oh, yes.

And later, she was vindicated, but it was—

Yes.

--kinda late.

Yeah; she was a martyr. There was no reason to burn her at the stake. What she said was true, what she did was true; she was faithful to her uh, her calling. But she was a brave woman. She would not relinquish; she stood up to those who would do her harm.

Now, you said you—one of the appeals was she was a leader of men.

M-hm.

Do you mean men and women, or—

No.

--men?

Men. She led the armies to put the right king back on the throne, with uh, France.

And she fought the English. She was actually- she dressed as a male in order to lead the men.

But you've mostly been involved with girls' schools until—

Yes.

--St Francis—

M-hm.

--became a co-ed school.

Yeah. Well, actually, St. Francis is the only school I've been involved with. All of the rest of my religious life, I worked in parish ministry, youth ministry, co-ed situations, churches, parishes. It wasn't until I came home in '73 to teach that I ended up at St. Francis, teaching in a girls' school.

Have you wanted to lead men?

[chuckle] I do. [chuckle]

[chuckle] Still do?

I still do.

Are you considered in the liberal vein of sisters?

Yup. Oh, definitely; definitely. On a scale of one to ten, with ten being liberal, I'm probably a twelve or thirteen.

And how did you get that way?

[SIGH] I guess I always figured it's easier to get [chuckle] I'm gonna say this in public? Yeah. It's easier to get forgiveness than permission. So if you think something is right, do it. And if it turns out that it didn't come out as you thought, well then you say you're sorry, and you move on.

But that's your criteria; if you think it's right.

Oh, yes; if you think it's right. You gotta think it's right in your heart. You've got to.

And are you considered a maverick?

I don't know. I have never asked people what they think. I guess there are some people who would say, Yes, look at what she did, she brought boys onto our campus, she opened up an elementary school, she opened up a preschool. I guess there are some people who would say that; yeah.

It's nice to talk with you to see how human you are, because you know, we think of sisters and nuns as sort of unapproachable people, I think, those of us who don't have direct experience.

M-hm. I wasn't born a nun. [chuckle] I grew up. I did things. I got in trouble, I fooled around, I had fun. I climbed trees, I played with toy guns; I did all those things. So you know, and as I say to the girls, I went to this school; very little you can do that I haven't been there, done that.

Do you think your decision to enter the community was a call from God?

I do. I think God calls us. He calls- God calls us to religious life, God calls us to married life. God also calls to single state, and some people are called to neither one.

How do you know it's God calling?

I guess it's the same way, how do you know that guy you're gonna marry is the right one. You know. You know, that's what it - that's where you're gonna be the happiest.

As Sister Joan of Arc Souza says, she wasn't born a nun. But she was raised in a small, religious family in Pauoa Valley. And when she attended St. Francis, it was still a convent school for girls. Of course, times have changed; and the school has changed. But Sister Joan has remained true.

[chuckle] Tell me how you started life. Where were you born, and what was your early life like?

I was born in well, Kapiolani Hospital, right here down the street. Grew up in Pauoa Valley, Blessed Sacrament Church.

Very Catholic family.

Very Catholic family, very much Catholic. Went to Sacred Hearts Convent School on Nuuanu, when they had the lower campus or the convent- the grade school on Nuuanu; went there for school. And from there, went to St. Francis.

You—you went—uh, you were part of a religious family, but did you ever see yourself becoming a sister?

As far back as I can remember, I wanted to be a sister.

Did somebody put that in your head, or why do you think that came to you?

I don't know. Just- as far as I can go in my memory, I talked about becoming a sister.

But no sister had said, You ought to think about it.

No; no. I kept asking them questions about their life and the style, and what would it take to become a sister. I don't remember any sister in my very early days.

M-hm.

As I grew up, there was the Sacred Heart sister, Sister Damien Terrez, who encouraged me. But she was my eighth grade teacher, and at that point, I was already very interested in joining.

Were any of your contemporaries interested?

There might have been a few. Most of them thought I was a little, you know crazy.

[chuckle] Well, what were you like when you were a kid?

Tomboy. Loved to play with- I got along better with the guys than I did with the girls, for the most part. After school, I would hang out with my cousins, and we'd do lawns and they'd mow, and I'd rake, and I just got along with them quite well. Played at the park during summer fun. I remember when the days where they had summer fun at Booth Park in Pauoa. And they divided all the girls on one side, the boys on one side, because the girls were going to take sewing classes and all of this kind of stuff, and I vehemently objected. So I ended up over on the boys' side, and we made coconut lamps and kukui nut ties, and those kinds of things. [INDISTINCT]

Did you pray as a child when you didn't—when you weren't asked to pray, I mean?

