

## Remembering Sister Mary Ann Szmania, IHM

April 13, 1933 – April 14, 2009



This afternoon we gather to remember Mary Ann Szmania, sister, friend, adopted sister and aunt, classmate, mission unit partner and rep, co-worker, teacher.

We come during this beautiful Easter week, celebrating the unexpected death of Mary Ann. When she celebrated the great feast of Easter a few days ago, did she have any inkling that she would be celebrating her birthday week among those close friends and family members who had gone ahead of her into the great celebration of Resurrection? It would appear she was planning more fun gatherings here. She was committed to lunch on Tuesday and breakfast on Wednesday. She had done an early spring cleaning, so that when Lent and winter ended, the little get-a-ways could begin!

My sharings today come from a short and limited connection with Mary Ann as mission unit rep for the Seneca Rose Mission Unit. But my impressions have been confirmed by many long-time friends, co-workers, classmates and those who knew her well.

Mary Ann was born on April 13, 1933, to Leo Michael Szmania and Virginia Mary Anderson. She had one brother, Bob. She was born in Ohio but the family moved to Detroit when she was very young, and Mary Ann attended St. Catherine's school in Detroit for 12 years. When she was a sophomore in high school, she showed great interest in becoming an IHM. This desire was realized when she entered the IHM community on Feb. 3, 1952. She was received into the community on Aug. 15, 1952, and took first vows on Aug. 15, 1954.

The ministry Mary Ann loved and felt called to throughout her active years was that of teacher. For IHMs who were taught and motivated to exercise excellence in education in the 50s and 60s – the main role model and instructor for student teachers was Sister Marie Winifred. Sister Marie Winifred was principal and directing teacher for Mary Ann when she began her teaching career at St. John School in Monroe in 1954. Is it any wonder she was skillful in preparing, motivating and inspiring students to achieve excellent study habits, independent work habits, and creatively used stimulating and varied methods of instruction? Mary Ann began her teaching career at St. John, Monroe, and showed great flexibility and creativity in being an effective teacher in schools representing different economic and cultural diversity as well as students from the primary grades through high school. Other schools where she ministered were Our Lady of Good Council in Detroit; Holy Cross, Marine City; Our Lady of Miracles, California; Hall of the Divine Child here in Monroe; Bishop Gallagher, Harper Woods; Marian High in Bloomfield Hills; St. Peter, Harper Woods; St. Germaine, St. Clare Shores; and Star of the Sea, Grosse Point Woods, where she retired in 2003.

Mary Ann's mother died when she was a very young sister, and her father and brother died within a few months of each other about 10 years ago.

It was at Holy Cross in Marine City where Mary Ann became good friends with Sue Gourley, IHM. This was a deep and rare friendship that enriched both lives greatly. Mary Ann was deeply grateful for the continued love and friendship of Denny and Carolyn Flynn and their family who continued to include her in their family gatherings and adopted her as their sister and aunt. Mary Ann celebrated Easter brunch with the family on Sunday.

Mary Ann lived life fully. She connected with people everywhere she went. On one occasion when she and Sue had moved into a new apartment, Sue commented that someone in the complex reminded her of a former student she had taught. Mary Ann connected with the man and asked him if he had been taught by Sister Eugene Marie. When he confirmed this to be the case, Mary Ann took him to meet Sue. This family also became extremely close to Mary Ann, and Mary Ann celebrated Easter evening with Ruth and Brian Rouleau.

A favorite pastime was travel. While Polish by birth it appears Mary Ann took on some Irish by association. She treasured her trip to Ireland a few years ago and was quick to show off her Irish jewelry and sweater as she celebrated St. Paddy's Day at our recent Coordinating Council meeting.

Mary Ann often talked about her outings to retreat centers and vacation spots. She was not into "games" but she loved to read. Mary King, a co-worker at Star of the Sea, shared how teachers were entertained by Mary Ann's stories in the faculty lounge where she would recount the weekend adventures – as she unpacked her perfectly wrapped, nutritious lunches! Mary Ann was comfortable with students, parents, authority. She was direct, funny, supportive and loving. She was always well prepared for class and always professional.

In recent years Mary Ann served as the mission unit rep for the Senaca Rose Mission Unit. Alice Baker, a member of this mission unit, shared the following reflection.

"Mary Ann and her friend, Sue Gourley, IHM, were the epitome of hospitality. While recognizing the obvious need to come together to discuss and share community business, Mary Ann and Sue always reminded us that we were together to have FUN. So, thanks to them, meals, snacks, birthdays, jubilees were the usual agenda, too. Even some of our extended times were at cottages, Days Inn at Frankenmuth, and their Fountainview Clubhouse swimming pool. During this past year, Mary Ann continued her wonderful, gracious hospitality for our meetings in her apartment, since the clubhouse was getting a new face-lift. Even as we discerned together our future, Mary Ann was always the practical one. She could verbalize, articulate and question any agenda issue, but temper it with a sense of equality, humor and justice. She loved the IHM community and its leadership styles, and was always the first one to say, 'we've got to move on with love, not fear.' With her strong sense of government and IHM history, she did not feel intimidated by outside forces. Rather she would speak from her Polish background and deep faith. Many times, she forced us to stop and truly listen with our hearts."

Those of us who served on the Coordinating Council for the last three years experienced Mary Ann's vivacious spirit – her enthusiasm and willingness to move an agenda item forward – and her eagerness to take on new challenges. She was particularly honest about her technological challenges and laughed at herself while continuing to challenge herself as she sought to master the computer hurdles along the way. Recently, she was excited about participating in her first phone conference including eight of us. Whereas sometimes phone conferences can be rather stifling – since you cannot read body language or expressions – Mary Ann lightened the atmosphere with her humor and laughter.

Each year Mary Ann's ministry commitment forms expressed her desire to witness to the Gospel and live the message of Jesus. The gift she most appreciated about retirement was the time she could spend reading, praying and integrating theology with life experiences. On one of her commitment forms she said

"Each day I reflect on this saying from a Flavia card: "Every day is a new beginning. Believe in your heart that something wonderful is about to happen."

On Tuesday of this week, Mary Ann, you truly experienced a new beginning. A new way of connecting with old and new friends and family. A new way of being with our God. Something wonderful did indeed happen. We thank God for the gift of you in our lives and in the lives of the many young and old people you touched over the years. We love you and we will miss you.

Margaret M. Sweeney, IHM  
April 16, 2009