Living the Mission
FOREWORD

At the annual meeting for institutions sponsored by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, the facilitator asked us to take ten minutes to write down a story that exemplified living out mission in our lives.

We were asked to share the stories. It was an amazing experience, and each story had infinite value. The stories were truly awe-inspiring.

Moved by this experience, we decided to begin each of our executive committee meetings with stories in mission. What happened invigorated us all and sometimes moved us to tears. We listened to stories of so many people who exemplified mission in their daily actions with one another.

The experience was so profound and reminded each of us why we worked at Avila, that we decided to ask our faculty and staff to share their stories as well.

The book you are holding is a compilation of some of the stories we received. There are dozens and dozens of others, equally worthy of print.

What we hope is that they inspire you to share your story. Just send them to the address printed in the back of this book. We look forward to reading them.

Please enjoy.

Ronald A. Slepitz, Ph.D.
President, Avila University
He was a quiet first-year student, hardly noticeable in class. He came in without a sound, made no eye contact and left without a word. His assignments were turned in on time, but had little remarkable content. He was present, but that was all. Then the first-year students participated in Heritage Day. He, too, was there. For the first time, he did more than participate. He opened his eyes, ears and heart to the story of Avila. He allowed himself to be transformed.

After his transformation, he was still quiet, but he radiated the feeling of belonging that he gained. He was determined to give life his all. He felt different, and he said so. He was inspired by the sense of community created by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet. He belonged – and still belongs – to the community, and he is inspired.

“He opened his eyes, ears and heart to the story of Avila.”
My friends at Avila gave me much comfort and strength..."
The first instance was when I parked next to a student with an interesting license plate. He told me about how the plate reflected his mission and ministry in life. I was touched by the strength of his faith and his absolute readiness to faithfully and fully act upon it. I felt Avila was blessed to have students like this young man.

I have been taking a course on the Person and Ministry of Christ this semester. What comes through strongly in my readings is Christ’s message that the Kingdom of God is now, emerging in our midst. It isn’t a message several thousand years old, but one relevant in the present. I think all of us are asked to find what role we play in bringing the Kingdom of God more alive in our world. I also think it is found prayerfully when we find the intersection between our deepest passions (what moves our hearts), our greatest gifts and talents, and what the world most needs.

My question to all of us at Avila is how are we being called to bring about the Kingdom of God in the day-to-day lives of the University, and if we sense God’s calling, are we open to respond? I believe in doing so we will find the happiness, success and satisfaction that my dining companions found during their 60 years of marriage, one that is grounded in a faithful beginning.

Sister Olive Louise Dallavis, Avila University president emerita, my wife and I enjoyed dinner with a couple who are long time friends of the University. The dinner was in celebration of their 60th wedding anniversary, and we felt very honored and blessed to be part of their special evening. Over the course of the dinner, the husband described a time when he and his wife were still newly married. He asked her to take their children to church while he went to the cathedral to pray. He said that he needed to find his direction in life, or more precisely, the direction God most wanted from him. He went on to describe how he found a calling that perfectly blended his passions with his talents in the insurance world. That was the second time in one week where someone had shared with me an experience of acting to help bring about God’s kingdom.
My parents “adopted” a Nigerian refugee family through our church. The family landed in Kansas City with no money, no family, no jobs and without speaking the language. Last week, friends from church delivered diapers, food, blankets and a washer and dryer to the family. They had arranged for an interpreter to meet them at the house to aid in the exchange. My mom noticed that the young interpreter was wearing an Avila sweatshirt. After the deliveries had been made, my mother mentioned to him that I worked at Avila. The young man said that he had just completed the nursing program. He went on about what a good education he had received, but also how well the faculty had prepared him for life. It was through an Avila contact that he got his interpreting job with Catholic Charities. So, not only is this alum making a difference through his job as a nurse, but he is also helping others through his work as an interpreter. 

