

Mary Sommer – “Serviam Now”



Mary Sommer

“There’s no such thing as not having the time...make the time.”
“There are opportunities everywhere.” “Look around and open your heart.”

Mary Sommer, CNR SAS ’71, and this year’s recipient of Mercy University Trustees’ CNR Legacy Award, puts her words into action every day, living and breathing “Serviam.”

Mary believes that service starts early. In her own case, parents and faith were early influences. This was followed by an educational journey that presented opportunities at every junction for her to serve. “Serviam” was reinforced frequently at CNR where she received a bachelor’s degree in political science in 1971. Making the decision to attend law school after CNR was a perfect fit – Mary wanted to serve and law was the way. The road to service was further solidified for her at the University of Notre Dame Law School where the practice of law was, and still is, viewed as a service to others.

After receiving her JD from Notre Dame in 1975 Mary worked in several capacities as a trial attorney, corporation counsel, and cofounder of a general practice law firm in Connecticut. Additionally, she served as an adjunct professor at both the University of Connecticut and CNR and as a faculty member at Notre Dame Law School.

In 2008, she was appointed a judge of the Connecticut Superior Court where she presided over civil, criminal, family and juvenile cases until her retirement in 2023. Reflecting on her years as a judge, Mary says she found this experience to be very satisfying. She stresses the importance of a judge exercising listening skills and believes that the stories she cannot tell are the most meaningful part of her experience. Specifically, they highlight the need to listen with an ear toward compassion while at the same time following the law.

Mary says she left the bench to become involved directly in service. Asked which endeavors she feels most fervent about these days, she quickly responds “immigration, imprisoned parents and their children, and Haiti.” Mary’s passion for service is palpable as she elaborates on her role in these efforts.

Mary is Chair of the Board of Directors for the “Building One Community,” a non-profit based in the Stamford, CT area. This organization’s mission is to advance the successful integration of immigrants and their families by providing free services that educate, employ, empower and engage immigrants and the broader community. Mary personally has been involved in providing protection to unaccompanied minors by guiding them through the legal process, the right to work, and the road to citizenship.

In addition, Mary is a founding chair for “Connecting Through Literacy: Incarcerated Parents, Their Children, and Caregivers (CLICC),” another Connecticut-based non-profit program that uses mentoring and literacy activities to reduce recidivism for incarcerated parents with the hope that the shame and stigma experienced by their children can also be lessened.

The “Hope for Haiti” program seeks to improve the quality of life for people in Haiti, particularly women and children, through access to healthcare, quality education, and clean water as well as through the promotion of economic growth. Mary is currently chair of the Board for “Hope for Haiti.”

Another non-profit organization for which Mary serves as Chair is the Ferguson Library Foundation. Its mission it is to provide free and equal access to information, ideas, books and technology to educate, engage, and enrich the Stamford community.

Although Mary’s days are very much filled by serving in these capacities, she still has managed to find the time to do more. Mary was a member of CNR’s Board of Trustees from 2016 until 2019, actively engaged in ensuring the placement of CNR students at Mercy as well as the adoption of CNR alumni by Mercy. She is a member of the National Association of Women Judges, serving on several of their committees that focus on the rights of women and children, and is also a James W. Cooper Fellow of the Connecticut Bar Foundation where she serves on the History of Women in Law Project. Additionally, Mary volunteers at her parish, St. Catherine of Siena and St. Agnes, in Riverside, CT.

From early on in life Mary Sommer’s self-proclaimed dream has been to be in service to others. Through her many acts of “Serviam” she has certainly fulfilled that dream and is a model for others who aspire to that same goal.