

ALUMNA SPOTLIGHT – JILL DISALVO ROSE '81

Jill DiSalvo Rose '81 left Visitation Academy uncertain about what direction her life would take her. Even though she excelled in her collegiate studies and was at the top of her career, she still felt an emptiness that led her to follow her lifelong dream to travel to Africa. That is where she finally understood the call from God and chose to pursue missionary work. She credits her time at Visitation for laying the groundwork that has led her on this journey and has made her the person she is today.

Jill and her husband, Jeff, married in 2006 and spent their honeymoon working at a hospital in Africa. Together they started the African Health and Hospital Foundation which provides clinical equipment, supplies and resources for health delivery systems and assists clinical enterprises abroad to build healthier communities by securing materials, financial support, technical assistance and resources unavailable in their communities. They raise awareness, and advocate for, the needs of healthcare in developing countries. Jill shares her story and how Visitation played such an important role in her life.

Jill, please tell us about your education and career after you graduated from Visitation Academy and how the African Health and Hospital Foundation was started.

After graduating from Viz in 1981, I attended a wonderful liberal arts school called Hollins College of Roanoke Virginia which became Hollins University in 1998. There I would get a taste of different options, flourish in the familiar all-girl surroundings and enjoy the equestrian facility which is a recently rekindled passion of mine.

Somewhat I became a straight-A student overnight—I applied myself and used the skills that were taught to me at Viz, but that I was unable to adopt earlier for whatever reason and possibly somewhat even resisted from the Sisters and teachers. One day it all just clicked. I really had no idea I had it in me or that I enjoyed learning and achieving so much. I began to savor and find comfort in study and knowledge, and in figuring out who I was, what I wanted to be and what life might look like. I thought about medicine or law, but neither fit. I decided to return home to attend St. Louis University and give business school a try. Even though I was excelling in my studies, I really wasn't sure what I wanted to do and felt confused. In the end, I obtained a BSBA and I graduated summa cum laude—boy would the Sisters be proud!

While attending SLU, I enjoyed the Jesuit part of the schooling. Spirituality was missing my freshman year at Hollins College and the curriculum requirements of philosophy and theology at SLU intrigued me.

I became very successful in my career as a real estate professional, winning many prestigious awards and accolades. Once again I was excelling and doing very well, but I still felt like something was missing. I was realizing that just succeeding in my career was not filling this void. Every time I felt that feeling it went along with the thoughts of “maybe I should devote my life to the missions.”

As time passed I was convinced that I was supposed to do mission work, but rather than just take off and go, I tried to be logical and decided to take a break to fulfill a childhood dream of going to Africa to see whether or not it would shed any light on what I was thinking I needed to do. There, I could investigate whether this was a real calling or just a diversion. I left for 21 days and



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saw East Africa and Zimbabwe in the south. I traveled alone and was with only a guide throughout Zimbabwe. Africa changed me. Plain and simple, it was God's country and a bit of heaven on earth—yet one could not ignore the people and how they have absolutely nothing. However, they smiled and were so happy, in such a way that they glowed. I could see God all around and everything the Sisters at Viz ever stood for, in my mind, came to the forefront in my life and it all started to make sense. While it took God a very long time, I finally got it. My entire life I was being shaped by God and the Sisters were clearly his stewards. From that point, I realized that we are here on this earth to serve. That is what life is all about. Life gets better and better and the purpose clearer and clearer and the more we “Live Jesus” the more it does so. So that was it. I realized my career

and the fruits of that success. All of the money, all of the awards were not the end for me, but they were a means that God was providing me – a means to an end so that I could save enough money to retire by 45 and do more.

When I met my husband, Jeff Rose, it seemed as if God had dropped him from the sky. He was a doctor who had volunteered in East Africa (Tanzania) years prior to our meeting and had provided refurbished medical supplies to hospitals and clinics in underserved areas of Africa. We shared many things, but most of all we shared a great love for Africa, and our relationship blossomed. We had a storybook wedding at the Ngorongoro Crater in Africa following our Catholic Wedding at Saint Joseph with Monsignor Schamleffer in October of 2006.

From that point on, I changed my focus from land and real estate sales management to Africa. In 2006, Jeff and I started the 501c3 African Health and Hospital Foundation (AHHF). Jeff continues

to work in the area of healthcare quality and national reform in St. Louis. We are making some changes to the foundation whereby we will be focusing more on education for the indigenous people to maintain and repair the equipment we send them. We continue to send refurbished medical equipment and supplies to the poorest areas of Tanzania, Kenya and Rwanda. In addition, I recently started working on an African Education Fund along with the help of a young lady with a huge heart, Madelyn Porter, who is all of 12 years old. We focus on supporting younger children's schooling in Tanzania. It is separate from AHHF, but knowing that education is at the heart of social progress, health, wellness and elimination of poverty, it is a good fit for me. Clearly, most of this ties in with the teachings and tenets of living Jesus and giving in the many ways that I learned during my time at Viz.

How has Visitation impacted your life?

Two quotes that stay with me forever—"Keep Going" and "Live Jesus."

Quite simply, Viz made me who I am today. Of course I had no idea at the time and never realized how much impact it had on me until my late thirties. To this day, it continues to blow my mind when I recall what I chose as my senior motto in the yearbook – Keep Going. It was those two words that Sister Margaret Mary told me one-on-one that I will always remember. They are two words that would and will keep me going for the rest of my life. It was that simple and at the time it was enough, but I always tried to figure it out, as I knew it had to have more meaning. In the end it did, but for a long part of my life it did not. I just

had to "Keep Going." It has been and is my consistent and most heartfelt aspiration!

It took me until now—almost 50 – to get the "Live Jesus" part in the deep way I understand it today. After my initial travels to Africa and deciding that my career was not going to be the answer to happiness in this life but a means to an end, I would save enough money so that I could start a foundation and "Live Jesus" every day. I pray that the Sisters of the Visitation also "keep going" and continue to touch so many lives in the same way they touched mine.

What advice would you give recent graduates?

Follow your heart. If you do not know what you want to become or even if you do, realize that life is a process. All the happiness and goodness, all the pain, all the mistakes, even sin is part of the process and part of your shaping. It is all ok and it is all good. You will see that as you look back. I would not change a thing in my life. Had I not lived the life I had, I would not be who I am today. My mother used to tell me that every decade life gets better. I was like...what! A decade! As time goes by, those decades become like years and I now realize she was right!

God has plans and just when you think you have it figured out you realize you do not and He has something else in mind.

The best advice is to Live Jesus. Give of yourself in some way. Do something as simple as making one stranger smile a day or just do little acts of kindness. Also, if you are happy and believe that happiness comes from God then let everyone know. And finally, "Keep Going." God will do the rest. □