

# St. Dominic's Alumni Association

VOL 22

FALL 2024



## From the Editor's Desk

Happy Veteran's Day 2024! I welcome you to join us as we present this St. Dominic's Alumni Association Special Veteran's Day issue, to honor those who served in the various military services for the United States of America.

I would like to first open by saying that I salute all who served, and *"Thank You For Your Bravery!"*

Everyone who served has a unique story about the military. It may be about when they were first processed when they joined, their experience at Boot Camp, their exciting first overseas assignment, or their significant first promotion.

I consider myself a U S Army Signal Corps Cold War / Dessert Storm Veteran. I joined the Army 18 years after high school and attended Ft. Jackson, SC for Basic Training and the U. S. Army Signal School at Ft. Gordon GA for A.I.T. (Specialized Training).

My first duty station was with the 10th Mountain Division at Ft. Drum. My last duty station was with the 32nd Army Air Defense Command, Darmstadt, Germany.

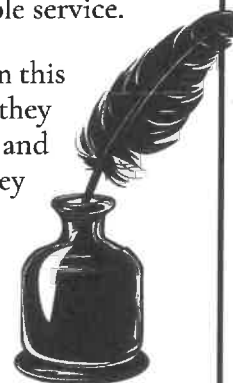
As a veteran, you should be proud of whatever you have accomplished. It could be your rank, your job, or your assignment. The important thing: **Is that you served!**

I reached the rank of Specialist Four with almost 5 years of service and 2 Honorable Discharges. One for Active-Duty Service and one for the Inactive Reserve Duty Service. I joined the Department of Defense as a Federal government civil servant and was assigned to the American Forces Network-Broadcast Center and retired in 2018 with 30 years of credible service.

In conclusion, when we meet a veteran this Veteran's Day, they all have a story. If they are willing to, listen to their story, and momentarily travel in the shoes they served.

**HAPPY VETERAN'S DAY**

*Joseph A. Olano, Editor*



## St. Dominic's Alumni Staff

Joseph A. Olano ..... Editor  
Pam (Mason) DiMaio ..... Treasurer  
Bob Moore ..... Staff Support  
George Chue ..... Staff Writer

## Contributing Writers

Michele Irene Reyes: *Firefly Blossom*

Evelyn Robles: *Sr. Jane Francis*

Virginia  
Synana Swarz:  
*Escape to Amityville*





## Firefly Blossom

*by Michelle Irene Reyes*

I came to St. Dominics literally kicking and screaming at the age of 5 (1974?) I was a foster child.... and in the home prior to St. Dominics, I experienced a trauma that prompted me to attempt to jump out of the bedroom window. The familiar station wagon came to take me to another place. Little did I know that St. Dominics would be my refuge and safe place where I would be loved and cherished! Oh! how my life changed for the better during the time I was there!

In St. Dominics I met my house mother, Sister Anthony Jerome and the house social worker, Betti Grennan who welcomed me. I loved Betti Grennan in particular as I felt she took me under her wing as did the older girls in my house. I remember wonderful trips we took to the beach and to the lake. See my favorite photo of me at 5 years old on a trip to the beach; Betty's feet are in the picture she was taking.

I met the girls in house who were all older than me. I was the baby of the house and was loved on by all the girls which was something that I had never really experienced before. I believe it helped me blossom. I was told later on as an adult that St. Dominics did not normally take children that young but there were extenuating circumstances.... you see, my biological mother, Nora was born with cerebral palsy and could not take care of me at that time. She did come visit me regularly, along with my maternal grandmother from NYC.

I attribute my love for reading and learning to the sisters of St. Dominic. It helped me immensely as an adult. I was an excellent student and yearned to learn as much as I could. I loved my teacher, Sister Catherine. In St. Dominics- I was introduced to GOD, I learned to ride a bike, to catch fireflies in a jar, to swim; in fact I was recognized as a little seahorse by my team. I learned about the world around me through play and interaction with my housesisters.

I also have a fond memory of "Bob" with the limp, who worked at the pool which was one of my favorite places to be!

Oh! how many fun picnics and games and tug of wars and Easter Egg hunts and sack races and just overall wholesome fun in a clean fresh air with birds chirping environment!

We did a school play production of "The Sound of Music" and I played the role of little Gretl. I still remember my lines, "If this is God's house, why does He let people in it?" It was wonderful! I was given a Raggedy Ann doll after the play.

One day my mother came to visit with a man in an Army uniform and she said, "Michelle, this is your daddy now." My mother had fallen in love and married Dennis who became my stepfather until they divorced when I was 20 years old. I went back home with my biological mother and now stepfather Dennis.