[chuckle] Oh, yes; I prayed a lot. I did; I did. Privately, quietly; I never really wore my faith on my sleeve. I went to church regularly, and kept in conversation with God, with becoming a sister. At one point, I decided maybe not. Maybe there's

something else out there, as I started to get older and-

What was that other thing that could be out there?

I think it's called boys.

[chuckle] Did you date?

Yes, I did. Yes, I did. Through high school; went out. There were some significant uh, guys in my life. There was a Vincent, there was a Benny that I still remember and pray for them on a regular basis and hope-

Were they surprised when you became a nun?

I think both were very disappointed when I told them that I really was going. I had to find out; I had to know for sure.

Was that hard for you to make the choice between? I mean, it can't be easy to commit yourself—

M-hm.

--to such servitude and celibacy.

Uh-huh. I think the difficulty or the realization of the difficulty wasn't until after I got there. Growing up on the island the only place I'd ever been was Kauai, to visit family. Never been anywhere out of the state. So there was a level of excitement getting on a plane, going to New York. And you know, this was back in the 60s, now. So it's all of that excitement. Then getting to Syracuse, New York and seeing fall for the first time, and never having experienced fall weather; and the winter and cold. And I think that's when the realization set in to, Do I really want to do this, do I really want to live in subzero climate, in another culture, and I missed my poi and fish, and [chuckle] and all of those kinds of things. And I think that's when I really sets in.

Did you miss boys?

No. Once I went, once I got there, I realized you know, that there was something here that I would never find in— in a married life. But the separation from family was difficult. That was hard.

At that point, you probably saw your contemporaries buying new clothes, cars, nightclub scene. Any regrets?

Not for that kind of thing. What I started to see as a young sister, especially in New York, working with youth ministry, young families and children, and you know, the biological clock running out, do I— you know, this it. It's make or break time.

Especially in a Portuguese family.

Yeah; m-hm.

Portuguese families historically were big, loud, fun. [chuckle]

Loud, fun; yes, I have untold number of cousins. I think there are like forty or fifty of us in my generation; I don't know. Um ... -So there were always people around, always children around.

So there came that time when you said, Boy, I'm never gonna—

I'm never gonna have-

--if I continue this way, I'm never gonna have a baby.

That's right; that's right. So that would have been another significant time where you have to say, Okay, do you really want to do this?

Did you feel like you could get out at any time, or there was a point of no

return?

When you become a sister, the first thing you do is, you take temporary vows after three years. So you can leave at any time. And then we renew the temporary vows for another two years, before you made final vows. And even after final vows, if you really want to leave, you can.

You saw some of your classmates leave, I imagine.

Oh, we entered with- I think there were thirty-four when we entered; there are seven of us left.

You were a member of the rock and roll generation who didn't rock and roll.

--Elvis Presley.

[chuckle] That got into the sanctuary, then.

Uh-huh. Yeah. And we brought our music with us. We turned the convent- I think when we entered, things changed. Prior to our day coming in, if the novice mistress, as she was called, said, This is what you do, they- they did it. My group said, Why? [chuckle] And we questioned.

You graduated from high school in '61, so you were—

Yes.

--right there in the 60s.

In the 60s, when Vatican II was starting, and all this of this; so yeah, m-hm.

So you're in New York, and your resolve remains strong.

M-hm.

And uh, and what kind of choices did you have with your life within the sisterhood?

Well, in the community that I entered, you either became a teacher or you became a nurse. And so they spoke to us; they talked to us, and I said, Well, forget nursing. I see blood, I and I pass out. I said, No way; no way. And I wanted to be a teacher. I wanted to teach first grade, and I wanted to teach math. Those are the two things I wanted to do. Neither of which did I do.

[chuckle]

As in, I suppose, many life situations, the general superior at the time came and said, We need you to teach religion for one year; are you willing?

Just one year?

One year; are you willing? I said, Sure. Catholic school graduate and all that formal education. I said, I can do that for one year. So went out to the convent, and what we did was we traveled from parish to parish to parish. And the children would be released from the public school, and we would teach them religion. And what I found was, so many children had this concept that, you know, God was an ogre, God was up there with His baseball bat and if you stepped out of line, choom, you were gonna get it. So I decided to change that concept. That we don't have the God of the Old Testament, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. We have the God of the New Testament, a loving God, a forgiving God, a God who welcomes you back. And I loved it. I loved turning them and reaching out, with teenagers the young ones. So I think I stayed in it seven, eight, nine years, teaching religions to public school children, children who had no Catholic school experience. Just working with them.

