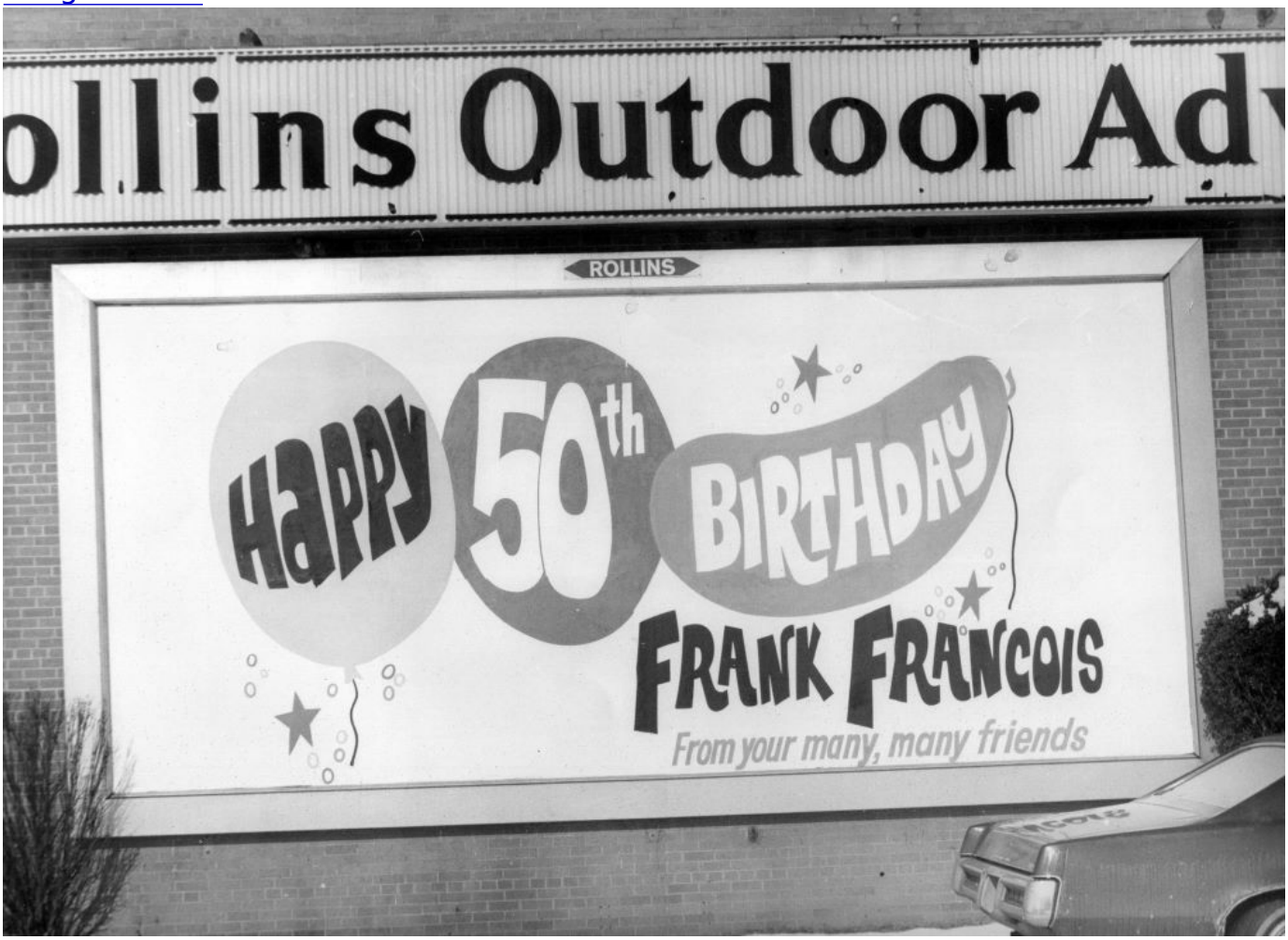
Columns
Horizons
Religious Life



The billboard pictured here celebrated the 50th birthday of Sr. Susan Rose Francois' father. This is the final Horizons column for the author, who recently turned 50. (Courtesy of Susan Francois)



by Susan Rose Francois

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Turning 50 is one of life's major milestones. I should know, as I turned 50 last week. Even the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recognizes people over 50 as "older adults" eligible for the second COVID-19 booster, which I happily received last Friday.

My father turned 50 when I was 12 years old. He had recently retired from a career as a local elected official and embarked on a second career of national service in public policy. That year, my mother organized a surprise birthday party for my father, and even collaborated with friends to pay to place a "Happy 50th Birthday" billboard in a prominent location.

