

Laura Gillen, left, of Rockville Centre, on her 1996 trip to volunteer with Mother Teresa's order in India.
 ■ Video: newsday.com/nassau

A gift for one who gave

Ller who volunteered with nun in 1996 will attend canonization

BY BART JONES
bart.jones@newsday.com

Laura Gillen was 26 when she strapped on a 70-pound backpack and headed to India to work as a volunteer with Mother Teresa, serving the poorest of the poor in Kolkata.

It was a transformative experience. Now, two decades later, the Rockville Centre resident is traveling to Rome this week to attend the canonization of the woman who so inspired her to serve others.

Blessed Teresa of Kolkata, as Mother Teresa is known during the canonization process, will become St. Teresa of Kolkata on Sunday during a Mass celebrated by

Pope Francis at St. Peter's Basilica. The next day is the 19th anniversary of the revered nun's death.

The religious order she founded, the Missionaries of Charity, invited Gillen to attend and sent tickets to the canonization Mass and related events.

"I was crying," Gillen, a lawyer, recalled of her reaction when the tickets arrived. She plans to leave Tuesday. "I was thrilled."

In New York, where the Missionaries of Charity order has centers in the Bronx, Harlem and Brooklyn, sisters will attend a special Mass at St. Rita's Roman Catholic Church in the South Bronx on Sunday at 7 p.m. A Mass celebrating the canonization also is planned at St.



Laura Gillen will fly to Rome this week for a special Mass.

Patrick's Cathedral in Manhattan, with Cardinal Timothy Dolan presiding, on Sept. 10 at 9:30 a.m.

The tiny nun, a native of Albania, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 for her work with Kolkata's ill and destitute. When she died in 1997, at age 87, her order had nearly 4,000 nuns and ran about 600 orphanages,

soup kitchens, homeless shelters and clinics around the world.

The process to make Mother Teresa a saint was fast-tracked by Pope John Paul II, a great admirer who waived the normal five-year waiting period for her beatification process to begin. Convinced of her saintliness, the pope launched it a year after her death.

Pope Francis finalized the process in December, when he approved a decree attributing a second miracle to Mother Teresa's intercession — a requirement to become a saint.

That involved the cure of a comatose Brazilian man with a viral brain infection who inexplicably sat up awake and without pain. A day later he was declared symptom-free. The Vatican attributed the cure to the fervent prayers by the man's wife for Mother Teresa's intercession.

A first miracle, the cure of a woman in India who suffered from a tumor, was approved in 2003 by Pope John Paul II.

Travel with a purpose

Gillen grew up in a Catholic family and graduated from Sacred Heart Academy in Hempstead, run by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood, and from Jesuit-run Georgetown University. She was working at a speaker's bureau in Manhattan in 1995 when she left to go backpacking in Southeast Asia.

After she returned home, she decided she wanted to see more of the world. But, Gillen said, "I wanted to have a purpose."

One day, thumbing through a book about volunteering while on vacation, she saw a section about Mother Teresa's work in Kolkata and decided instantly she would go.

She made her way to the convent in Kolkata where the



COURTESY LAURA GILLEN

Gillen volunteered for an extended time in 1996 with Mother Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity in Kolkata.

famed nun lived, and asked to be put to work.

Volunteers could work with orphans, with people requiring long-term care, or with the dying. Gillen chose the dying.

"I thought that was where I would be most needed and that would be the most challenging," said Gillen, who is the mother of four.

She moved into a cheap hotel popular with backpackers, and every morning after Mass and breakfast at Mother Teresa's convent, she would take a bus to the center for the dying.

There she would help bathe and dress the patients, feed them and generally provide companionship.

"It was actually not as grim as it sounded," she said. "Because a lot of the people would come there and would be dying, but they would be dying because they just had no access to an antibiotic. They would die of something that nobody here would ever die from" or from a wound that wasn't treated properly.

"So the good news was that a lot of the patients that came there dying left and went back to their families," she said. Still, "at least every few days when I would walk in the door, there would just be a corpse at the door, wrapped in sheets."

Despite the difficult work,

Gillen found it to be one of the most fulfilling and even joyful periods of her life.

"I came there to give, but I really got so much joy from helping the patients, because with the slightest gesture you could give someone so much comfort, so much happiness," she said.

Meeting Mother Teresa

She often saw Mother Teresa at morning Mass and evening prayer, and occasionally spoke briefly with her. At the time, the nun was infirm and sometimes confined to her room.

"To see her . . . I was kind of in awe of her. This is the person you've read about forever and heard about forever, especially going through Catholic schools," Gillen said. "It made me a little bit star-struck . . . She was this small, petite woman who had changed the world."

Gillen left after several months, a heart-wrenching departure after the bond she had forged with some of the patients.

As she heads to Rome for the canonization, she thinks of Mother Teresa's advice to volunteers and others: "Go out and find your own Calcutta, because there is a Calcutta everywhere," Gillen recalled her saying. "There is always some place where you can serve others."