

Former nun worked with Mother Teresa

Mary Johnson shares her experiences working with Missionaries of Charity for more than 20 years

LOUIS LAVENTURE
Editor-in-chief

For two decades, Mary Johnson worked with Mother Teresa to help the poor. She also fell in love twice with a fellow nun and a priest, and eventually left the order.

Johnson told her astonishing story – “How I Became a Nun and Disappointed Mother Teresa—An Examination of Commitment Mechanisms by a Former Nun” – to a packed house Thursday in the Smith Center on the Fremont campus, as the Ohlone College Psychology Club’s speaker series made its return to campus with a huge splash.

“We are so thrilled to have her here and share this amazing story,” Psychology Club adviser and faculty member Sheldon Helms said as he introduced Johnson.

Johnson’s tale is one of intrigue, woe, despair, humility and perseverance.

Her personal struggles lend insight into the life these women led, pioneered by Mother Teresa.

“I did this really weird thing and joined a convent at the age of 19,” Johnson began her powerful story.

From Washington, D.C., to Winnipeg, Manitoba, to the South Bronx and even Rome, Johnson has seen it all in her travels with the Missionaries of Charity, which was established in 1950 by Mother Teresa primarily to help the poor, sick and impoverished around the whole world.

“I was young and great in school – I was even voted



TAM DUONG JR. / MONITOR

Former Missionaries of Charity nun Mary Johnson explains how Mother Teresa hated to be touched during Johnson’s visit to the Smith Center on Friday before a packed house.

most likely to succeed,” Johnson said. “I just didn’t know what I wanted to do.”

Johnson capitalized on her intelligence and enrolled in the University of Texas, where she came across an issue of Time magazine with the image of Mother Teresa on the front page.

“I sat there and I read that entire thing – I even missed my French class,” Johnson said. “Something about that cover and the prophetic way of doing things really pulled me to the organization.”

After several inquiries, Johnson was accepted into the organization as an aspirant, and after a six-month process that she described as “boot camp” she was finally a part of something that she had longed for.

“There were 12 women in the beginning of my class

and only two of us made it,” Johnson said. “We went to the South Bronx and we were pinned at a ceremony with Mother Teresa with a crucifix. Our hair was also cut and we were given the familiar saris to wear.”

For two years Johnson was a novice, learning the ways of the sisters and what the vows she was going to take actually meant.

They begged for food, only had two pairs of clothes. Touching was not allowed. Friendship was not allowed. They were allowed to see their family once every 10 years and make a phone call once every two weeks.

“Mother (Teresa) was very hardcore in her belief that we should have nothing and live like the poor we were trying to help,” Johnson said. “Mother (Teresa) said our

heart should belong always to Jesus and nobody else.”

Requiring that obedience be “cheerful, blind and constant,” Mother Teresa did not make being a sister in the Missionaries of Charity an easy task by any means. These rules were part of the constitution that the Catholic Church requires every organization to have, a constitution written by Mother Teresa and later rewritten by Johnson.

“It felt wrong to rewrite them, and I would do it as long as nobody knew who did it,” Johnson said.

“The church required this update, so I had to do it since it was assigned to me, but it was hard.”

Johnson moved all over the world, serving the poor as well as helping to train and prepare sisters within the

organization, when Mother Teresa’s health began to decline.

“As (Mother Teresa’s) health declined, two new sisters guided it very conservatively and it was no longer the prophetic vision it was when I started,” Johnson said.

“It didn’t sit well with me and this is when my secret life became an issue.”

Johnson explained that she fell in love twice, breaking several covenants, once with a sister and again with a priest.

“I began to feel all sorts of things that I never felt before,” Johnson said. “I wanted to live a full life and I felt like I wasn’t as long as I was a sister.”

Johnson wrote a letter asking for permission to leave, which was given, but not without some conflict.

“Mother (Teresa) asked to speak to me one day and she wanted to know what was going on,” Johnson said.

“So I told her I wanted to go home and that she already signed a letter of permission. Mother (Teresa) said, ‘I can believe this about anyone, but I cannot believe it about you.’”

So, after 20 years of service, Johnson left the convent in May 1997.

Four months later, on Sept. 5, Mother Teresa died at the age of 87 in her native India.

The crowd filling the Smith Center was not disappointed in Johnson’s story, rewarding her with a standing ovation at the conclusion of her presentation.

“I cried a few times,” attendee Alexis Gavin said. “What she did and what she went through to do it, makes me feel so humble and amazed.”