That party, and billboard, became infamous in my family. Let's just say, for some reason, my father was not amused. Perhaps this cautionary tale is why — rather than risk a surprise party of which I was unaware — I asked a sister friend in community to plan the celebrations for my milestone birthday.

To be honest, I also recognized this milestone birthday as an opportunity not to be missed to celebrate life with my religious sisters. I did not make the plunge into religious life until my early 30s, so the next big milestone is not until 2031, when I will celebrate my silver jubilee as a Sister of St. Joseph of Peace. Given the demographics of my community, I have always said, half joking, that we needed to celebrate my 50th in a big way because who knows who will still be around, or in shape for a party, by the time my jubilee comes around. For the record, the 50th birthday celebrations were a blast. Even my 12-year-old nephew enjoyed all the "nun fun."

While turning 50 is a milestone birthday for anyone, it is a particular one in 21st century U.S. religious life. This column, for example, will be my last for Horizons, where "younger sisters reflect on their lives, ministries, spirituality and the future of religious life." Don't get me wrong; I hope to continue to write and contribute to the conversation here on Global Sisters Report, but I also think it is important to hold this specific column for the voices of younger religious.

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Last week I also stepped out of the circle of Giving Voice, the peer-led network of women religious in their 20s, 30s and 40s that has been such a central part of my religious life so far. Giving Voice "creates spaces for younger women religious to give voice to their hopes, dreams, and challenges in religious life."

I attended my first Giving Voice retreat as a novice, helped to plan two national gatherings, and served as a member of the core team. My vocation was nurtured through Giving Voice. I built relationships with sisters across congregations that I know will continue to support and challenge me during my second half of life. They, too, are my sisters and always will be.

At the same time, I felt that it was important to honor the sacred space that is Giving Voice by leaving it in the capable hands and hearts of the generations behind me. I say generations because, while I am a Gen Xer, Giving Voice is now filled to the brim with millennial and even Generation Z Catholic sisters. That gives me hope. As my old Giving Voice T-shirt proclaims, I love religious life and believe in its future, in no small part because of this peer network.

During my birthday celebrations, some of my friends from Giving Voice, who already stepped out of this space when they turned 50, traveled to New Jersey to join my birthday celebrations with my community. Together we celebrated me joining them as a Giving Voice alumna.

Turning 50 is also a time to perform some diagnostic checks. For one thing, there are the actual medical tests that your doctor tells you to schedule with this birthday, like my upcoming colonoscopy! The midcentury marker is also a time to reflect on this journey called life as you look ahead to next adventures.

In the mix of birthday gifts, I received a book called *50 Things to Do When You Turn 50*. "If you're like most of the 13,000 people who will turn 50 on any given day, you're trying to juggle a healthy dose of optimism about the future, satisfaction with the past, and a few question marks about how to spend the next 30 or 40 (or more!) years of your life," I read in the introduction.

Happily, I've already got a head start on some of the 50 things, such as:

- Listen to Your Heart (How else to explain the religious life journey?)

- Develop Deep Relationships (The love I felt during my birthday celebrations was proof.)
- Write a book (I wrote a small book on St. Joseph a couple years ago and have started writing a cozy mystery.)

One of the greatest birthday gifts I received was the presence of my big sister and nephew at my birthday celebrations with my religious sisters. My worlds don't often collide, but it is always a joy when they do. It meant so much to have my sisters in community and my actual family as well as a few youngish Catholic sister friends together in the same room to celebrate the gift of life.

My big sister gave me a letter that I wrote to her 24 years ago. She was then in the Peace Corps. I was early in my pre-religious life career in local government. My job was becoming the career I thought I'd always wanted. Religious life was not even on the horizon at that point — I think I didn't even come back to the active practice of my Catholic faith until the next year. When my sister handed me the letter, she told me that I'd recognize myself in my words from 1998 and the journey I've been on since then.

"I don’t think I want to do the all-consuming 'my career is my life' thing," I wrote then. "I have no desire to work 60-hour weeks and become a respected expert in my field. I hope to enjoy what I do, excel at it, be well-compensated, but make time to stop and enjoy life. To listen to the trees rustle. To take walks. Sit in the park. Read books."

My 1998-self had no idea what I would be doing today, as I celebrate 50 years of life and 16 years of vowed religious life. And yet, as I celebrate this milestone and perform my self-diagnostics, I can't help but wonder at the mystery of it all. I enjoy what I do, who I am and who I'm with. I am well compensated with a life full of meaning and companions on the journey. What a gift! God is good. Amen. Alleluia.