Ministry

Q&As



Mercy Sr. Percylee Hart cheers on Union Catholic Regional High School alumna Sydney McLaughlin on Aug. 3 as she competes in the 2020 Olympics. McLaughlin won a gold medal in the women's 400-meter hurdles event that day. (Courtesy of Jim Lambert)



by Sydney Clark

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Sr. Percylee Hart of Scotch Plains, New Jersey, was just 17 when she entered the Sisters of Mercy in 1952.

Drawn to their charism and the influence of foundress Catherine McAuley, Hart joined the religious order after witnessing the sisters in action at her high school.

"They were on the move, they were getting their master's degrees and they were energized," Hart said. "As a young person coming out of a terrible experience with World War II and the atrocities of Hitler, I was drawn always to the spiritual realm."

Years later, Hart discovered another vocation: education. After serving as principal of Red Bank Catholic High School in Red Bank, New Jersey, for 10 years, she brought her gifts and ministry to Union Catholic Regional High School in Scotch Plains, where she's been principal for over 41 years.

Hart has been instrumental in shaping and implementing the school's mission and core values of respect, responsibility, honesty, compassion and community, inspiring former and current students to be agents of change.

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During the 2020 Tokyo Olympics this summer, Hart and a crowd of nearly 500 students, staff and supporters wore the school colors blue and white to cheer on Sydney McLaughlin, who graduated from the high school in 2017, for winning gold medals in the women's 400-meter hurdles event and the 4x400-meter relay.

McLaughlin completed her hurdles event in 51.46 seconds, beating her world record.

The joy and excitement of watching with the school community as McLaughlin crossed the finish line were indescribable, Hart said.

"Sydney epitomizes what we're about here at Union Catholic," she said. "She has a deep faith and a commitment to be all she can be and what God calls her to be."

Throughout her tenure as principal, Hart has received recognition for her dedication to providing students a quality, spiritual-guided education, including the 2020-21 Lifetime Achievement Award from the Union County Commission on the Status of

Women and the Lead. Learn. Proclaim. Award from the National Catholic Educational Association.

***GSR:* What makes the students at Union Catholic Regional High School shine?**

Hart: They step up to the core. They know it's OK to fail, and they also know that it's OK to be who they are. I am who I am. I respect myself. You can't stay at Union Catholic if you do not respect others.

We all have gold within us, and each one of us has a path that leads us to the gold. Of course, the ultimate goal is to have everlasting happiness with God. To see each of our students go down the path that empowers them to reach their full potential, whatever it is, they shine, and you can see that they're so happy.



Sydney McLaughlin, right, with Mercy Sr. Percylee Hart at McLaughlin's high school graduation in May 2017 (Courtesy of Jim Lambert)

How would students describe you? What do you think they would say?

Well, they've said many things over the decades, and as I age, the message keeps changing, but they have given me feedback. I think I have inspired them to say, "If she can do it, I can do it. If she believes in me, I need to believe in myself."

In terms of relational, I think it has grown into a very heart-to-heart love, like from a great-grandmother. It's familial love, a bond that can't be broken. I've had faculty and parents who will come up to me, and I'm giving the message to the children, but they've said, "You know what? That message is for me." It's Jesus' message to love and to encourage others, so how can I not stop doing what I'm doing?

In terms of my ministry, it gets better every day and accelerates. Over the years, I've seen the students change, and I've seen education change. It's been an exciting journey, and I'm truly blessed.

The school seems to have a strong sense of community, particularly among you and the students because you're heavily involved in their activities. Why is community so crucial, especially for high school students?

To me, community is a unifier, and anything that is used to divide is evil. We need to build up the kingdom of God, and we do that by promoting and bringing unity into our school, which is shared among everyone who comes to Union Catholic. People will walk into this building, and they'll say, "There's something different about this place."

It's a little microcosm of loving one another. It's a simple formula. You should smile, be positive, helpful and hopeful.

How has the school supported students throughout the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic?

We were ready to pivot. We promised our children a quality education, and we did not waver in that. For 20 years, we had already been doing one-on-one learning with laptops. Therefore, our teachers were trained, our children were trained, and we had

all our learning platforms in place. No one missed a beat.

We committed to converting all athletics, student activities and clubs to a virtual format. We had honor roll breakfasts, virtual National Honor Society meetings, plays, Christmas concerts and more. We also offered virtual counseling services so the support was there for our children.

However, the one thing we could not give them was bonding with each other in person. They truly missed that. We did what we could, so we had pop-up drive-throughs and some days where students met up outside at the school and wore masks.

What is your relationship with Sydney McLaughlin like?

The McLaughlins are a U.C. family. Sydney and her three siblings all went here. Ryan is the youngest, and he just graduated. Sydney's mom said that our mission and core values matched theirs as a family, so that's why the family chose to come to U.C. The bond with Sydney's family was there from the beginning, and we're blessed to still be connected with them throughout the years.

Sydney lives in California now, but when she comes back home to U.C., you'd never know it because of her humility, and she's low-key. She likes to run with the girls on the track, and she likes to give them advice. God has called her to be a power for good that very few people can be. She's the first one to go to volunteer at soup kitchens and help others.

However, with that comes some suffering because she doesn't want fame or notoriety; she just wants to be Sydney. Unfortunately, the world isn't always kind, so I hope she can stay grounded in her faith and always remember her commitment to God.



Mercy Sr. Percylee Hart, left, stands with gold medalist Sydney McLaughlin during the December 2017 dedication of the trophy case honoring the Union Catholic Regional High School track alumna. The trophy case features a portrait of McLaughlin. (Courtesy of Jim Lambert)

What is the greatest lesson that your Catholic faith has taught you?

The thing that has come to me about our Catholic faith, and I can't shake it, is Matthew 16:18: "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it."

The Catholic Church is a rock. I think those of us who believe in Jesus and all followers of Jesus in the Catholic faith need to be that rock since we are part of the church.

Another school year is here amid the ongoing pandemic. What is your prayer for students, their families, faculty and staff this year?

I hope and pray that they all have a spirit of hope and are filled with optimism. I also hope that they do not give up the course or become discouraged. Take it one day at a time, lead with love and walk with God.