

Jenny Symon Leguineche: A Lifetime of Building Bridges

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Jenny Symon Leguineche with her husband James

Jenny Symon lived an adventurous roaming life for many decades before finally settling down in Anchorage, Alaska – a long way from her birthplace of [Australia](#). Her parents were originally from New Zealand so Jenny's early life found her shifting between the two countries. After spending her early life in Australia, at 16 she returned to [New Zealand](#) where she earned her undergraduate degree at the [University of Otago](#) in Dunedin. She took a degree in psychology, and although it was to be useful in the future, she didn't immediately know what she wanted to do in terms of a career.

Jenny soon found herself teaching seven and eight-year-olds at an elementary school, but it wasn't long before she discovered it wasn't her cup of tea. "I didn't get on with the school's head teacher; our philosophies of education were wildly different." This became extremely clear during an art class where her students were having quite the time dyeing Easter eggs. "Well, they were really dyeing everything in sight, but they were having a great time." She was "invited" to come observe the head teacher's "proper art class" which turned out to be extremely restrictive with everyone having identical materials and all the students doing everything by rote. "He was really a bit OCD (Obsessive-compulsive disorder) and I realized we would never reconcile our approaches to education. "I just had a revelation, 'Wow, this is what the education system is doing to kids' minds, stifling creativity. 'I knew at that moment I couldn't do it. I handed in my notice immediately."

Although her parents had her christened in the [Church of England](#) and there was mandatory religious education at her school including preparation for confirmation in the Anglican church, this religious background didn't resonate with Jenny. "I was really an atheist. I have to honestly admit that I had a rather an anti-religious stance and used to mock the Mormons and Christians in general."

After her brief experience with teaching, Jenny did a lengthy world tour which included Southeast Asia, Europe, including England and Bali. During her time in Bali she closely observed Hindu life with temple dancing and the traditional rituals of daily offerings. In India she visited a Sikh temple and in the Punjab in northern India, she observed Muslims conducting commerce by canoes as well as their regular calls to worship. "I was in Iran at the time of Ramadan, and later had an amazing experience at the famous [Blue Mosque](#) in Istanbul. "It was on a Saturday and I was walking through the temple. The floors were covered by beautiful rugs and I was admiring the amazing tile work. I found myself in the dead center under the dome; suddenly the hairs on the back of my neck were just standing up – I felt connected to something very powerful spiritually; it was both awesome, but at the time I felt a little unsettled by the experience."

After her trip around the world concluded Jenny found herself back in Australia. She had intended to go to Sydney, but her car died in Adelaide, so she stayed there. "I got a job with a juvenile detention facility where I did counseling. The residential philosophy was changing and it was clear that this was the last chance for these kids. There were 16 kids in each facility, with lock ups in-between the structures and razor wire atop the outside walls. The kids came in by [paddy wagons](#). These kids were 16-18 years old and they worked there for two years. The place was really like a fortress; cement walls, razor wire – the works. You could only get in by passing by the guards; the kids were housed either in a single cell or dorm style. I was given specific kids to counsel as well as providing them with exercise. My work partner had retired from the British Special Forces and he would really just exercise the heck out of kids and wear them out as well as trying to talk some sense into them"

The kids in her care were a tough bunch. "After the first kid attacked me I took a self-defense class – the first kid who tried me again I nailed to a wall with one knee. I actually found the boys easier to manage; they were more straight forward than the girls who were often catty. But it wasn't too long before I felt discouraged; there were riots and the social situation was bad. Not a single child had a stable father figure – there was a lot of abuse, and absent or cold, distant fathers; I mean, there were wealthy kids living under a bridge! And in Australia we had the situation of having aborigine youth from families who had all been pushed off the good land onto "mission" lands. The elders were best at dealing with these kids. I had one kid in with me - a tribal kid who stole a truck; he couldn't use a fork, do laundry, and certainly wasn't used to being confined." Jenny discovered he was being visited by spirit world and getting stabbed in the foot by ancestors. "They eventually found him work as a [jackaroo](#) (Australian cowboy.) "Really, the social issues were overwhelming..."



Since I was already doing social work I decided to go more deeply into psychotherapy training. I joined a psychotherapy network; we were doing a lot of Gestalt work so I went to graduate school to study psychotherapy and then did a practicum in hospital. But I found I really couldn't protect my heart from other peoples' suffering."

Jenny began to work on a degree in social administration. "I was sitting in on a class on social policy thinking, 'I could die doing social administration,' followed by the thought that she would rather die doing something she loved. "So that was it; I bought a plane ticket to USA after visiting New Zealand and then I was off to the San Francisco Bay Area."

"I got off the bus in San Francisco and two young guys - literally 19-year-olds dressed in shirts and ties invited her to go to dinner. She passed on dinner in favor of looking for a cheap dive to stay in – and some postcards. At this point a fellow country woman, Beverley Tidwell, struck up a conversation with her after correctly identifying Jenny as a New Zealander. (Apparently her unique shoes gave her away, along with her overalls and the scattering of Women's Lib buttons on her clothes!)

Shortly after, Jenny formally joined the Unification Movement. She worked on a property in Aetna Springs, CA restoring buildings on the property before joining fundraising efforts with the church on the East Coast. While at a church celebration she learned about UTS and made a mental note to enroll in the future.

"When I arrived at UTS I found I really appreciated the environment there. I was able to meet people I wouldn't have met otherwise. I clearly remember having many spirited discussions including talking the fine points of theology. People from the [Religious Youth Service](#) (RYS) worked at UTS and I had an opportunity to make friends with Dr. Frank Kaufmann and learn about his work with the [International Religious Foundation](#) (IRF). Frank was such a strong influence. He introduced me to the interreligious work that IRF did. The way he spoke about his work and his obvious commitment to it made me want to do that kind of bridge building myself. I've never forgotten that experience."