“The (Avila) faculty had prepared him for life.”
Last week, five junior students spent 15 minutes telling me how excited they were about one of their new instructors. They exclaimed that she was so encouraging, so empowering and so interested in them. I was thrilled to hear this from them. Not one hour later, this instructor left a message for me that she needed to resign and could not complete her contract. Through no fault of her own, she had suddenly become homeless. The instructor had moved to Kansas City in order to get a chance to teach social work. She had years of personal and professional experience to share, but had not been able to get her “foot in the door” elsewhere. Now she was going to have to quit. Several hours later, a local social worker called me. She had started a program for near-homeless women and was calling to request having Avila students do their placements in her facility until she had a budget to hire a social worker. Instantly, I recognized God’s intervention. I explained the new instructor’s plight. It wasn’t long before the two women were able to arrange a bartered deal — social work for a place to stay. The instructor was able to continue teaching at Avila. Her students were thrilled. I was thrilled. And she was too. Of course, there was no doubt how God felt about it.
During the holiday season, the Advancement staff used to come together with spouses for a social event usually hosted by someone living close to campus. White elephant or gag gifts would be exchanged and many laughs would be shared in fellowship. A couple of years ago, the staff asked to do something different and more meaningful with the money that would otherwise be spent on useless gifts.

Several ideas were tossed around before the suggestion was made to do something with the Catholic Worker House located near 31st and Troost. I had heard about Brother Lewis and his work there but wasn’t familiar with all of the Catholic Worker House’s efforts to help the less fortunate. The staff agreed that it would be an ideal organization to help, but Brother Lewis informed us that they didn’t just want our financial support. They wanted us to visit, but not in the typical way you would think about a food kitchen. They had a year’s worth of volunteers lined up to cook and serve, so they asked us to come down and join their guests for dinner. Brother Lewis wanted us to experience the soup line exactly as if we were one of the regulars.

For mid-December, it was a pretty nice evening. We got there a little early and delivered a couple carloads of supplies that they had requested. Then we waited outside as the line began to form for that evening’s dinner. To wait outside, at night, at 31st and Troost, is not one of the safest things that comes to mind. But some of the guests were willing to visit with us, and they were very cordial and open. Others kept to themselves, wary of the obvious outsiders, but we never felt threatened. As we split up into several different groups around the numerous crowded tables, we heard a lot of different stories that folks from the suburbs aren’t used to hearing. It was a very humbling evening and one that opened our eyes to the plight of the homeless.

After dinner, we spent some quality time with Brother Lewis and one of his staff asking numerous questions about their mission, how he came to be a part of it, and what their goals are for those they help. Everyone left that evening with a much greater appreciation of the blessings that we do have and a greater concern for those less fortunate.
Sister Ellen Marie Gavin was an incarnate example of the mission of Avila. She was welcoming and was always able to see Christ in everyone she met. Diminutive in stature, she stood larger than life among faculty, staff and students.

When Sister Ellen retired, she moved to Nazareth Living Center in St. Louis. She had made such an impact on so many that people often made the four-hour drive to visit her and let her know how much she was missed.

Several years later when Sister Ellen passed away, the example she had set was echoed by a group of current and former Avila employees who made the trip to Nazareth to honor Sister Ellen and her example of mission. If we could learn to see Christ in everyone we meet, like Sr. Ellen did, then the world would be a more peaceful place.
My most profound mission experience during my time at Avila isn’t one wrapped up in one event. This has been an experience that continues on each day, without ever calling attention to itself. My mission reflection concerns acceptance.

When I first came to Avila several years ago, I knew very little about its heritage, let alone about the faith journeys that many people at Avila travel upon. In time, I began to learn how important Avila’s Catholic identity is to the institution, and I must admit that I felt more than a little apprehensive of that fact. In my experience, strong religious connections often provide little room for acceptance of diversity, particularly that of sexual orientation. I wondered if Avila would welcome me as a unique and vital individual should my sexual orientation come to be known.

I’m happy to say that my concerns have been put to rest. My partner and I have both enjoyed and appreciated the welcome we’ve both received from the Avila community. What a terrific surprise.
That’s what we do at Avila – respect people for their ability to grow . . .”

The nursing program enjoys a positive, long-standing reputation in the community. As the nursing shortage has grown, more and more students are interested in joining our program. As a result, admissions are selective, primarily based on grade point average (GPA) and completion of prerequisites. Admissions criteria and guidelines also include the opportunity to look at less quantifiable characteristics and “patterns and trends in the student’s academic history that indicate potential for success.”

