Remembering Sister Helen Shondell, IHM

Early Years

Ellen: Good evening, I am Happy's niece, Ellen Reed and this is my sister Joan; and on behalf of our family, Happy's sister Claire, our brothers, our niece and nephews, I would like to share some of our family's memories of Happy.

Ellen: Happy was born in Toledo 78 years ago, the second daughter of Mary and Tate Shondell. She was welcomed by her older sister Claire (my mother). She was named Helen after two of her aunts, one on her mother's side, and one on her father's side. With so many Helens in the family, a need for a nickname was evident. Happy's father Tate, traveled often for work, but when he came home he noticed what a happy baby his new daughter was, and the nickname stuck. Growing up, whenever Happy got into a bit of mischief, her father called her Happy Hooligan. My mother was thrilled to find out, very recently, that there was a cartoon character from the early 1900s named Happy Hooligan. Her name really fit her…who knew Happy would really always be so…Happy!

Joan: My mother's recollection of Happy during her grade school years was of a very good student, but she never seemed to get above a C in conduct. Her parents wondered about that and asked her teachers. They told Mary and Tate that Happy was not a trouble-maker, but she was rather gabby. Looking back now, I am glad that getting Cs did not deter her from lots of conversation with friends.

Ellen: In high school, Happy continued those conversations and made many fast and long-time friends with her classmates at St. Ursula Academy in Toledo. She consistently kept in touch with her 10 closest friends and often went to potluck dinners and get-togethers. Many summers she got together with her high school friends for a weekend slumber party.

Joan: When I was 5 years old and my sister was just a baby, we drove north from Toledo to visit Happy in Mich. My parents wanted to introduce Ellen to her Aunt Happy. They knocked on the door of the convent and my sister took a look at the sister that answered the door in her full habit and let out a blood curdling scream that today would have drawn the attention of the child protective agency. When Happy came to the door to see Ellen she didn't let up and the visit had to be cut very short. Luckily, in time, Ellen got over the trauma.

Ellen: As a child, I remembered visiting with Happy in the summer at my grandmother's house. She was in her full habit and she seemed a bit of a mystery to me. My older brother would dare me to lift up the back of her veil to see what color her hair was. We wondered why she could not stay overnight. The time she had with her family was short and she seemed to spend her time mostly talking with the grownups, so we didn't feel we had a good sense of who she was.
Joan: That all changed in 1969 when Happy was put in charge of six young scholastics whom were finishing up their degrees in Chicago. My father found them a large apartment on the northeast side of Chicago and Happy and her charges moved in. After that, we visited often with Happy and her entourage. They invited us over to their apartment for spaghetti dinners and we had them over to the house on a regular basis. One of the young novices was a good guitar player and often brought her guitar and music with her. I remember sitting in the back yard singing wonderful songs that they taught us – like Adakutchycamatamtosanaratosanovasamatamawacky Brown. It was like knowing a singing nun! Also, Happy had lost her habit. She was now wearing the new uniform: white blouse, navy blue skirt and sensible shoes. Happy seemed more like a part of the family.

Ellen: From then on, Happy rarely missed important family events like baptisms, confirmations, graduations and anniversaries. She was part of the cooking crew at Christmas when my father's family arrived on Christmas day – it usually was a group of about 40 people. Happy fit right in and we got the chance to know her and she us. My parents liked to travel and once, Happy was enlisted to take care of us. Looking back, this was a big undertaking: six kids, one large dog and a horse. This was not for someone faint of heart. This was like a mini-vacation for us too! We didn't have to get used to someone's cooking that we didn't like. Happy was the surrogate parent you could go to with your worries and concerns and she would listen without parental judgment. That was a priceless gift.