In an ironic twist I would meet Betti Grennan again in my teenage years, but this time it would be in a youth diagnostic center Euphrasian Residence in Manhattan where I was placed for a few months while experiencing traumatic difficulties with my mother Nora. I did not recognize Betti though and when she took me in a room and asked me to tell her about myself, I kept looking at her face and feeling something I could not quite put my finger on. Finally, Betti said to me, "Michelle, don't you recognize me?" and in that moment I did and ran into her arms! I believe it was a GOD moment because what are the chances of me coming under Betti's care at a most vulnerable time and transition in my life yet again! Betti was now the Director of Euphrasian Residence.

My introduction to God and my Christian faith would remain with me until adulthood (although there were traumatic and dark years of my life that I strayed far from God,) but like the Prodigal Son, I returned to the foot of the Cross by God's grace and mercy. I give all Glory to God!

I am so grateful to Betti and to Sister Anthony Jerome and all the sisters and staff at St. Dominics for the wonderful care and love they bestowed on me and all the girls. I will never forget my time at St. Dominics during my formative years. Thank you!

---

## Sr. Jane Francis

*by Evelyn Robles*

There wasn't a time in my years at St. Dominic's that I ever thought I was missing a family life. I owe that to Sr. Jane Francis. Not only was she caring, but she exuded a mother's love that I still treasure today. While she was strict and firm, she also encouraged and complimented me to always do my best. She made occasions and holidays very special for all of us. I will forever be grateful and thankful for her presence and the positive impact she's had on my life.

# Escape to Amityville

by Virginia Synan Swartz

When I was seven I would lay in my bed in Dormitory Four at St. Dominic's Home for Children in Blauvelt, NY, and plan my escape. I saw the escape as my only option to the prayers I said nightly with great faith and optimism. My prayers were for my parents to find a home for us, because in the summer of 1947 we had been homeless, and it was why we were now at The Home.

Then, when I was eleven, those prayers were finally answered; we were going home. ... which was a good thing, because no matter how I planned, my escape route always included a trek through Bear Mountain, where I was sure there actually were bears, and I was afraid one might even try to eat me.

The good news came at the end of the school year, and couldn't have been more joyful. My father got a job at St. Martin's as both, the sexton of the church, and the janitor of the school ... and a house came with the job!!! We would have a home of our own.

And, not just any old home. This one had been the former convent for the nuns, and it also had a chapel attached. Can you imagine? We called it the Cold Room, since it had no heat, though it did have an elevated platform at one end of the room where the altar must have been located.

The house was magnificent, for many reasons; it had both a front porch and an attic, and was located right on Oak Street, not far from Broadway, with a yard that backed up to St. Martin's School yard.

I would sit on the front porch and just watch the cars go by. And I'd watch the people, too, making up stories about them in the bubble above my head. Everyday, a man who I believe was maybe Angelo? Camarota, would walk up Oak Street to Broadway. I think he may have had polio and was left with a physical handicap, but he had a lovely smile and would always share it with a big wave. Someone I didn't know was waving to me. Smiling. Helping me to feel welcome in my new home and my new village. Amityville; the Friendly Village, to be sure.

The attic in the house was a true treasure, where I found all sorts of goodies from boxes of clothing, to pieces of furniture, and all manner of bric-brac, left there by whom I would wonder. It didn't matter for it was all fodder for my imagination run wild. Oh, the stories I could make up, and the mysteries I would find in every darkened corner.

The real joy, however, in those first days home from St. Dominic's in the summer of 1951, was everyday life in the little village of Amityville. My world was limited to the village from the railroad tracks to the Post Office located on Broadway about a block or so beyond Avon Place. ... and the schoolyard, of course. As it happened, we arrived in Amityville at the start of St. Martin's Annual Bazaar, which was set up in the schoolyard. All I had to do was go out our backyard gate and I was in the middle of this great adventure. There were rides and music, and hundreds of people taking chances on the many different game booths; and there was every variety of food being sold at various booths throughout the bazaar, and it was at night, so it was lit up so brightly, which added to the excitement. Everywhere I went people would say hello, as though they knew me, though I had no idea who they were. They were friendly, and laughing, and excited, and having a grand time. What a way to start the summer, but even better, what a way to start my new life!

St. Dominic's was a good place for my sibs and me to be when we were there. Though it served its purpose, it was a bit like being in jail, and God was the Warden. The nuns were kind, but strict, so coming and going anywhere at whim, was certainly never allowed. At The Home, we walked in lines, two by two, and no talking were the everyday rule, except during the time on the playground, aka The Plot. So, now here we were at 19 Oak Street, with the door wide open, and the freedom to come and go without having to ask permission whenever I wanted took some getting used to.