Recently, the nursing faculty met to interview candidates. We interviewed in faculty pairs. A mature student arrived. Her file had been quickly reviewed the day before and noted that her GPA was below the minimum criteria. Had we had the luxury of time, we would have cancelled her interview. But she came with instructions from the admissions committee for the interviewers to let her know she was not qualified for admission to the program.

A minority, single mother came into the room. Smiling, but nervous, well groomed, and proper in her introductions, she sat in the chair, waiting to be interviewed. The faculty member began the interview while the other faculty interviewer reviewed her file. She saw the GPA and the note about her disqualification for admission. Digging deeper we noted this woman’s academic history started over 20 years ago with failing grades that marred an excellent recent academic experience. In talking with her, the faculty members learned she had accepted a buy-out during a major layoff by her employer, and she had a limited amount of time to complete her degree.

The interviewers suggested she submit an exception for consideration of admissions based on recent grades that are more reflective of her ability.

It was obvious she was going through a roller coaster of emotions, experiencing pain as she realized she might be disqualified, but relieved to find out that she would be viewed and respected as a unique human being, with unique and special needs for consideration. That’s what we do at Avila – respect people for their ability to grow, to learn and succeed no matter where they are in their life stage. She brought her petition in later that week.
Several years ago, a Japanese student came to Avila to study psychology so he could apply to a doctoral program in cognitive psychology. While he already had an undergraduate degree from Japan, he was not prepared for our master’s program because of his difficulties with the English language. He was also easily frustrated and shy. Our department faculty worked with him for two years, correcting his papers while complementing his creative thinking. When he completed the master’s program, he applied to and was accepted into a prestigious doctoral program at the University of Nevada. He left there after one semester because nobody cared for his ideas the way we did at Avila. Shoaq now lives in Japan and has just published his fourth book on “Robot Psychology.” He still keeps in touch and attributes his success as a philosopher (yes, not psychology) to his time with us. He said we helped him discover his inner voice and passion.
“Dave, we need more spaghetti!” was the shout I got from a student as she was working the food line at the local Salvation Army Food Kitchen. We were there cooking and serving dinner that night. As I delivered the pan of spaghetti, I noticed a rather well mannered man who didn’t appear to be like many of the other homeless men at his table. He was a little better groomed among these men who commonly sleep in the woods near the center. He looked at my Avila tee shirt and asked, “You all from Avila?” A couple of the nearby students heard him and told him that we were indeed from the university.

He surprised us when he said, “I’m an Avila grad. In fact, I almost have a master’s degree from there.”

“I didn’t really believe him – I thought he was probably just playing us.” “Yeah,” he continued, “I was doing okay ’til last year when I started having seizures.”

“Seizures?” I repeated.

“Yes. They don’t know what it is. But in the meantime, I’ve lost my job, and now I’m looking for a place to stay. I’m doing okay. They say they may have a place for me next week.” He smiled, thanked us for the meal, and then he wandered off to find a place to sleep for the night.

On the way home a student asked me, “Dave, did that guy really go to Avila and have a college degree?”

I said, “It sure sounded like that was the case. Kind of gives you a close up meaning to the cliché – there but for the grace of God go I.”

“Yes,” the student responded, “That really could be one of us some day. I thought the homeless were just people who didn’t know any better.”

“Well,” I responded, “I guess now we all know better.”
A student came into my office. The first things that I noticed were her multiple facial piercings and an obscene statement on the front of her tee shirt. My initial response was to judge her and assume that she was less intelligent or less deserving of my help than other students. I know that my attitude sounds disgusting, but I’m being honest. Then I thought about the Avila value about respecting the dignity and potential of each person. I put my prejudices aside, smiled, and assisted the student. It turns out that she was very articulate, friendly and polite. Then I wondered what her initial impression about me was – perhaps I surprised her, too!

