

SCI Board's Mary Ruth Talley: A waterfront leader

First in a series about people who make
the Seamen's Church Institute important to the port.

By Mark Staples

Mary Ruth Hannold Talley of Woodbury, NJ, says it wasn't hard to take up an interest in Seamen's Church Institute when she first heard about the ministry in the 1980s. "Both my late husband, Robert, and I had ancestors who earned their living on the high seas, and we've been aware how much our sustenance depends on waterborne cargo," Talley says.

The South Jersey native says it also made a difference to grow up around water and its influence. Talley's husband knew first-hand about waterborne commerce. He served many years as a metallurgical engineer for Mobil Oil working throughout the East Coast and Midwest.

"From the beginning I found SCI to be an interesting group," she says. She became educated about the various organizations that are part of life in the Port of Philadelphia and the services they provide. And she's seen several "evolutions" of SCI as a member of the Board since 1992, including the move to a new building on Philadelphia's North 5th Street and the new chapel.

"I really appreciate the international flavor of the men and women who work the cargo ships visiting our Port," she says. "So many countries are involved, and there are so many human needs that the seafarers face."

In 1982 Talley was appointed a volunteer commissioner to the Delaware River Port Authority (DRPA) by then New Jersey Gov. Tom Kean. She served on its World Trade Committee. "We worked to research the best opportunities to gain cargo for the Port of Philadelphia," she said. The committee then planned and carried out trade missions to Western Europe, Belgium, Germany, Russia, Asia, Hong Kong, Japan, China, Australia, New Zealand, Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Spain.

The Port of Philadelphia is complex, conveniently located between Washington-Baltimore and New York. But it is challenging. It has more than 30 terminals on both sides of the Delaware River in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Committee members pitched the port with videos and, sometimes, re-enactors playing William Penn and Ben Franklin. Talley calls herself a "bit" player over a brief time in the overall promotion of the Port.

Talley says too many people do not realize how important the port is, what a high percentage of consumer goods comes to them by water. "They see 18-wheelers beside their automobiles on the highway, and they don't stop to think that the trucks are carrying containers or cargo that came off a ship," she says. She is personally grateful that her experience over the years has made her sympathetic to other cultures and the nature of the global economy and marketplace. "I've been exposed to other cultures, languages and lifestyles, what a living wage is in other places. It is easy to be provincial within our borders even though we have assimilated other cultures here.

"If seafarers are not able to leave their ships to shop or come to the (SCI) center, we take them cell phones so they can communicate with their families. Our senior ship visitor, Mesfin Ghebrewoldi, was a seafarer at one time. He speaks eight languages and has an innate ability to feel the vibes of people on a ship. He can determine if there are issues there to resolve, such as whether the crew has been paid." SCI, she notes, plays a key advocacy role on behalf of seafarers.

SCI's executive director, the Rev. James Von Dreele, has "a bigger vision" for the mission of Seamen's Church Institute and provides leadership that has furthered important collaboration among Port organizations.

She sees challenges ahead – one being to tell churches and individuals about the difference Seamen's Church Institute makes in strengthening the region's economy and security – "We need more volunteers and donor support."