But there was a yearning among some for faith, something to believe in.

Yes. Yes; very much so, with the children. I just loved it. It was first communions and confirmations, and challenging that, too. I remember the one lesson that I would give them all the time. I say, You read all these nice things in the Bible, that Jesus said. But how many of you are aware that he said, Love me or hate me, I shall vomit you from my mouth? And the kids would look at me like, What? I said, Yeah. You can't sit on the fence with that; make a choice. One way or the other; make a choice. And try to get them, of course, to make good choices.

Those were different days. What kind of habit did you wear in those days?

The long black dress, white underneath, a big black veil that came over this way, and you couldn't see because it stuck out like this. So it was difficult when you were teaching in those days, too, you had you know, fifty students in a room that-

How were you supposed to use peripheral vision—

[chuckle]

--to see who was acting up?

Well, you learned how. And-

[chuckle]

--you almost learned to have eyes behind your head. You knew.

Today, you're here in a red blazer.

[chuckle]

Things have changed.

We've come a long way.

When did you stop wearing a habit?

I think in the 70s, we started to let little things go. We didn't have to wear the big hard veil; we could just wear the driver's veil. And then the dress shortened, the color changed, it became an A-line. We went through stages.

So now you're in a red blazer.

I'm a red blazer. It's my favorite color.

[chuckle]

The students at St. Francis know that when I'm wearing red, I'm in a good mood.

You know, speaking of kids seeing God as an ogre, as you described; aren't they afraid of you?

I don't think so.

No?

No; we walk down the hall, you'd hear, Hi, sister, hello. In fact, when the new students come in, I tell them, I want to be greeted. When you see me in the hall, I want to see a smile on your face. Our mission statement is, Quality Catholic education in the spirit of joy. And if you're not in a joyful mood, then you need to go to confession, because that's the only thing that should put you in a bad mood is if you're in sin. And they look at me; and I say, If you're not a Catholic, ask a Catholic what that means.

[chuckle]

I heard you're tough.

Well you have to be consistent. If you're dealing with teenagers, you have to be consistent. So

Sister Joan of Arc Souza loves sports. So it's no wonder she enjoys cheering for the school's basketball team and the Pac-5 football team (with St. Francis students on it).

Other innovations Sister Joan brought to the campus: a band program, cinematography classes and a four-year American Sign Language program · along with co-ed classes and a preschool · which she says are necessary for the school's survival, which was in jeopardy when she arrived in 1991.

They said, Well, it's like this; Go there, turn it around, or we're going to close it. So I said, Well, they're not gonna close my alma mater, not on my time, anyway. So that was eighteen years ago; I came back, and turned it around, and St. Francis is flourishing.

How did you turn it around?

The first thing I did was look at the curriculum. And we had to improve the curriculum. So we concentrated on that. Then we looked at the athletic program, we looked at all the other things that go into making a school. And little by little, we made changes.

Even though it must have been hard to afford. I mean, you had such a small student body. How do you afford making those changes?

Well, some of it wasn't all that difficult. It was simply teaching what needed to be taught, and making some very simple changes. There were some people there who had very light schedules, because they only wanted to teach the brightest of the bright; and some people who were doing all the work, in a sense. And we made some changes that way. We had to do some cutting; there were some very painful decisions that had to be made, to try to bring it back in line. And advertising; first thing I did was increase the budget for advertising. Because I think when I came home, we were one of the best kept secrets in Manoa. Everybody knew about the hospital, but nobody knew about, oh, they've got a school named St. Francis.

What year was this?

When I came home, '91 as principal.

As we talk in 2008, what's your enrollment?

Right now, we're just under four hundred.

And we see some male faces at the school—

Oh, yes.

--these days.

Yes. The school looked into the possibility of moving leeward; and we did about a five-year research, and finally came up with the understanding that it was just financially not feasible for us to move. Along the lines when we were doing that, I had parents saying to me, It would be great if we could drop all of our children off, one place. Because at that time, we were six through twelve, girls only. We had a preschool; we had started a preschool, so we did have that. So I went to the board and said, If we're not moving, we're surrounded by schools that are K

to 12; if we're going to survive, we need to do something to put St. Francis back on the map. So it was a twofold decision. Open up an elementary and go co-ed. So I think we shocked the community a little bit after eighty-two years, but you know, we served something that was necessary for eighty-two years. We're in the 21st century; we need to move on.

What is the case for girls only education?

The girls learn cooperatively; they want everybody to succeed. They reach out and they help everybody. Boys tend to be more competitive, and you know, they want to learn that way.

Do you think that's hardwired?

