

## Ana Rodriguez-Soto

MIAMI

Ileana Bravo is a dame in the noblest sense of the word.

Mercedes Iannone is a university professor who descends the ivory tower to empower the handicapped.

Sister Yamile Saieh is a "beautiful pilgrim" who has found a home among Haitians in Miami.

Meet three women who are making a difference in South Florida, three women whose Catholic faith has helped them move mountains for the benefit of others.

### Using fame to spread Good News

Ileana Bravo's face is familiar to anyone who watches television in South Florida. She worked for 20 years as anchor/reporter for local television stations before leaving the daily grind and starting her own production company.

But parishioners in the archdiocese also know her as the face and voice of the ArchBishop's Charities and Development Appeal (ABCD). She chaired the drive in 1998 and has narrated or appeared in every video since then. She also anchored the video for the Vision 2000 capital endowment campaign and wrote, produced and narrated the Jubilee 2000 video, which traced the history of the church in South Florida.



Bravo

But her donations of time and talent do not end there.

Around Epiphany Parish in South Miami, Bravo is known as

a lector and eucharistic minister.

At St. Ann Mission in Naranja, she is the lady who brings gifts to the children of farmworkers.

At Lourdes Academy in South Miami, she is the loving aunt who serves as mentor to a club headed by her niece, Women in Community Service.

At Providence Place, the archdiocesan shelter for homeless women in Oakland Park, she is the lady who visits on Saturdays to play and draw with the children.

You might say Bravo is quite a dame, and you would be right.

In January, during a ceremony at New York's St. Patrick Cathedral, she was inducted as a dame of the sovereign Military Order of Malta, a chivalric group that traces its origin to the Crusades. Their mission now is to help the sick and the poor. For Bravo, being asked to join the order "was an inexplicable honor because I didn't feel worthy," she said. "I don't know if I ever will but it certainly is my effort in life to live up to that mission."

Bravo recognizes that her prominence in the community gives her an opportunity to spread the Good News of Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular. "I think you need to live what you believe in and spread that as much as you can," she said. "I think we shouldn't be embarrassed or shy about that. We should use our voice to make a difference."

# Women of faith

## Make a difference in South Florida



ANA RODRIGUEZ-SOTO/TFC

Sister Yamile Saieh with some of her students at Notre Dame d'Haiti.

She thinks such role models are particularly needed by today's youth.

"I specifically see it in the example of my nieces who are teenagers now. I see them grappling on Sunday morning for what they take away from that service. What is the message? How am I supposed to live my life?" Bravo said. "Young people right now are having a very difficult time in this country. More than ever we need to step up to the plate and help them."

### Giving voice to the deaf

Twenty years ago, when Mercedes Iannone and her husband Joe were looking for a place where they could teach together, they had to choose between Notre Dame University in Indiana and Biscayne College in Miami.

"We saw that Biscayne was at a place where Notre Dame had been about 150 years before," Mercedes said. "We decided that our talents could best be used in building up something from the beginning."

Biscayne College eventually became St. Thomas University, Joe is now dean of its graduate school and Mercedes is master's program coordinator for St. Thomas' Institute for Pastoral Ministries.

The institute has three goals: to do research on the needs of the church; to educate people through its academic programs; and to provide direct services, such as bereavement counseling, spiritual companionship and training in social justice and domestic violence issues.

During her tenure at St. Thomas, Iannone has overseen the establishment of two programs: the Center for Loss and Healing, which trains coun-

selors in bereavement at the graduate level, and the just-opened Center for Education in Deaf Ministry, the only place in the world that offers a master's degree in pastoral ministry for the deaf.

"Only 5 percent of the deaf in the world are churched. They've had very little access to education, let alone higher education," said Iannone, who was honored by Miami-Dade County on March 20 with the "In the Company of Women" award for service to the community.

"We found that there were no programs at the master's level in deaf ministry that were for the deaf, by the deaf, in American Sign Language," Iannone explained.

"So we decided that was a worthy goal for us."

The institute opened in 2001 with students from all over the United States. Because there are so few deaf people with advanced degrees, classes are team-taught by St. Thomas professors and deaf interpreters.

In developing and implementing the program, Iannone worked closely with the Schott Center for the Deaf and Disabled, an archdiocese-sponsored facility in Fort Lauderdale. This June, about 50 deaf teenagers will gather at St. Thomas for a meeting of the Catholic Deaf Youth of the Americas.

"The longing that deaf people have is to be taught in their own language with a peer group," Iannone said. "I've just been amazed at the talent within the deaf community."



Iannone

### God brought me here

She is a Palestinian by way of Colombia who works with Haitians in Miami.

Moreover, Salesian Sister Yamile Saieh wears a habit, and she knows how to use it to get what she needs for her beloved Haitians.

"I try to get everything I can out of the rich," she said. "Because the poor need to be helped, and the rich need to share what they have."

The colorful nun has worked at Notre Dame d'Haiti Church in Miami since 1988. She directs the parish's religious education program, which has about 400 children enrolled, and teaches English to Haitian adults. During the summer, she directs a day camp for between 80 and 100 children from the community.

In Arabic, her first name means "beautiful," which is how Catholics in the Middle East refer to the Virgin Mary. Her last name means "pilgrim," a word that closely parallels her own and her family's life.

The Saiehs are Latin-rite Catholics from Bethlehem who trace their faith "back to the apostles," Sister Saieh said. (Her aunt and cousins still live in the Palestinian city of Ramallah.)

In 1910, her father emigrated from his native Bethlehem to Paris. From there he boarded a boat for America and landed in Cap Haitien, which he described as "the most beautiful place."

Forced to leave there in 1917, when the U.S. invaded Haiti and expelled all foreigners, his next stop was Barranquilla, Colombia. There he met his future wife, also a native of Bethlehem.

They moved to Cucuta, a small town near the Venezuelan border that reminded Sister Saieh's father of his native city. All 11 children were born there. Sister Saieh recalls feeling called to teach, although not necessarily to the religious life. That changed after high school, when she met the Salesian sisters.

"They were more human, closer to us, happy, always happy," Sister Saieh recalled. "But I didn't feel the vocation yet."

Still, the Salesians were persuasive and within a few years she set off for their motherhouse in Turin.

"There I really felt the call of God," said Sister Saieh, who speaks Spanish, English and French and can say a few phrases in Arabic. "I felt I was made to be a sister, a Salesian sister."

Eventually, her ministry took her to New Jersey and then Virginia, where she worked among German immigrants and migrant farmworkers. Her parents were already living in Miami when she came in 1984 to care for them.

After they died, she spent a year working at Corpus Christi Parish before being hired at Notre Dame by its then pastor, now Miami Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Wenski.

"The Lord went round and round, but he ultimately put me where he wanted me," Sister Saieh said.

In 14 years at Notre Dame, she added, "I have not had a sad day. Every day has been a happy one. I love them (the Haitians) so much. They are beautiful people."