

**Remembering Mary Jane Brennan IHM
June 2, 1925 - July 30, 2011**

“You must be faithful so often that when people wonder where life lives, they will think of you as one in whom Life has made its home.”



This quote from Anthony Padovano graces the center of Mary Jane’s IHM Book of Life page. Everyone who knows Mary Jane will understand why she chose it, because it describes her life beautifully. She knew and experienced God’s unconditional love for her, and in turn she graciously offered her faithful love and service to God’s people: her beloved family, her dearest friends and IHM sisters and everyone who crossed her path in her many ministries throughout the United States. “Life made its home in her” and she had an easy sense of being “at home” not only in her native Detroit, but also in Albuquerque, Pontiac, St. Louis and Minneapolis throughout her 68 years as an IHM Sister.

Mary Jane was the youngest of six children born to Dr. Thomas Brennan and Alma Wagner Brennan, who happened to be a nurse. She had two brothers: Tom and Jim, who became a Vincentian priest. She had three sisters: Mary Louise, who died as an infant, and Pat and Betty. She loved her brothers dearly, but the Brennan sisters were very close. They outlived the boys and grew to share a deep bond of sisterly love and closeness that couldn’t be severed by anything – not even the deaths of Betty and Pat.

Mary Jane entered the IHM community on July 2, 1942, at age 17. She wrote that her parents, with their medical backgrounds, tried to discourage her from coming because they worried that she was entering a very difficult life where women often didn’t take very good care of themselves. Interestingly, Mary Jane, like her parents, became an advocate of caring for oneself as well as others.

In 1945, Mary Jane began her teaching career at Christ the King School in Detroit. She taught second grade there for 10 years before moving on to Epiphany, also in Detroit, where she taught second grade for two more years. At some time during that 12-year span, she noted that together with Sister Robert Bellarmine, she “wrote a spelling book for the Second Grade because the Archdiocese of Detroit did not have one.”

In 1957 she received her B.A. from Marygrove College and was sent out west to Our Lady of the Assumption School in Albuquerque, N.M. In 1960 she became principal of the school and superior of the local community there. Sisters who were on mission with her have said that her sense of adventure and fun flourished in Albuquerque. Apparently, the rule at that time was that short trips were allowed, but that sisters must leave and return in the same day. So Mary Jane would plan a sightseeing trip and the sisters would pile in the car around 3 a.m., enjoy the day together and she would be sure to pull in the driveway before the clock struck midnight, bending but never breaking the rule! She was a beloved superior and principal, and she enjoyed her days in the beautiful Southwest. She took the opportunity to learn about the Native American and Hispanic cultures there. With this new learning came a deepening faith in God and an appreciation of the beauty and diversity present not only in cultures and peoples, but in creation as well. Later in life, when our Mission Unit would meet for a special occasion in Albuquerque, Mary Jane felt right at home again and was ready to hit the road to see how the area had changed and grown and to reconnect with people she knew there.

After Albuquerque, she returned to Pontiac for one year and, in 1967, she came back to Detroit to serve as principal at St. Charles Borromeo School. Being in Detroit this time, she had the opportunity to reconnect with her family and to become better acquainted with some of her many nieces and nephews. During the time she was principal at St. Charles, there was a fire at her sister Betty's house, and the family needed a place to live while the house was being repaired. Mary Jane took them in, and they lived on the third floor of the convent. Her nephew, Chris Campbell, said that the best bedroom he ever had was at St. Charles Convent! While the family lived there, the children also went to school at St. Charles...and apparently being Mary Jane's nephew was not enough to keep Chris from having a few memorable visits to the principal's office!

In 1971 Mary Jane moved to Kirkwood, Mo., (near St. Louis) to work at St. Gerard Majella Parish as director of religious education. In Kirkwood she coordinated the K-8 program, trained the teachers, developed the curriculum and provided sacramental preparation for both parents and children. She also participated in home-visiting, provided opportunities for faith sharing, initiated a support group for parents of handicapped children and offered a monthly program for the elderly. She coordinated monthly days of prayer, trained lectors and began her work as a spiritual director for individuals, couples and groups – all while also serving as a team member for the parish renewal program. She established life-long friendships in Kirkwood and was delighted to return there twice each year for our Mission Unit meetings. For many years she used those opportunities to reconnect with friends and colleagues from her days in Kirkwood. Mary Jane was amazing in the ways she kept in touch with people throughout the years...relationships with friends and family meant everything to her, and she put her best efforts and energy into maintaining them.

