

REMEMBERING SISTER JOANITA DUGGAN, IHM



Joanita's oral history and her IHM Ministry Commitment Forms leave no doubt that loving service was the guiding principle of her life.

Joanita, an only child, was born on June 1, 1914, to Joseph Duggan and Josephine Gorey. After her father died when Joanita was 3 years old, her mother returned home to live with her mother, sister and brother. When her mother went back to work, she sent Joanita to the Hall of the Divine Child. Yes, there was a time when the Hall was "coed." Joanita showed a picture of her third grade class sitting on the front steps of the hall to prove it. In fact, according to Joanita, the minimis, as the girls in the lower grades were called, made up one-third of the hall while the boys made up two-thirds.

After her mother died in 1925, Joanita left the Hall and went to Annunciation for seventh and eighth grades. In her oral history, Joanita reveals that she knew the "Grix girls," Sister Annunciata and Sister Anna Marie and that she lived next door to Sister Ellen Van Antwerp.

When Joanita left Annunciation for St. Mary Academy, she planned on staying to graduate, but the fire in 1929, her sophomore year, changed all that. As a result of the fire, the girls who lived in Detroit would have to take buses over to Marygrove as day students. Joanita opted to finish her last two years of high school at Annunciation only three or four blocks away from her home rather than ride two or three buses to Marygrove. After graduation from Annunciation in 1931, Joanita entered the congregation.

Joanita's oral history includes some interesting driving stories. Long before the IHMs were allowed to drive, Joanita recalls as a postulant she drove Sister Miriam down every day to supervise the building of the "new" Motherhouse. She was with Miriam when one of the workers came to her and said, "Now, Sister, where do you want the ash trays?" Those ash trays were, in fact, marble holy water fountains for inside the door. It did not take Miriam long to tell him the difference between an ash tray and a holy water fountain.

In her role as manager of the Motherhouse “shoe store,” Joanita made frequent trips to visit sisters at the mission residences to measure for and deliver shoes. Ironically, Joanita did not have a driver’s license and depended on Jerome Vandeveld, an IHM employee, to drive her. She says in her oral history, “Sister Julianna would put so many people in the car there was hardly room for us to go.” On one such trip after everyone had been dropped off, Jerome asked Joanita, “By golly, Sister, where is your partner?” “You’re it, Jerome,” she replied. A male companion in those days? A first for Jerome, Joanita, and the IHMs! When Hugh Gorey, Joanita’s uncle offered to give her a car from his Buick dealership if she got her driver’s license, it was a deal neither Joanita nor the community could refuse.

As the “shoe lady,” Joanita’s first attempt at ordering shoes almost ended in disaster. If she had ordered six of everything, Joanita claims the order would have been for a million shoes and the IHMs might still be wearing high tops! Thankfully, a representative from the shoe company returned her original order and showed Joanita the correct way to order shoes. This same representative also pointed out that the IHMs were at that time (around 1952) the only women in the United States wearing high tops. He suggested oxfords instead. So began the IHM “oxford movement” initiated by Joanita.

From 1932 to 1971 Joanita taught Latin, math, geography, religion and English on a grade school and/or high school level in Michigan and Ohio. In her oral history she admits teaching the lower grades was not her forte. She says with a chuckle, “I was two weeks in practice school in the second grade, and I was like a bull in a china shop, so I never saw little ones again.” At the Academy she could detect a gum-chewing with her nose. She used to say to the girls while writing on the board, “Third row...get rid of your Juicy Fruit.” She could even recognize the brand of gum they were chewing (probably because she once chewed it herself.)

After teaching for 38 years, care and concern for the elderly, sickly, infirm and lonely became Joanita’s top priorities from 1971 to 2003. When asked her reasons for assuming this ministry at St. Joseph’s Trenton in the ‘70s, she responded, “Maybe because I was in the hospital myself and realized how much it meant to have the Eucharist brought to me and also to have someone to come and visit with me.”

In her role as coordinator of St. Mary’s Retirement Center in Mount Clemens, and director of the Northeast Province Life Planning Center, Joanita felt it was imperative to keep the sisters alerted to the needs and concerns of our aging society, “that they be made aware that we are all in the process of aging, and the more informed we are, the better able we are to assist others and also improve our own aging.”

Joanita's goal was to get two or three people from each province to be on the Life Planning Committee – volunteers to assist the aging. Her feelings about the importance of participation on this committee were very strong. When she met one provincial who was not getting any volunteers, she said to her, "You ought to have somebody from your province. What do you want 'em to be – bitchy old ladies?" Shortly after this remark, all provinces were represented on the Life Planning Committee.

Joanita's passion for ministry to the elderly continued while serving at St. Peter's Church in Mount Clemens. While there she worked for the aging in our own community, in the parish, and in Macomb County as a member of the Macomb County Division Advisory Committee. By doing his, Joanita hoped to "celebrate the lives of older persons as sources of power and wisdom and to stand in solidarity with those who suffer in a world characterized by fragmentation, violence and poverty."

Tireless as an advocate for the oppressed, sick and elderly, Joanita says on one of her IHM Ministry Commitment forms, "I try to see that they are cared for with the respect and kindness that in justice they deserve." Whenever she saw a lack of care, respect or kindness in any nursing home she visited, Joanita did not hesitate to point it out and see that it was corrected. In her oral history she says, "[The nurses] began to know me and would say, 'Here comes trouble!'"

When Joanita retired in 2003 at age 89, the pastor of St. Peter's Church where she ministered for 26 years, summed up what she meant to the parish. "As long as I have been pastor," he said, "she has been my right arm in ministering to so many people who have various needs. She has visited the nursing homes and brought the Eucharist to the homebound. Indeed she has been Eucharist to all of us by her energy, prayerfulness and her vitality. In her ministry she had made Vatican II real and acceptable in many ways. She has truly been a sign of God's presence among us."

St. Peter Church's loss was the Motherhouse's gain. Joanita prayed for, visited the sick and was a Eucharistic minister at the Motherhouse until she went to the Health Care Center in 2010.

Joanita, you touched the lives of thousands with your compassion and courage, freedom and dignity, understanding, sincerity and awareness.

Thank you, woman of hope for bringing Good News to a broken world. Thank you, woman of holiness for bringing God's justice, mercy and healing peace to those you served to faithfully and so well. May God's great love and peace which you wrote about on your Book of Life page be with you.

Mary Ellen Loren, IHM
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