Denise DeVaan ’75
2015 CSB Distinguished Alumna Award recipient

Dorothy Day was an iconic figure — as a Catholic and pioneering leader in the struggle for social justice. For Denise DeVaan ’75, Dorothy Day was a champion and, for one impactful January in 1974, a mentor.

The two met while attending the 1973 International Pax Christi Conference in Chicago. Conversations ensued and Dorothy agreed that Denise should come and work with her. That led to Denise organizing the first group of CSB/SJU students to volunteer at The Catholic Worker in New York during January Term of 1974.

Denise recalls that at the end of that month, “One of the toughest decisions I made was to leave the volunteer experience and return to Saint Ben’s to finish my studies.” But while that volunteer experience was over, it created a passion in Denise that has led to a lifetime career of addressing poverty issues through public policy and entrepreneurial innovations.

Over a 44-year career, Denise has worked for Catholic Charities, the Archdiocese of St. Paul/Minneapolis, the Minnesota Food Education & Research Center and Minnesota Community Action Partnership, focusing on energy conservation, food access, jobs, economic development, housing, dental care access, federal and state block grants, early childhood, financial empowerment and asset building issues.

She currently works as a senior consultant for ICF International. Her roles include coordinating national financial empowerment asset-building projects to bring financial literacy, financial capability, tax credits and banking and matched-savings resources to low-wealth families.

Her simple, straightforward philosophy has been instrumental while serving others. “Focus on strategies that speak to the interests and desired outcomes of all parties,” articulates Denise. “If there is evidence, a good return on investment, a reduced need for public assistance, genuine movement toward financial stability, it is possible to move these issues forward.”

Through the years, Denise has been privileged to experience and lead many firsts. She was the first woman of her family to obtain a post-secondary degree. She was the first lobbyist for Catholic Charities and the first woman to lead the Minnesota Community Action Partnership in Minnesota — investing 20 years in direct lobbying to reduce poverty.

Through the network of CAP Agencies, Native Tribes and WomenVenture, she created the first matched-savings program for Minnesota, which resulted in $2.5 million in savings deposits to-date for low-income families. She was also the co-founder of the international Kellogg Fellows Leadership Alliance and its first president. As a Kellogg National Fellow, Denise studied with Peter Drucker in the United States, Dr. Paulo Freire in Brazil as well as other notable political, business and not-for-profit leaders in South Africa, Costa Rica and Northern Ireland.

Denise says the most important leadership lesson she’s learned is to listen to what is being said and what is not being said. “The way we do our work is as important as what gets done. Relationships are key. Trust is essential. It is impossible to be successful in my line of work without partnerships between leaders of government, nonprofit and private sectors,” Denise
notes. “Many leaders and funding streams work together to create opportunities or pathways out of poverty. Developing a contemplative or meditative practice helps to ground the work.”

Denise came from humble beginnings and attributes many of her accomplishments to her Saint Ben’s education and many mentors, including S. Emmanuel Renner, who provided continuous support throughout her career. Denise has kept the Benedictine values, which were nurtured first in her family, as the foundation for her thoughtful, strategic leadership.