After a year of renewal and formal training in spiritual direction in Denver, Mary Jane moved to Minnesota, which was to be her home for the next 30 years. For 15 of those years, she served as pastoral associate at Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish in Minnetonka. While there, as a result of her ongoing prayer and study, she became deeply committed to intentionally living and ministering from a Christian feminist stance. She wrote, “In ministering to those in difficult, painful situations I want to be present in a gentle, empathetic and understanding way. In all of my work I desire that mutuality, collaboration and creative energy flow from my feminist stance. As a woman in the Church I will speak out and stand up for those women who feel discounted and unnamed by the church and society. I intend to do all I can to encourage and affirm women in leadership in the local, and if possible, larger church.”

Mary Jane was true to her word, and her commitment deepened through the years. On a later ministry commitment form, she wrote: “Feminism has had the greatest impact on my ministry. In ministering to both men and women, I have learned and been affected by the need for change in our cultural and religious attitudes. This has been my focus in teaching, counseling, spiritual direction and ministering to women in their life situations...feminism has the most significant influence on the choices I will be making in the future.”

At IHM Parish, Mary Jane coordinated the Stephen Ministry Program. All those whose lives she touched in that program knew they were fortunate to find, in Mary Jane, a master teacher, a skilled counselor, trusted spiritual guide and a life-long friend. There are testimonials to her from each of her Stephen Ministry classes, each one overflowing with love and appreciation for all that this gentle, bright, loving woman had taught them not only in class, but by the way she lived her life and gave witness to the values she held most deeply.

After Mary Jane formally “retired” in 1996, she remained a member of IHM Parish and was active in parish activities. As we all know, all too often, gentle, effective, empowered women who reach out to others to heal and empower them are perceived not as healers but as threats to some in the institutional church. Mary Jane experienced this with a pastor at IHM, who not only tried to keep her completely out of IHM Parish, but wanted her out of the Archdiocese of Minneapolis/St. Paul as well. Mary Jane tried to resolve this situation through conversation with the pastor and meetings with the archbishop. But even with the support of the congregation, our mission unit and the parishioners who loved her deeply and supported her completely, she could not achieve any breakthrough or resolution to a situation that was not of her own making. With a very heavy heart, she moved on from IHM Parish and found a new home in St. Joseph’s Parish where she remained until she left Minneapolis earlier this year.

During her retirement years, Mary Jane continued to study. She loved reading and had an insatiable curiosity about everything! She took classes at St. Thomas University on a

wide variety of topics: Scripture, Shakespeare, opera – even costume and set design. This enhanced her enjoyment of the many plays and dramas she saw at the Guthrie Theatre, where she volunteered as an usher. She enjoyed music, and loved movies. At our Mission Unit meetings, we would often bring several different DVDs to watch in the evenings. We would choose one or two that most of us hadn't already seen or were willing to watch again. But Mary Jane would want to watch them all...and most of us were usually sound asleep before Mary Jane would finish watching movies in the evening. At our recent meeting last March, we watched the movie *Secretariat* together. True to her commitment to feminism, Mary Jane remarked that it was a wonderful movie about a woman who, after some struggle and misunderstanding, was finally to use her gift and was a success in business. She also noted that a beautiful horse was part of the story line, too.

In her later years in Minneapolis, she continued her work as a spiritual director, volunteer as a hospital chaplain, and visitor/volunteer at a center for those suffering with Parkinson's disease. She embraced justice and peace issues and became active in advocacy work, especially on issues affecting the poor and disadvantaged in society. She enjoyed her many friends, continued to attend conferences and classes to continue learning and growing, and she never missed a Mission Unit meeting. Our meetings are held in St. Louis, and Mary Jane loved going back there...we know she equally loved being with us and being an active part of IHM life.

Recently, she talked about entering into a process of moving from "aging to Sage-ing" which she said helped her to come to a level of peace, generativity and wisdom so that she, in turn, could enable others to do the same. "At peace with myself," she wrote, "I can enter into a new phase of gratitude and praise for life within, in others, and in the universe. I am aware of God's presence permeating all people and creation. It is my desire to bring that love and beauty to those I encounter and to somehow be a grace-filled presence in the world. This is my way of furthering the peace the world so needs."

Mary Jane planned to come back to the Motherhouse in June, and she did. But instead of coming back to spend many happy years with classmates, family and friends here, she suffered a heart attack in April and returned after rehab at the end of May, thanks to her good friends, Marge Polys, Mary Ann Bredice, Mary Jo Jeppesen and others who helped her make the transition from Minnesota back home to Michigan and Monroe. Another heart attack this month weakened her significantly, and ultimately ended her life on Saturday afternoon (July 30). She died in the Motherhouse, surrounded by the love of family members and her IHM sisters.

She will live forever in our hearts, our cherished memories, and in the lives of her beloved nieces, nephews and friends. She now dwells in the place where Life and Love have made their home. Tonight we send Mary Jane to her eternal home, with our deep gratitude and love that will never end.

*Written by Ann Oestreich IHM
July 30, 2011*