UTS's president, Dr. David Kim, also had a profound impact on Jenny. "I had a close relationship with Dr. Kim; he was so non-judgmental and just so lovely. I found I could share everything and anything with him. He was really just so fatherly."

"While I was a student, I found I also really enjoyed the World Religions classes." Jenny was to find a useful application for her knowledge when she later joined the RYS and spent time in the Philippines. "During semester breaks, we were tasked with building a bridge through a village; half the bridge was in a Christian community while the other half was in a Muslim community. Building this bridge was so symbolic. The kids on Muslim side had to walk five miles to get to their school. When we finished building the bridge it was big enough for small vehicles to travel across. We had people participating in this project from all over the world. I really liked combining working with my hands and my heart. There was a lot of history involved and animosities were played out and worked out. We had a Jew and a Muslim working together there and not without some tension. Before this project I had thought I was about done with religious work, but building bridges – not just physical bridges, but also through relationship building was a profound experience for me."

Prior to graduating, Jenny's father became ill and she needed to return to New Zealand. To complicate matters, she had an unpleasant run-in with the Immigration and Naturalization Service because of her immigration situation and even had to spend a night at the Niantec Women's Prison in Connecticut. Ironically, Rev. Moon was in prison (in Connecticut) at this same time with a trumped-up charge of tax evasion. "Being in that prison even briefly was a very humiliating experience; it really gave me a deep insight to Rev. Moon's woes."

After she returned to the United States, she joined RYS in Portugal between semesters at UTS before graduating in 1987 with a Divinity Degree.

Post-graduation Jenny found herself living in Athens, Greece for five years. "I was involved with interreligious conferencing for the Middle East and for the [Professors World Peace Academy](#) for Eastern and Western Europe. Greece is really a cross roads – a place where Christians, Muslims and Jews can meet. The work I was doing included conferences in Hungary, Poland, and Yugoslavia. I was doing things I loved; inter-religious work, publishing, proof-reading, and typesetting. My work really combined everything I was interested in."

After receiving the [Marriage Blessing](#) in Korea in 1992 Jenny found herself in Alaska. "Prior to my marriage blessing I was doing intense prayers to prepare and I remember asking God, 'Please don't send me to Siberia; you can send me to the last Frontier,' which in Jenny's mind was the Middle East. As a native of Australia, she later laughed at the irony of her prayer for the state of Alaska is often called the Last Frontier. "I felt my prayers were answered, but somewhat as a cosmic joke!"

For the past 21 years Jenny has worked at a Catholic Hospital in Anchorage that she truly loves. "The Sisters of Providence pioneered the Pacific Northwest and Alaska; and they had a unique method of fundraising. Before they created the Providence Alaska Medical Center in Anchorage, they had - back in the day – [worked in Nome, Alaska](#). A couple of sisters from the order were accompanied by a priest and they would travel to mining claims with a rifle in hand and basically requested financial support from all the miners. In exchange, they promised them they would always be able to provide the miners with medical care; no one would ever be turned away. They build a hospital in Nome with these funds. And this was the same order of nuns who got our program started in Anchorage."

"I have really loved working with [Providence Health and Services in Anchorage](#); it is a special place and very spiritual. It was created by very strong, religious women with a deep spiritual orientation. Everyone who is an employee is instructed in the mission of the Sisters of Providence and we are all trained to support their mission. There are strong ethics here; instead of a CEO we have a Mission Integration officer to make sure people have not just their bodies, but their souls looked after. It is part of the mission to express the spirit of Jesus Christ to the poor and vulnerable."

"At the hospital I do project management. I focus on helping people improve their experience in the hospital. This might include processes like improving the flow of supplies coming through vendors; improving the flow of patients going through a particular department in the hospital or possibly improving reimbursement procedures. I love the varied cultures and diversity of the people at the hospital; there are many cultures working here. Every month we have presentations given by people who work here or who have been patients. We ask them critical questions to facilitate improved care. Patients are asked directly, "How could we improve the care we provided for you? We have had many refugees who were sent to Alaska from the Middle East and over the years we have worked with many people from many countries in Africa as well. The hospital has a special program to train refugees and now many of them work at the hospital."

Despite the problems in the world, Jenny has a forward-looking attitude. "I am generally optimistic; over the years I have learned to see the promise in people. If I were to give advice to current students enrolled

at UTS it would be to learn how to really listen to people and learn to appreciate the goodness in others. It is so important to understand how to genuinely get on with other people. I have to say that the public speaking aspect at UTS really helped me articulate my thoughts; the counseling courses at UTS also helped me learn how to negotiate. Sometimes I find I have to be an apologist for others who can't speak for themselves. I have spent much of my life promoting understanding between diverse communities and RYS helped me to see the importance of building bridges between individuals and communities. We need to stop looking at each other as "other" - that is when trouble starts. The bottom line is that all people just want to be treated with love and respect. No matter who they are or where they are from they are all really asking for the same thing: listen to me, hear what I say, understand I am sometimes afraid and please respect me."



Jenny with her son Jacob and husband James

Jenny will soon wind down her work at the hospital and she is looking forward to moving onto a new phase in her life. Her son, Jacob, now lives in Florida so she and her husband, Jim, have joined the world of empty nesters. "My husband and I enjoy doing Tai Chi classes together and I am also very interested in studying genealogy; you can see so clearly how people are related. We also love taking hikes in the Alaskan countryside; we live in a remarkably beautiful place." Jenny may be retiring from her professional life, but her passion for bridge building will likely continue far into the future.