But, when Christopher's Stationary Store is waiting with the newspapers, both morning and afternoon editions, and when Lomots and Johnsons were waiting with every variety of fresh veggies and fruit and groceries, as well as delicious meats, and The Bakery, with the most delicious selection of fresh made buns, was on the list, who wouldn't want to walk up to the village whenever the request was made.

If it wasn't Lomots and Johnsons, it was Bohacks across the street and still on Broadway, or Fisher's Ice Cream Parlor... where they made their own whipped cream! And Phanemiller's Pharmacy, or the Post Office, where my father would send me to pick up the rectory mail... and how exciting it was to be entrusted with the combination to the box! Leibangs Hardware Store, which was always a mystery to me, and McClellan's Department store where I bought my own curlers and and my first lipstick; Langs Shoe Store where I picked out my own first pair of shoes, not given to me from the clothes donated to The Home. They were soft flats and were two toned with the toe top one color and the rest of the shoe a different color, neither of which I remember; it was the two tones that intrigued me. My favorite all time clothing stores, though, before Martins Department store came to Babylon, were Shims and Lowys. I bought socks and underwear in Shims, and my first pair of Dungarees in Lowys, and, I picked them out all by myself!

Most of all, in the Summer of 1951, there was Katherine Coletto. Her mom and mine had become friends before we had come home from St. Dominic's, and lucky for me, she was probably encouraged to be nice to me... because it worked; I had a new best friend. Somebody who wasn't family liked me, and made plans to do things with me ... like go to the movies every Saturday, or fish in Avon Lake, or go to the wonderland of the library, where she introduced me to this very funny game.

It went like this. As we went through the stacks, we would pick up a book, read the title, then add, "under the covers". For example, "The Thurber Carnival...under the covers," or "Norman Vincent Peale's Guide to Confident Living...under the covers," or, "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer ... under the covers." Then we would laugh ourselves silly and run out of the library, before we got into trouble. To this day, I have wonderful memories of time spent with Katherine and her very large, very loud, and very happy Coletto family. I'm also happy to say we are still in touch ... and FaceBook Friends, as well.

As the years went on, many wonderful, and some not so wonderful, events filled my every waking moment, but it was the summer of 1951, the people, the village, and all I discovered in my new home, that has helped to form who I am today. So yes, I never had to go through with my escape plan, my prayers were answered many times over, I am both blessed, and lucky.

# A TRIBUTE TO OUR ★ VETERANS ★



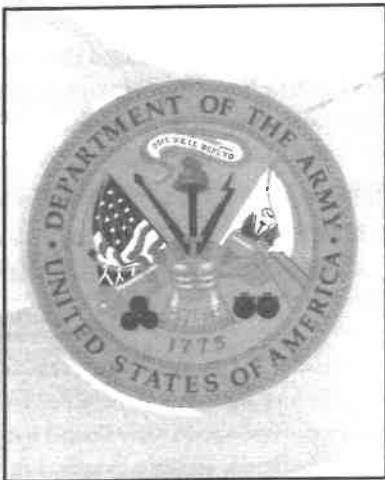
**RD3 Peter G. Borgia, USN**  
July 1960 - March 1964  
USS Neosho-AD143 Norfolk, VA '61-'63  
(joined brother already on board)  
Portsmouth Naval Shipyards, '63-'64



**Pedro Calderone (Louis Caban)**  
US Army 101st Airborne Recon  
Drafted 1970  
Infantry- Screaming Eagles  
Vietnam: 71-72



**MOS Abe Escobar, US Navy**  
March 31, 1969 - December 10, 1971  
Interior Communication



**MOS Mike Escobar, US Navy**  
February 19, 1969 - December 8, 1971  
Green Berets, Specialty: Explosives



**Sgt. Joseph E. Hartz, US Army**  
**KIA: Vietnam**  
Tour Start Date: June 16, 1967  
Died: March 6, 1968  
Province: Gia-Dinh



**AM5 Edward Higbie, USN**  
1962 - 1966, US Navy  
1966-1968, Active Reserves



**Sp3 David MacMillan, US Army**  
188th Airborne Regimental Combat Team  
11th Airborne Division  
Fort Campbell, Kentucky, 1954 - 1957



**Sgt. Benjamin P. Marrero, Jr.**  
US Army



**Sp4 Ted Mason US Army**  
3rd Infantry, 7th Battalion  
3/7 Hawk Missile Battery  
Schwankfurt, Germany: '73-7



**Private Umberto Matos,  
US Army (RA)**  
1978 - 1979  
Honorably medically discharged  
Fort Dix (Vietnam era)



**Signalman 1st Class  
George C. Merna, USN**  
KIA - WWII LST-577  
February 11, 1945



**1st Lt. Gerald F. Merna USMC (Retired)**  
Korea '52-'53  
ATA-1-5, Weapons, 1st Marine Division  
Vietnam: '66-'67  
Third Marine Division



