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The life-transforming guidance of Sister Mary Louise Barhorst

By **Mary Schmich**

My life would have been radically different without Sister Mary Louise Barhorst.

I hadn't thought of her in a long time until recently when a friend and I were discussing the anxieties of today's college-bound students and how getting into college was once a more relaxed affair.

I began telling the tale of Sister Mary Louise Barhorst jokingly, as proof of how much less seriously we took college applications in those days, but as I talked it hit me: This woman changed my life.

Sister Mary Louise Barhorst — I always thought of her by her full name — was the girls guidance counselor at Gerard Catholic High School in Phoenix. Most students planned to stay in Arizona for college, but once in a while, when an out-of-state college rep appeared with a briefcase full of brochures, she would round up a few students to listen to the pitch.

One day she corralled me and a couple of other girls into a classroom with a man from a place called Pomona College in California. I knew nothing about the college but the word "California" shimmered before me like a beach sunset.

I took the application home, filled it out and mailed it in. It was my only college application.

Some time later, a white envelope bearing a Pomona logo arrived in my mailbox. I ripped it open. I looked at the letter. I folded it back up and put it in a drawer in the bedroom I shared with my two little sisters. I hoped it wasn't too late to apply to Arizona State.

It was spring in Phoenix, the smell of citrus in the air, a hopeful season except for the fact that, because my father was broke and could no longer pay rent, my family of 10 was living in a house temporarily secured for us by our parish. The day the letter from Pomona arrived, we knew that before long we would be evicted.

Under the circumstances, I didn't bother mentioning the letter to my parents. Maybe I'd get to California some other way and time.

A few weeks after I tucked the letter in the drawer, Sister Mary Louise Barhorst called me into her office.

"Did you ever hear from Pomona?" she said.

I nodded. "I'm not going."

"You didn't get in?" she said.

"Oh, I got in," I said. "But I can't pay for it."

I told her the letter said it would cost more than \$4,000.

Hadn't my mother filled out the financial aid application? Yes, I answered, without adding that my mother had done it hesitantly, afraid it would alert the IRS to the fact that my father hadn't paid his taxes.

"Do you still have the letter?" she said. "Will you bring it to me?"

Every now and then I hear stories on the news about kids from unsophisticated or financially strapped families who are shockingly clueless about how to play the college admissions game. I imagine such stories puzzle many people, but I understand. Applying to college is like calculus: If no one teaches you how, how can you do it?

At Sister Mary Louise Barhorst's request, I dug Pomona's letter out of my drawer and took it to her. She flipped through the pages, then told me what I hadn't understood as I looked at those giant numbers.

I'd been offered a big scholarship, plus a small loan and a good work-study program. Everything was covered. While I sat there, she called the Pomona admissions office to make sure it wasn't too late for me to say yes.

By the time I left for Pomona, which turned out to be a great school, my family was living in a motel room, one of a series of motels they occupied until my father got his life back on track.

If I'd stayed in Phoenix, I probably would have had a good life anyway, but leaving opened possibilities that led me to the life I have and love, for which I owe Sister Mary Louise Barhorst.

After the conversation with my friend a couple of days ago, I searched for Sister online and discovered that she died in 2013, at the age of 86, in a Dayton, Ohio, convent. I also learned that she was born Louise Cecilia Barhorst, the youngest of five children, on a farm in a small Ohio community of 60 Catholic families. When she was three years old, her mother died in childbirth. Her father died when she was 10. After the family farm was sold, she lived with relatives.

All of that was news to me, but it shed some light on the quiet way she'd let me know, just a couple of times as we sat in her small office, that she sensed things weren't going well for me at home. She never pressed for details and I, trained in the belief that what happens in the family stays in the family, never offered. Still, it mattered to know she cared.

It's easy, especially when you're young, to take for granted the good things that happen to you, and the people who help make them happen. It's never too late to acknowledge those people, even if they're not around to hear.

mschmich@tribpub.com • [Twitter @MarySchmich](https://twitter.com/MarySchmich)

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