It sure seems like it [chuckle] for them. Although you have some that cross over. So these are the girls who do well with the boys. And my case that I'm going to be making is, I think there are some boys perhaps that we should hand select to put on the other side. Because I see them working in groups, I see them working well, and they thrive. So why not?

Actually, one of the number one skills for the 21st century student is said to be collaborative leadership—

M-hm.

--teamwork.

Teamwork; right. And they have to learn to do that. They have to learn to be cooperative, to work together. And for some of them, it's a natural instinct, and for some of them, it's a difficult lesson to learn.

Boys are always the minority at St. Francis, at least—

[chuckle]

--now.

They will be for a while. Yeah; I think so.

What kind of experience is that for them?

Oh, I think they're having a wonderful time. They have got a ratio of three or four girls to each boy in the seventh and eighth grade, so they think they've got it made in the shade.

[chuckle] And you're also expanding athletics as well.

Yes. In fact, we've had for the first time this past season boys playing Pac-5 football. So that was a first in our history.

You're an athletic fan, you're a—

Yes.

--football person, aren't you?

Oh, yes; oh, yes. I follow the UH, and

I hear that you have tailgate parties at school.

At school. We have the projectors, we have all of that, because it's all part of the classroom. And we set it up whenever there's a game, and it's potluck. Staff come, they bring their family, they bring their friends, and we just have a wonderful time watching the game. I'm sure anybody in the area can hear us cheering and moaning, as the case might be.

[chuckle]

Education is a tough business. I mean, there's so many family problems and economic problems, and there's a lot of competition in Hawaii for

students. What do you think is gonna be important to St. Francis' survival and to thrive in as well?

Well, I think we offer a quality education. Our students get into pretty much the same colleges as all of the other private schools for the most part.

And St. Francis doesn't cost as much either, does it?

No. We work very hard to keep the tuition down. Now, we do have some outside sources of income. We have a parking lot on our property. If you know anything about parking in Manoa; and we border the UH. So once the law was passed where students all had to do the drivers ed and- or be eighteen, the parking lot went empty. Most parents said, You're waiting 'til you're eighteen. So what I did was, decided to rent it to UH students. So that's income for the school. The school also hosts Leahi Swim School. We have other people on the property who rent classrooms for educational purposes. We have a halau who uses our facilities. I've tried to look into different ways of making money for the school, without dipping into the parents' pockets all the time. And then we have our Ohana Fair at the end of the year that's become quite popular.

At the end of the day, you're done being an educator, but you're never off duty as a nun.

No. [chuckle]

What's that like?

Well, you go home, and you have other responsibilities, and you interact with- I live with twenty-three other women.

Where?

Right there on the property. The convent is right in the middle of the eleven-acre property. So I walk to school. I walk to work, and I walk home every day. It's a two-minute walk.

And do you have the corner bedroom?

No.

Because you're the—

No. [chuckle]

--principal? [chuckle]

No, I have a bedroom that's the same as everybody else's.

To have a job like yours is to be—I would imagine you just have to be dedicated to problem solving, because that's what greets you every day.

Every day.

Is that exciting for you, or does that get to be a drag?

Sometimes it gets you down. Sometimes you go home and you say, you know, God, why am I doing this. And then you go back to school the next day, and some child comes up to you, or passes you in the hall and says, Hi, Sister. And you say, That's why I'm here; that's why I'm here.

Do you think you've made a profound difference in any one student's life, or more than one?

I would hope so. I think that's something most of us in this kind of business- you won't know. You won't know until you're in the afterlife and you get to look back. Yeah.

Maybe they won't know what it means to them until later—

Yeah.

--as well.

Yeah. And then, you know, I've had a few come back and say, You made a difference, you know, what you taught me, or when they remember you, you know you touched something.

M-m. Wonderful.

One of the nice things about this program is the opportunity to meet people from all walks of life. We've met highly-accomplished folks like senators and award-winning recording artists. And we've met unsung heroes - teachers - whose work influences others to achieve their goals.

Mahalo to Sister Joan of Arc Souza for being an innovative leader and educator - at her school and in our community— and for joining me for this *Long Story Short*. I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.

Video clip with production credits:

Now, as we speak, Halloween has just passed; we're approaching Thanksgiving. Did you participate in Halloween in any way? -

Oh, we did. We had the children from the elementary school and the preschool come up and trick or treat. And as I walked in the night before, my secretary said, Make sure you wear your red jacket. Oh, okay. So when I walked in, she handed me this set of horns.

[chuckle]

Beautiful red horns. So they have pictures of it. And I put it on, and went out, and-

You were the devil.

I was the devil. [chuckle] It's all in fun.