Remembering Jane Nordhouse, baptized Beverly Jane, also known in community as Sister Beata Maria, evokes abundant images with multiple interconnections. Remembering a person who invested her life energies with great passion for more than 90 years calls forth a swirl of color and imagery. Call it a tapestry, a mosaic, a continually shifting kaleidoscope pattern – Jane’s years of life testify to her whole-hearted living as a human being, as a Christian, as an IHM woman. In the diversity of my memories of Jane, I think we can detect the single-heartedness of an integrated life.

I hope these few moments call forth your many memories of Jane as well. May they remind us that, like so many friends we have loved and known, we cannot encompass all they have meant to us and to so many other relatives, friends and companions on life’s way.

Jane offered a framework for our memories when she prepared an oral history some months ago.

She read the testimony to her, written and framed by Richard Greeves, a fellow teacher. He titled it “To a Teacher Always Young of Heart.” He called Jane “woman of the earth,” a teacher who “inflamed the artistic fires of the poet” and influenced “countless hearts,” “by example, always by example,” “a blessing, Beata Maria.”

Reflecting on our many years of friendship, I can recognize in Jane the characteristics he noted: an inspiring teacher, one who lived what she taught, a woman who loved the Earth and all its creatures and touched countless hearts.

Jane’s parents, Harry Albert Nordhouse and Sylvia Gladys Blahnik married when they were both 19. They had two daughters, Jane born in 1921 in Manistee, Mich., and Mary Margaret in 1925 born in Port Huron where the family settled.

Unfortunately, Mary Margaret died of TB as a senior in 1943 here at St. Mary’s Academy. Her sorrowing parents honored her memory and enriched ours with the installation of the carillon chimes that sounded every quarter hour over this campus for many years.

Also, IHM Sisters who lived with Jane at various missions recall that Mr. Nordhouse, a successful Michigan businessman, often arrived with multiple cartons of candy and candy bars. When swimming was also an option for the sisters, Mr. Nordhouse helped the
cause by sending the sisters boxes of bathing suits from one of his stores to make a fitting selection. His generosity was prodigal and not just in regard to the IHMs.

Jane describes her early years:

“My sister and I were opposites. She was outgoing, friendly, and I was bashful except with my few neighborhood girlfriends with whom I played jump rope, and I sewed doll clothes and I was always reading. Don’t misunderstand me. I was a contented child. I didn’t miss any outward signs of affection. I knew I was loved and appreciated.”

Jane loved the water and recounted her success in exploring all five of the Great Lakes. “Another bond I have with the Earth and the Great Lakes,” she said, “is known as Nordhouse Dunes. These dunes are located on Lake Michigan and named for my grandfather. There is also a Nordhouse Road, Nordhouse School and a Nordhouse Lake all of which I have visited several times. You would love the Nordhouse Dunes! And the lake!” In later years, she and Mariruth Ledyard contributed many hours and weeks to the IHM summer water spot known as Crawford on Lake Erie.

Jane had a love for any growing thing. “The most beautiful part of every classroom and biology lab I taught in was always the variety and abundance of plants.” Wherever she went, she planted gardens. When suitable soil was not available, as at Sacred Heart, Dearborn, Jane says she grew tomatoes hydroponically up on the second-floor of the convent porch.

Without a doubt her love of life extended to animals. “From the cat and dog I loved during my childhood to all the animals in all my biology labs – mice, gerbils, guinea pigs, fish, et cetera – I must admit they were more pets than experiments – and during the 23 years I lived with Mariruth [Ledyard] in Southfield we had many real pets” – Hobo, Casey, Perky, and not only dogs, but three cats as well.

Jane attended a number of schools to gain her early education including Port Huron Public School, St. Stephen in Port Huron, St. Joseph with the Adrian Dominicans in Port Huron, The Pines in Chatham, Ontario, with the Ursuline Sisters. “Woe is me!” she wrote, “They were Canadian. We took 10 subjects in the ninth grade and even studied all Saturday afternoon. The only way you could escape that study was to stay in the recreation room and listen to opera on the radio. Hence my appreciation for opera and classical music even to this day.”

