

IHM Sisters Then and Now

March 2013



Sister Mary Ann Grates was born in Harbor Beach, Mich., and went to Our Lady of Lake Huron School, where she was taught by IHM Sisters. She was the youngest of 10 children in her family. Near the time of graduation, she went to her homeroom teacher and told her she felt she had a calling to religious life but that she wanted very much to be a social worker.

The teacher told Sister Mary Ann that the IHMs were strictly a teaching community. The Felician Sisters in Livonia, Mich., ministered in social work, and she decided to join that community.

When she had made her first vows with the Felicians, a mostly Polish community, her religious superior asked Sister Mary Ann, “Why did you come to us? You’re not Polish.” She responded, “You do social work and it is my dream to do social work.”

The superior told her, “You will do as you are told.” And for the next 19 years Sister Mary Ann taught young children. Each year she would ask her superior if she could minister in social work, but would be told that she was a good teacher and they needed good teachers.

She said, “I thought it more important to be a religious, so I stayed. I learned to love teaching.” She was always interested in her students as “people.”

When her mother had a heart attack, Sister Mary Ann was granted permission for a leave of absence from the Felician community for three years. During this time, she lived with the IHM Sisters in Harbor Beach, continued working as a teacher and was able to give her mother the care she needed for the last few years of her life. While at Harbor Beach, she was exposed to “a different spirit” of the IHMs, and it was that spirit she felt she resonated with.

She decided to join the IHM congregation. But it wasn’t an easy choice to make. She left behind part of her Felician “family” and many close relationships.

But being the risk-taker she is, she made the change. She took two years of clinical pastoral education (CPE) at a hospital in Oklahoma to become certified as a chaplain.

And for the next 26 years, Sister Mary Ann fulfilled her dream of social work and became a chaplain. She ministered in Wichita, Kan., at St. Francis Hospital, Via Christi Regional Medical Center and St. Francis Regional Medical Center.



Sister Mary Ann Grates in her office as chaplain at St. Francis Regional Medical Center, Wichita, Kan.

“When I finally became a chaplain, it was as if a dream came true!” she said excitedly. “I worked in the behavioral health center and in the medical center.” She ministered in grief counseling, death and dying, and in the drug and alcohol unit. She earned two “Awards in Excellence” while working at those centers.

“I was able to be compassionate without being judgmental of the patients. You learn to listen for the ‘unspoken message,’ to listen with your heart,” she said.

A stroke in 2005 brought her back to the Motherhouse, where she lives today, fully recovered. She enjoys playing cards with sisters in health care, reading books and working crossword puzzles.

Sister Mary Ann said throughout her life there’s been one thing she wasn’t afraid to do: take risks. She took a risk joining the Felician Sisters without knowing them. Years later she moved to another city to live and minister with IHM Sisters, taking a leave of absence from the Felician congregation. Shortly thereafter, she left the Felicians, leaving behind many close relationships, to join the IHM Sisters. And then she moved to Kansas at a time when there were no IHMs or any of her family living there.



This year Sister Mary Ann will celebrate her 60th Jubilee.