

# **Louisville HS grad elected head of Sisters of St. Louis**

**By Paula Doyle**

It's been quite a summer for Sister of St. Louis Donna Hansen. On Aug. 6, the American-born religious was elected head of her Irish-based international congregation just a couple of weeks after celebrating her 60th birthday and a few weeks before her community's 60th anniversary in Los Angeles.

Born in New York the same summer eight Irish Sisters of St. Louis arrived in El Monte to staff archdiocesan Catholic schools, Sister Hansen met the nuns after she moved with her family to the Southland at age 11 and enrolled a few years later at Louisville High School in Woodland Hills.

The Sisters of St. Louis congregation, founded in post-revolutionary France, opened Louisville in 1960 as the only Catholic private all-girls' secondary school in the San Fernando Valley, which was then home to all-boys' Notre Dame in Sherman Oaks and Crespi Carmelite High School in Encino.

Active in Louisville's musicals, Sister Hansen was impressed with the teaching sisters' many acts of kindnesses, such as bringing tea and cookies to late-night rehearsals and attending students' extracurricular activities outside the classroom.

"I loved how they cared for each other. I loved how they engaged with the students at Louisville," said Sister Hansen, the oldest of four daughters of an Irish Catholic mother and a Swedish Lutheran father.

Contemplating a religious vocation, she thought about entering an American-based order but, as she explained to her mother, "there was just something about the spirit of the Sisters of St. Louis." Forty-two years ago last week, she entered the community at age 18.

She received a BA in math from Mount St. Mary's College and taught junior high classes during the '70s at St. Mel in Woodland Hills, Cathedral Chapel in Los Angeles, and Corpus Christi in Pacific Palisades. From 1979-1985, she was principal at St. Bede in La Cañada, and, from 1985-1995, was principal at our Lady of Grace in Encino.

Sister Hansen served in regional leadership for the Sisters of St. Louis California Region from 1995-2004. The congregation has sisters ministering in seven countries, including France, Ireland, (where the Motherhouse was established in 1952), England, the U.S., Brazil, Ghana and Nigeria.

As the new Institute Leader of the international order of 450 members --- whose ministries encompass education, health care, counseling and social justice --- Sister

Hansen will be doing a lot of traveling along with the other three members of the leadership team. "I'm guessing one or two of us will be going to every country [where the sisters minister] every year," she said. "I'm excited about it."

Each of the four leaders will be moving to Ireland from a different country: the U.S., England, Ireland and Nigeria. Sister Hansen, who has already resigned from her seat on St. John's Seminary board as well as her position as Louisville's religion chair, will relocate to Dublin, Ireland, in November to begin working with the Central Leadership Team.

"I feel that God meant it to be at this time in my life --- it felt right after I got over the shock. It is a big uprooting for me," said Sister Hansen, who has enjoyed sharing community life since 1999 with an inter-congregational group of sisters that includes two Sisters of St. Louis, one Ursuline Sister and one Presentation Sister.

Another cherished constant in her life has been the opportunity to sing since she was a high schooler in choirs directed by Paul Salamunovich --- who recently retired from St. Charles Borromeo Church in North Hollywood after 60 years as its musical director.

"I think the chance to keep music in my life has been terrific. It's been a gift of God," said Sister Hansen. A self-described people person, she looks forward to being a collaborative leader. "When you have a team leadership model, you can't be a lone ranger kind of person," she remarked.

Noting that the Sisters of St. Louis charism is unity, Sister Hansen said that the order's commitment to collaboration among its members hailing from Europe, North and South America and Africa is instructive in a pluralistic world.

"Now that we're such a global world [with] differences in religions and ideologies, our own struggle to form community and to really grow in the appreciation of difference and diversity is exactly what we think is a gift to the world we're trying to serve," explained Sister Hansen. "There is a hunger in our world for deeper meaning and spirituality and we hope to speak to that by our lives and by how we do our mission in the world."

For more information on the Sisters of St. Louis, ministering in health care, education, counseling, writing, retreat work, spiritual direction, parish ministry, care of the elderly, and women's and children's issues, visit [www.stlouissisters.org](http://www.stlouissisters.org).

