

Ann Gillespie (BA '03), a longtime television and stage actress, follows a call to the ordained ministry.

Calling A New

BY KELLY COLLAR



When the Reverend Ann Gillespie ascends the altar and turns to face her congregation, she's bringing a flair for the dramatic that most Episcopal priests can't touch.

A 2003 graduate of Goddard's bachelor of arts program, Ann left a 23-year acting career in Hollywood to follow a call to the ordained ministry—a calling she fulfilled last December during a “commissioning” ceremony at Christ Church in Alexandria, Va. Today she is the associate rector for worship and pastoral care at the church.

“I feel like I'm exercising so many of the same gifts in my liturgy work here,” she says.

Newcomers to Christ Church might gaze in wonder at the priest delivering the sermon, certain that they have seen her face, heard her voice, somewhere before. And indeed they have.

Ann is probably most recognizable for her recurring role as Jackie Taylor—or “Kelly's mom”—on *Beverly Hills 90210*, a part that ran the length of the series from 1990 to 2000. She was Nurse Jabara on *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* in the early '90s, was a guest star on dozens of shows like *ER*, *Diagnosis Murder* and *The Gilmour Girls*, and also had an active presence in the theater during her lengthy television career. Her husband is also a performer.

“We were part of this middle class of actors,” she says, “where you're a recurring character on a show. So you may work three out of 12 episodes that are being shot.”

Above, Ann Gillespie today, at Christ Church in Alexandria, Va. Right, Ann during her years as a television actress.



Ann says that while she was coming of age in the business, only about 2 percent of Screen Actors Guild members were fortunate enough to make a living acting.

“My husband and I were part of that two percent,” she says. “Now, we weren't multimillionaires, and we weren't big stars, but we did live very comfortably.”

While she and her husband were enjoying the fruits of their labor, though, Ann found that the entertainment industry was changing; Hollywood was becoming increasingly focused on “big names,” making it difficult to make a living in television. The couple was also raising two children, and Ann found that her own beliefs were often at odds with the work she was doing.

“I started to feel that not only was the work I was doing in Los Angeles not important, but it actually went against some of the values I held,” she says.

And with Hollywood's notorious aversion to aging actresses, Ann says that just as she was reaching her full creative power, the acting parts were drying up.

“I started feeling like, ‘I've got all these gifts, and they're not being used fully,’” she says. “That's what really set me on my quest.”

Ann's quest began with a summer of reflection in 2000 about her career and her future. This introspection, and reunions over the summer with old classmates and family members, brought about a decision to return to college. She had attended a few semesters at Yale right out of high school, and then a theater program sponsored by Connecticut College, but she'd left both behind for a career in acting. This time she chose a less traditional college, and that college, of course, was Goddard.

“I knew I couldn't go to a ‘normal’ school, because I didn't want to declare upfront what my major was,” she says. “I wanted it to be a real process of being led to what it was.”

Ann says she really had to relax and trust the process at Goddard. “It was a little scary for me at

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portrait of a donor

MARY JANE DELLENBECK HAS SUPPORTED GODDARD FAITHFULLY FOR 28 YEARS.

A resident of Medford, Ore., Mary Jane graduated from Goddard in 1979. She says when she was looking at colleges, she wanted to study pastoral counseling for a layperson. She couldn't find a program like this at any other institution.

She ended up doing just that at Goddard, though, and enrolled simultaneously at Wesleyan Seminary in Washington, D.C., surviving an extremely challenging year and earning two credentials. She completed the clinical requirement at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington and then worked for 12 years directing the pastoral counseling program at the National Presbyterian Church.

Fast forward to 2008. Mary Jane, now 80, is still very active in her profession, serving as a pastoral counselor and licensed marriage and family therapist within a church, which allows her to serve traditionally underserved populations as well as the congregation.

A long-time Goddard donor, she was surprised to learn that



her annual gifts, averaging around \$200 a year, now total \$5,000. When asked why she contributed to Goddard so "religiously," she said that her late husband believed in philanthropy, and together they were in the habit of giving whatever discretionary money they had to deserving organizations.

Goddard, where she got her start on a fulfilling career, was "always on the list." CW

— BY SARAH HOOKER

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the beginning, because it was so different from what I know," she says, "but it was exactly what I needed, to be able to structure my own learning and reflect, reflect, reflect through my writing." Her reflections helped her sort out some mystical experiences she had had during her lifetime and also led her to listen to an "inner voice" that was a constant and growing presence. She continued her meditations

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— REVEREND ANN GILLESPIE

through her ongoing passion—yoga—and even returned to the Episcopal Church, something she hadn't done regularly for years. One day, she experienced a "turning" when a friend asked her what she planned to do after Goddard.

"I said, 'I don't know, but whatever it is will combine the ritual and pageantry of theater with the transformation and healing of yoga,'" she remembers. "And I walked into church that morning, and I looked at my rector and thought, 'that's it!'"

"It" was a divine calling to the ministry, a calling that led Ann and her family to leave Los Angeles for the Virginia Theological Seminary and, eventually, Christ Church.

"What happens when you, in essence, accept a call from God is that your life is turned upside down," she says, "because suddenly your center is not in you. Your center is in something much larger than you, and you end up in places you never could have imagined."

In her position at the church, Ann oversees the worship services and the music, orchestrating the whole. In fact, during Holy Week—the busiest week of the church year—she says, "I told my husband, 'I feel like I'm the writer, producer, director, set designer...everything!'"

While she still loves the theater and great movies, she says she doesn't miss her acting career a bit.

"I feel like I am using the same gifts, but to a greater cause." CW

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