Ellen: Happy was a good conversationalist. The attributes that come to mind when I think of our conversations are thoughtfulness, reason, passion and conviction. Never was she better at it as when we were at the dinner table in Deerfield and the topic turned to politics. My father definitely leaned to the right and Happy’s leaning were to the left. The discussions could get heated. Happy gave us the example to speak thoughtfully, with reason and conviction, and your point would be heard. This was in contrast to my father, who could speak passionately too, but if he was not getting his point across, he would just increase the volume.

Joan: Happy was a good sport too. When my father bought a horse at a fundraiser, Happy was willing to give it a try. On the first attempt of getting into the saddle, Dad was helping her but warned her not to drag her foot over the horse’s rump. So, up she went, right over the horse and landed rather gracefully on the other side. Everyone was surprised, even the horse. But like a trooper, she got up in the saddle again and got it right the second time, much to everyone relief… especially the horse. She often went ice skating with us and wanted to hear about her great niece’s ice skating competitions and her great nephews’ sporting events. She was good at remembering our names, not like our grandmother who would often call us by one of our siblings name before we corrected her.

Ellen: We have missed our holiday times together. We all wish we lived closer so we could continue to be a regular part of her life. My mother talks about Happy often and could not wait until the weather turned warmer so she could visit her again. I am glad we called Happy one last time to tell her we loved her and missed her. I called my son Nicholas to tell him that Happy had passed away and he remembered at Happy's Jubilee Mass, Happy had selected the response to the petitions as, “Loving Father, heal our broken world.” Nicholas felt that underlined Happy's motivations for living a religious life. I think through her thoughtful, reasonable, passionate life, she let us know that she loved us with conviction. I think that might be just the recipe God wants us to use to heal our broken world.
Joan: Hilary Clinton wrote the book, *It Takes a Village*, referring to raising children. We think it does not end there. It takes a village to take care of those who suffer in mind and body. Our family is very grateful for the wonderful community of women religious Happy joined more than 55 years ago. Our family wants to thank all those who ministered to Happy during her last failing years. We want to thank all who visited Happy at the Motherhouse, for all who sent her cards and letters, for those who accompanied her to Mass, all who loved her and kept her in their prayers. You are all members of Happy’s village. If she could speak to us today, she would thank you all from the bottom of her heart. And we know she would want each and every one of you to…. BE HAPPY!

Ellen Reed and Joan Schermerhorn Hoffman

**IHM Life and Ministry**

Happy was introduced to the IHM community when she went to Marygrove College. Her connection with IHMs the likes of Charlita, Mary Avila, Mary Joseph, Rosalita and Mary Mercy was the spark that fueled her call to religious life. She graduated from Marygrove in 1956 and entered the IHM postulate. Mary Ellen Sheehan, her next-in-rank, remembers Happy as one who was always asking questions – especially of the superiors – to explain why they had to do all these different spiritual practices that didn’t make much sense to them – and she was persistent at it too. Her fine Marygrove education made her a reflective person and a good critical thinker.

Happy’s earliest years of ministry were focused on teaching high school math. She raved about her years at Marian High. She loved the impact that Sister Ann Chester had on her and the school as a young teacher and she thought the girls were great. She said she wept buckets when she was assigned to Immaculata.

That is where I first met Happy. I had her for home room and algebra. She happened to be related to the Dailey’s who were neighbors of my family. One moment that has stayed with me over the years is that the freshmen faculty administered a standardized exam to all of us in the gym. At a break, the choral director started playing the piano and singing, “I Could Have Danced All Night,” and there was Happy – the only faculty member actually dancing in the back of the gym.

In 1967, Happy was asked to be part of the postulant formation team. Again our paths crossed because I was part of that class and she was in charge of us. As we remember, this was a time when many women were leaving religious life. Happy experienced this full force when the other three women who were part of the formation team left the community by Nov. of 1967 and she and the postulants needed to figure out how to make a new path together.

As Joan mentioned, Happy then moved to the Chicago area with six young sisters who were completing their undergrad degrees and she was teaching math at Alvernia High School. The faculty with whom she worked was very cooperative and they used to frequent Chicago restaurants for their department meetings which she chaired. Seems not only did they get a lot accomplished but also had a good time.

