

## **Christine Bhartu: Memories (1974–2001)**

I'm Christine Bhartu, a long-time friend of the Sisters of House of Bread. I'm also one of the earliest people who worked on staff with Sister Jill at the Bethlehem Retreat Centre.

My family and I met Srs. Jill and Claudia shortly after we arrived from Fiji in the winter of 1987. While waiting for our immigration status, my husband Hiren and I volunteered at the BRC for a year, and this began our journey with the Bethlehem Retreat Centre and the Benedictine sisters.

Hiren created databases for the Centre and showed Sr. Claudia how to enter data. He also helped Howard Smith build the chapel, originally called the Galilee Chapel, and helped with the construction of other buildings as well.

The BRC was a beehive of activity on the weekends. I helped in the kitchen, setting tables, serving, cleaning up and dishwashing. At first, it seemed like a mammoth task because I had never used a dishwasher, in fact, had never seen one let alone a humongous one as they had there. I had no clue how I was going to survive in the 'dish pit', but thanks to Claudia it was a breeze.

For some reason, Sister Jill decided that I would make a good secretary. Shortly after receiving our work permits Jill called me into her office. As most people knew, she was a no-nonsense person and always cut to the chase. When called into her office it usually meant that she needed to have a 'chat' with you so when it was my turn, I thought, "Oh boy, am I in trouble?" What a surprise when she offered me the job of secretary. I had no clue why she decided that other than I was a fast typist, a skill I learned in the newsroom back home in Fiji.

Besides being the secretary, I helped in other areas as well. I recall once when I was in the kitchen, Sister Jill kept taste-testing the meat sauce that the cook, Brian, was making. She finally sent him out of the kitchen and worked her magic on it until she was satisfied.

During my time there, I gave birth to our youngest child, Janine. I had the privilege of bringing her to work for the first few months of her life – all thanks to her godmother, Jill. However, when it became apparent that her loud wails could be heard in the counselling offices next door, it became time to make other arrangements.

I also recall one time I was in the middle of an important work phone call, and it was obvious that Janine needed her diaper changed. For some reason, Jill came in and noticed Janine squirming about. She picked her up, realized she needed a diaper change, promptly placed her back in the crib and dashed out the door. She returned with Sister Eileen who took charge of things. Sister Eileen and I had a good chuckle about it later... but not in Jill's hearing.

Over the years, working at the BRC was like working for a family. There were deadlines to meet and details to manage prior to retreats but no matter how harried things got, Jill had my back. I once lost a whole day's work in the computer because I forgot to save it and when I told her, she said, "Oh well, start again tomorrow."

I have so many beautiful memories and leaving the BRC in 1995 was not an easy decision. The time Hiren and I spent there gave us the opportunity to spread our wings in Canada, a gift we hold very near and dear to our hearts. No matter where our journey has taken us these last 35 years, the BRC and the Benedictine Sister have and will remain a driving force in our lives.