**Sgt. James Merna, USMC**  
Korea '52 - '53  
1st Bn. 5th  
Marines, 1st Marine Division



**Capt. Richard G. Merna, USMC**  
Korea '53 - '54  
1st ServRegt  
1st Marine Division



**YN1 Robert P. Merna, USN**  
USN 1951 - 1956  
Korean War Era





**Cpl. Robert Moore, USMC**  
October 1972 - October 1975  
Parris Island - Camp Lejeune  
Iwakuni MCAS, Japan; Subic Bay, Philippines  
Willow Grove NAS



**Robert J. Ogden**  
PO1, USN, 1952-1962 Various Ships, stateside  
assignments and overseas assignments in Japan  
SGM, USAR & DOA (Ret.)  
1981-1994 Active Army Reservist  
and dual-status employee for the Dept. of the Army



**Specialist Joseph A. Olano**  
US Army Signal Corps Regiment  
10th Mountain Division - Ft. Drum, NY  
Cold War/Dessert Storm Veteran  
Active Duty/RR Service: April 1988 - May 1996  
Character of Service Discharge: Honorable



**John Oppenheimer**  
US Army Warrior OP  
Enlisted Oct 15, 1971 Fort Dix,  
DMZ North Korea: '73-75



**Harry L. Perez, US Army**  
Photo of the day we were married  
by Father John P. Farrell  
at St. Dominic's Church

*Aida E. Morales and I first met at St. Dominic's Orphanage around 1960. In 1967 the army drafted me, and Aida and her mother planned our wedding when I came home on leave.*

*Mr. Dampson, Aida's Social Worker, kept in touch and recommended for us to get married by Father John. P. Farrell at St. Dominic's Orphanage Church. Mr. Dumpson came to see us get married on August 10th, 1968. Five days later, on August 15th 1968, I left for Vietnam.*

*We were married 49 years and 7 months, until she passed on December 24, 2017*

*Aida was the love of my life.*



The late  
Fr. Dumpson  
Aida's Social  
Worker later  
became a priest.



**Colonel Frank Phillips**  
Retired US Army  
Desert Storm Campaign;  
April 1975 - December 1998  
21 years of service)



**Sgt. David Ramirez, USAF**  
Weapons Specialist  
Basic Training - Lackland, TX  
Thailand: '66-70; Takli AFB/ Korat AFB  
Nellis AFB Nevada



**A3C Nicholas Reginella, USAF**  
1957-59, non-active Air National Guard  
1959-61, active



**Dino Rivera, USMC**  
(formerly Victor Matos)  
1967-1973  
Vietnam, 2 years



**SSG Elsa Gonzalez Rojas**  
US Army National Guard  
1976-1998  
New York throughout



**Command Sgt. Major  
Anthony Serrano**  
US Army E9  
Resource Management  
Served: 1979 - 10/8/2010 Honorably Dis-  
charged  
(31 years, 8 months of service)  
Afghanistan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia  
Korea, Panama, Germany, Equador, Hawaii



**John (Jackie) Synan, US Air Force**  
Drafting Clerk PAFSC  
Served: '65-69  
Griffiths AF Base, Rome, NY,  
Fort Belvoir, Va, Lackland AFB, TX

**In Memoriam**  
**ALUM**  
Sean-Lean Chue-Tompkins died Sept 19, 2024  
**SISTER**  
Sister Barbara Werner, O.P. died August 14, 2024



## Please pray for

all deceased Convent Kids and their families  
the many who are fighting illnesses  
those struggling with life's challenges  
all sisters, priests, and laypeople who have mothered, educated and cared for us  
all families who have lost loved ones while serving their country

St. Dominic's Alumni Association  
PO Box 362  
Malverne, NY 11565-0362

---

## OUR MISSION STATEMENT

To Rekindle  
Old Friendships  
to Make  
New Ones

Congratulations to all the members of St. Dominic's  
Home Alumni Association for being honored as '  
recipients of the Mother Mary Ann Sammon Award  
for Compassion and Service.

*Since our 2006 inception, we have contributed our time, talents and financial resources to assist the Sisters of St. Dominic as they care for the aging sisters as well as supporting their many outreach programs.*

**If you would like to attend the Gala:**

**When :** Sunday, April 27, 2025

**Where:** The View on the Hudson, Piedmont

**Time:** 12:00 - 4:00

**Tickets are \$150 each**

If you are unable to attend, and would like to make a contribution to help the sisters continue their work, contact Kerrin Kissel at [kkissel@opblauvelt.org](mailto:kkissel@opblauvelt.org) or call 845-359-5767