During these years, Happy had an opportunity to make a 30-day Jesuit retreat. As an outgrowth of the retreat, she became part of the community at Visitation, our House of Prayer. This community was immersed in both providing hospitality and spiritual direction to those who were seeking God and their own spiritual growth and renewal.
In 1976 Happy’s life took a pivotal turn that impacted not just the rest of her ministerial experiences but changed her whole world view. She accepted a position in Greenville, N.C., at the SS. Peter and Gabriel Parishes with Chris Gellings and Jane Paris. They worked well with two priests who became good friends, Charlie Mullholland and Paul Byron. Charlie was a man for justice – for the poor. And Happy loved it.

Jane remembers that Happy related well with the college students at the Newman Center and that was a good thing since she also lived in the Center! While Jane, the young sister, would have to give up and go to bed, Happy would continue to talk with the young adults who shared with her what they couldn't with their parents and they listened to her sage advice. She planned meals with them, went on retreats with them, counseled them through life decisions and celebrated with them at graduations, weddings and the birth of their children. She also ministered to the gay community, making them feel a very welcomed part of the Newman Center.

This was also the place where she celebrated her 25th Jubilee. The theme of her celebration was “God’s Love endures forever.” Happy’s first 25 years had taught her that the only way she could be faithful was because of God’s faithful love for her. Her final years gave evidence that she knew this well.

In the late ’80s, Happy was elected as part of the South and West Provincial Team. Because the province was spread over such a large territory, she, Eileen Semonin and Catherine Mary Zacharias visited the women in the province and were able to see the way they were engaging in ministry with many different kinds of communities. It also gave Happy a great chance to travel which as you all know she loved to do.

In 1994, Happy and Margaret Chapman participated in a yearlong internship with Mercy Housing in Colo., learning how to provide quality and affordable housing for low-income people. For the next three years she was both property manager and office coordinator at complexes in Phoenix and then at the Teresa Maxis complex on the Detroit campus of Marygrove College.

When she returned to the metro Detroit area, she lived with Martha Rabaut for nine years in Oak Park until they both moved to the Motherhouse in 2008.

In 1998 she joined Margaret and me at the IHM Development Office that was newly located in Marian High School’s Convent as the administrative assistant. At the time of her retirement in 2006, the focus of her work was building sustaining relationships with alumni.

She also found herself invested in the IHM Peacemakers, her mission unit and various reflection groups and Silver Sneakers and swimming as she became Medicare eligible.

During this time, Happy began to be concerned about her memory. She went for testing at U of M to no avail. Eventually, she was tested at Henry Ford. Her neurologist, Dr. Rhonna Shatz, walked with her each step of the way trying to find out exactly what was occurring. She too was stymied. Happy was faced with making some very difficult decisions as well as living with some significant consequences of the disease. In 2008 Happy made the decision to move to the Memory Care Unit at the Motherhouse. This also meant she could no longer drive and at times others were doing things for her that up until this
point she had been doing for herself and that was frustrating. She loved to walk these grounds and eventually that freedom too was taken from her. And more than anything else, losing her ability to speak and express herself, when her mind still comprehended what was happening, was probably the most devastating.

When I contacted Dr. Shatz this week she emailed back this note. “Happy was courageous; in a way, knowing what was happening made it so much harder. And I am hopeful that she is at peace and able to speak her mind in another way.”

There is a poem from William Stafford that goes:
There is a thread you follow.
It goes among things that change,
But it doesn’t change.
People wonder at what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can’t get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt and die,
And you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time’s unfolding.
You don’t ever let go of the thread.

Happy, you never let go of that thread. You knew that God loved you and that was enough. You may have become frustrated, annoyed and impatient at times but you always knew. You knew the thread that was yours for life. You knew God loved you and that God’s love would endure through all of it.

Martha Rabaut IHM, and Marianne Gaynor, IHM
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