Gertrude Frances Papp was born Gizella Francisca Farkas on April 24, 1916, in a Hungarian area of southwest Detroit. When she was a year-and-a-half old, her mother died and her family disintegrated. Her father left for work in Rome, N.Y., and took her brother George with him; her sister Barbara, who was working, took her sister Juliann with her. Before leaving, her father placed Frances with friends until he could return. She was 16 when he returned to Detroit and by then much “water had gone under the bridge.”

Frances moved from home to home until she was adopted by Joseph and Helen Papp in 1924 when she was eight. Since Helen was a non-practicing Catholic and Joseph a member of the Reformed Hungarian Church, Frances was raised a Protestant. They lived a simple life, often moving from one rental house to another in different areas of Detroit. Frances says, “I completed 12th grade in 1934. I have no roots, no long-time school friends, except one.”

Her most traumatic experience was during her 10th grade year. She thought her birth father had died and was shocked when he showed up one day in her adoptive parents’ living room. She describes the experience.

I never did find out why he had left me as he did. But his re-appearance complicated my life. It was then I learned I had two older sisters and an older brother. One of my sisters was a nun, an IHM Sister teaching at a school on Junction Street, a school called Holy Redeemer.

Frances explained that she had contacts with her birth family from that time and developed some relationships with them, but she stayed with her adoptive parents and felt that they were her real family.

She transferred from Southwestern High School to Holy Redeemer on an impulse, where, during the 11th grade, she was prepared for her first communion by her sister Juliann, Sister Mary Rupert. Pressured by her sister Barbara, she applied to St. Mary Academy for her senior year. She was accepted as a working student and earned her keep by cleaning the triple parlors of the Academy. Because of her “checkered school career,” she lacked credits to graduate at the end of the year. Since Mother Ruth Hankerd had accepted her to enter the community, she could complete the requirements the next year as an IHM postulant. During the summer she worked as assistant to the porteress at the Academy and lived with the orphans the sisters cared for. On Sept. 8, 1934, she entered the IHMs.

Frances wrote that she only remembered Juliann as an IHM. “I have known Sister Mary Rupert only as a Sister, Servant of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.”

Frances (L) celebrating with Mary Rupert on her 60th Jubilee in 1984
The Marum Sisters Were an Early IHM Trio

The Marum sisters entered the congregation together on July 18, 1862. Julia (Godelieve) was 27, Kate (Chantal) was 29 and Mary (Angela) was 32. The ceremony took place in St. Mary’s church because the crowd expected to attend the reception would not fit into the sisters’ chapel.

In 1859, the separation of the community had 12 sisters going to Pennsylvania and 12 remaining in Monroe. Since that time, 10 candidates had been received and two sisters had died. Accepting three members of one family into the small group of 20 was a significant step. It wasn’t until 1870 that the community reached 100 members.

The Marums were originally from Ireland where they were among the gentry; in the United States, the family had made their home in Flint, Mich. Having been educated by the Ladies of the Sacred Heart in Dublin, they were well-suited to serve on the faculty of St. Mary Academy. And, their arrival was fortuitous. The Academy, which had previously been only a day school, was becoming a boarding school in September 1862 and was in need of additional staff. The Marums were ready to step in. Godelieve was placed in charge of the school. Chantal, described as the most delicate of the three, became the portress and served in that capacity for the rest of her life. Angela was appointed mistress of boarders and head of the music department. The number of music students and the related income increased rapidly.

When Angela began, she was faced with teaching on two old pianos. Obviously, there was need for a new one, but no money to purchase one. Efforts to raise the required $320 dollars began. Roderick O’Connor, Bishop Lefevre and Father Joos each contributed $25. Students organized musical and dramatic performances and the Monroe ladies held a Fourth of July festival. In the end, there were sufficient funds to pay for the new piano and for the exchange of an old one, resulting in three pianos, two new and one old. How different from 1926, when the campus had a large and nationally recognized music department with 75 pianos, a harp, violins and other instruments too numerous to list.

Angela died in 1872, Chantal in 1880 and Godelieve in 1896. They had left their marks on the fledgling community.

There’s No Fear Like That of a Furry Creature

I was teaching 5th grade at that time and had one of those spirited Chicago classes. At times the place looked cluttered and even messy. When I would come over on Saturday to fix up my classroom, I was especially disturbed when I saw that some of the children had left their lunches—whole and intact—in the wardrobe cupboard. There they were lined up on the floor beneath their coat hooks, some with sandwiches in them that were hard from age.

I decided I would teach them a lesson. On Monday morning, after prayers, I called on a few children to go out and bring those lunch bags in to me. As they stood around, ashamed I think, I held up a couple of the bags and told them how bad it was to leave food and let it be there in our closet for days. I reminded them that exposed food would attract mice and rats—or worse. Just as I was describing this, the example came to life—out popped a mouse from one of the bags!

I screamed bloody murder and jumped up on my chair, as I had a mortal fear of a mouse traveling up my leg. By this time the children went berserk and the room was in turmoil. Luckily "Mother" didn’t hear this, but my next-door neighbor, Sister Josanne (Sally Lannen), came to my rescue. When she saw me on top of my desk and the children running around and chattering, she saved the day. I was sent into the hall while she quickly got the children back in their seats. I learned not to over-react.

Rita McFarland, IHM

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Rita (Lucita) McFarland, IHM
1926 - 2009
Rita, who taught at St. Felicitas in Chicago from 1949 to 1955, told this story about one of her teaching adventures.