She and some American girls at The Pines “formed a club called The Seven Black Sheep” whose aim was “to stir up a little excitement” in what they felt was a very dull environment. After a year she returned as a sophomore to St. Stephen’s where she says,
“I literally fell in love – with Sister Annunciata. And I would always earn A’s . . . just to please her.”

“During my senior year my father offered to retire and give me his ladies ready-to-wear store. I had worked every Saturday for three years and I had never liked it. My happiest years all my life had always been in school, especially with the sisters. I don’t think he really was disappointed when I rejected his offer because several years later he informed me that I had never been a good saleslady.”

“In June [of 1939] I went to Monroe . . . to fulfill what had always been my ambition. I had been at daily Mass, received the Eucharist, practically every day of my life since my First Communion. And so no one was really surprised.”

In the community Jane continued her quest for learning with studies at Marygrove, University of Detroit, Ball State University where she received her master’s in biology, graduating with honors in 1967. With National Science Foundation grants and Elderhostel opportunities, she continued to satisfy her hunger for learning and exploration.

She summed up her teaching experience from her first mission at St. Mary’s in Monroe until her retirement after 18 ½ years at St. Agatha’s High School in Redford with this remark, “I retired in 1993 and loved every moment of every grade I taught from the fourth to the 12th.”

Those of us who worked with Jane can testify to the dynamic character of Jane’s teaching and to the affection of her co-workers and of her students for her. Sister Marie Chantal Sipes described Jane as an attractive teacher with a rich cultural background, a sense of humor, a marked altruism, with energy, enthusiasm, frankness and honesty.

She was well-placed teaching biology, the life sciences, bioethics, as well as religion classes. In the spirit of Vatican II she taught out-of-the-classroom religion classes as well as traditional ones. At Our Lady of Lourdes as a team teacher she took students “to steel mills, synagogues, foundries, places where their fathers worked.” Over the years, Jane participated in many demonstrations in many places, such as Washington, D.C. and at Williams International in Walled Lake with Peter Dougherty and other peace activists, at protests in River Rouge against police brutality, in Detroit at the Free Press Strike for worker rights and in the Focus Hope March, in Rochester, Mich., for animal rights, to name just a few places and events.

One of the significant areas of her life activity centered on the Associate Program. For some years Jane served as secretary of the Infinity Institute and the International Medical
and Dental Hypnotherapy Association (the IMDHA), organizations created by Anne Spencer an IHM Associate.

Anne led her to sponsoring a number of our associates: Beryl Harriott, Cindy Porter and Joyce Mattarella. Jane had a deep respect for these women and for the associates who touched her life over the years. She remarked on how much she learned from them.

She loved to travel. Over time and with careful garnering of her budget she managed to travel widely. She and equally interested companions went to Europe, Egypt, Canada and across the United States. For her, such journeys offered new insights, deepened understanding and focused motivation.

Jane’s was a questing spirit. She invested herself in many causes. She recognized this in herself when she said, “At St. George I thought my mission was to black people. At Immaculata I was convinced that I was to work with the Catholic Worker . . . [then] I thought my calling was to the gays and lesbians.” In these latter years she firmed up her commitment to a creation-centered spirituality inspired by Thomas Berry. And now her questing has led to its ultimate fulfillment.

Jane belonged to the Mission Unit named Stardust. How appropriate! This woman of the Earth has moved now even beyond the stars. With the Cosmic Christ, in the company of our Father/Mother God and the Holy Spirit, surely hers has become a planetary perspective.

St. Augustine cried out long ago, “You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.” Thank you, Jane, for journeying with us through so many years of inspiring search for the God who calls us forward. May this passage into transcendence be for you, Jane, endless joy in dynamic rest.

Joan Glisky, IHM

2/25/13