“I put my prejudices aside, smiled, and assisted the student.”
During a recent Avila homecoming, we celebrated the 50th reunion of the class of 1958. In addition to being a fun and spirited group, they were a class that developed and maintained deep friendships, friendships that have lasted a lifetime. Here is the story of one such group: The Supper Club. Two lived in the nurses’ dorm and two commuted. Three were from the Kansas City area, but one came from Georgia. Two studied nursing, one business education and one teaching. A friendship was formed playing cards between classes and smoking, both of which were frowned upon by the Sisters; perhaps that was half of the fun. They graduated and married, mostly boys from Rockhurst, but the friendships remained. For almost 50 years they’ve met monthly, or as often as their busy schedules would allow, in the Supper Club, sharing friendship and the unfolding stories of their lives, of children and grandchildren, of work and success, moments of happiness and times of trouble. They have served together in the community and the community has been far better for their service. These bonds formed at Avila have been the threads woven together in the lace of their lives and we are the beneficiaries. During homecoming, they were honored as part of the class of 1958, but for Bobbi, Peggy, JoAnn and Virginia, their friendship is so much more.

It is friendships like these of the Supper Club that make a life that matters. My wife, Suzanne, and I were grateful for that dinner over the summer where we got to meet and experience the Supper Club first hand; it was truly a precious moment.
Our dean of students stepped into my office and asked if we could chat. She indicated that one of the university employees had recently lost his place to live because a roommate had to move on and close out on their lease. Our employee was currently living in his car.

Her request was that we allow the employee to live in one of our residence halls on a short-term lease until he could save enough resources to find a new place to live. She also suggested that, since we had empty rooms, we simply charge him a nominal fee so that he could more quickly recover.

Our employee stayed in our residence hall until he was able to save enough money to find a new home.

“She also suggested … we simply charge him a nominal fee so that he could more quickly recover.”
Life as I knew it had come to a sudden halt and what would rise from those ashes was yet to be determined. Fortunately, the Avila community reached out to me and in a way, I feel as though they all had a part in saving me.

Many dear co-workers, peers, friends and even students reached out to me. I received several e-mails and cell phone numbers; many ears were suddenly willing to listen as I attempted to sort out the mixed emotions surrounding such a tremendous loss. They did not set time constraints and in the wee hours of the night, when I would wake up alone, tears falling down my cheeks, I would reach out and call one of these dear friends.

Many hours were spent on the phone with my Avila family; they would listen intently while I cried or screamed and questioned a God so cruel as to take a man I loved so dearly away from me and our children. But listen they did. Support me they did. Heal me they did. And restore my weakening faith – they did.

This is the power of this humble community.

I recently suffered the loss of my domestic partner. It was a very difficult time for me. I felt lost. I felt alone. I felt as though my life had been taken from me. I felt as though a large piece of me had been ripped away. Suddenly, he was gone.

I was unsure how to continue. I was unsure how I would move on. I was unsure how to grieve. And I was unsure how to express all of these hostile emotions in a way that honored his memory.

I was unsure, and now untrusting, of a God I had come to know and love.
I’d had her in class before. Merian was an older MBA student, but she was different. Already retired, she’d decided that she still wanted to continue to learn and grow, so she was working toward her master’s degree. During the semester, I questioned whether I wanted to continue taking classes. I was working full time and very pregnant. I was tired. Still, I enjoyed the course and my classmates. Merian was so interesting in our class discussions. She had a rich and varied life experience that was enlightening to me as a 29 year old. One day I came to class and Merian had a baby gift for me. Her gesture was so sweet it brought me to tears. To me, she is the spirit of the sisters to keep moving forward to love lifelong learning and to love your neighbor.

“Her gesture was so sweet it brought me to tears.”
On the evening of September 12, 2001, we held our Peace Studies class as we had for the past few weeks. Students were shaken by what had occurred the day before. Some wondered why we even held class. Others gathered just to take solace in one another’s company. We came together that night to talk about principles of caring, forgiveness, reconciliation and nonviolence – very, very difficult to think about after what had happened the day before.

Students asked the instructors, “So what do you say now about nonviolence? Tell us why we shouldn’t blow Afghanistan off the map (One student wrote in a journal entry, “Nuke the country back to the Stone Age.”)

So the instructors asked the students, “How can you put into practice what we’ve been reading and discussing? How can Avila respond, as an institution with CSJ values?”

Avila students put the CSJ mission into practice in one of the most challenging situations they had ever faced.

After some talk, one student finally spoke up, “I called the Muslim School today and asked for the administrator. I told him, ‘You don’t know me, but I just wanted you and the others at the school to know that I care about you and what you’re going through right now. I realize some Kansas Citians may have said some unkind things to you. I want you to know that most of us don’t believe that, and we stand in support with you.’”

The rest of the class was quiet for a few moments until someone said, “We should hold a peace rally here on campus Friday. We should have a campus moment of silence for those who have died.”

During the rest of the class that night, the students planned the vigil for that Friday evening. They determined how to publicize the event, making plans to let other students know, contact media outlets and generally get the word out. This all occurred spontaneously, with little or no input from the instructors. But that night, Avila students put the CSJ mission into practice in one of the most challenging situations they had ever faced.
In one of my classes, after studying the thoughts of the great ancient philosophers and early scientists, a student wrote, "Wow! I’ve never had to think about this stuff at this level. These days, it seems like all thinking is so superficial. To even read about people who spent their lives thinking about the world in this depth is mind-boggling. And to be asked to actually think about similar topics, in similar depth, is truly awakening. What an opportunity. It’s a shame everybody isn’t exposed to, and required to, think at this level!"

The student’s statements reminded me that the gifts of education, seeking and understanding knowledge, and the act of critical thinking truly represent the mission of the University.
A friend (and former Avila professor) was in intensive care when she had to vacate her apartment. She had been ill and the apartment was in deplorable shape. I asked our director of campus ministry if he could find some students willing to help with the move. He said he’d put out a request. Four students responded, and two were able to fit it in on short notice. That Saturday, they worked like troopers all day long, cheerfully, making it an outing. It was such a blessing to me, my husband, and especially for the friend in intensive care. I treated them to pizza, but they never expected anything but a thank you and never really expected even that, but they got it many times over.

“They worked like troopers all day long, cheerfully ….”
I have experienced our mission by watching the genuine care and concern the administration has for Avila employees. I have seen “exceptions” made for employees going through hard times. In the department I work in, an employee’s mother had leukemia and was not expected to live long. He was allowed to use unearned sick and vacation days for the following year so he could be with his mother while she was still here. His mother passed just as he was using up the remaining leave for both years. He was so grateful for the opportunity to spend time with his mother without having to worry about whether he would have a job or not. At Avila, the “exception” is more the “rule.”

“\He was so grateful for the opportunity to spend time with his mother … .”\n
It was the evening before I administered one of my class finals that I learned the closet was bare. My niece, a social worker in an inner city junior high school, had issued a plea for “hoodies” for her students whose families were poor and could not afford to buy coats to keep them warm.

My niece’s situation weighed heavily on my mind as my class assembled the next morning for its final. We came early to share in cinnamon rolls and coffee to celebrate surviving the semester. One of the students, who had been in a serious car accident during the semester, asked to share with the class a letter she had received from Santa. The letter acknowledged the student’s hardships since the accident (being unable to work, having trouble with paying bills as a result of the accident, trying to replace her vehicle and healing from a near-death experience) and addressed how bad things happen to good people. In the envelope were five $100 bills and a message that Santa wanted this young woman and her family to be able to experience the “spirit” of the season, to not worry about “paying back” but to, at some point in the future, “pay it forward.”

The message in the letter was too good to ignore for the power of its impact. When the student finished reading her letter and the other students had the opportunity to share in her joy, I was moved to communicate the plight of my niece and her very poor inner-city students. I shared with the students that it had been my intent to tell them the story at the end of class. Because I was so touched by the student’s letter, though, I felt that the time was right to share my niece’s dilemma at the beginning of class. I simply asked each of them to consider “giving the shirts off their backs” to help in the cause.

There was a stunned silence in the room as everyone acknowledged how much each of them had been given.

After a short time, conversation ended and the class final began. The next day, bags of clothing suddenly began showing up at my door. Before the day was over, 34 members of the senior nursing class had dropped off 110 pieces of clothing for the students in the inner-city school. The Avila community joined in and, ultimately, we delivered more than 150 articles of clothing to my niece for further distribution. Once again, the Avila values of interaction with and service to others in caring for our “dear neighbor” had been demonstrated.
We hope you have enjoyed our mission stories, and we hope to publish more in the future. If you would like to send in your own Avila mission story, please forward it to the following address. Please include your contact information in case we have questions. Thank you.

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God helping, fear not.