IHM Archives Notes

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The IHMs went to Austin, Texas, at the invitation of the president of St. Edward’s University, Brother Raymond Fleck, CSC, to establish Maryhill, a coordinate college for women. Sister Thomas Aquinas Walmsley, who played a major role in sending sisters there, said that one compelling reason for doing so was to make an option available to IHMs who were college professors and whose only opportunity to teach was at Marygrove.

Brother William Dunn, CSC, the author of the official history of the university, describes the coming of the IHMs to the campus.

The arrival of the IHMs in 1966 marked the opening of a new era in the life of St. Edward’s University. The sisters were brought here … when women were admitted as regular students. There were five in that original group under the leadership of Sister Ann Virginia Bowling. … All of them in a very short time were impressing colleagues and students with their competence and dedication. … There was a quality, thoroughness and a caring, about the way they did things that you don’t just go out and find any old where in the academic marketplace.

In those early years, the Sisters staffed dormitories, developed new majors, worked on distinctive programs for women, had responsibilities for recruitment and admission of students and did a great deal of administrative work. …

From the beginning, the sisters felt that the Brothers of Holy Cross, members of the administration and faculty, were partners in the new venture. Sister Marie Andre remarked, “From St. Joseph Hall [the brothers’ residence] there radiated a spirit of warm hospitality, extended to everyone on campus, but especially to the IHM Sisters in ways too numerous to mention.” Nevertheless, the sisters faced many challenges. The idea of the coordinate college never really took hold. It was decided to discontinue it in 1969 and to establish St. Edward’s as a single co-ed university of about 900 students. When, by common consent of the faculty, Maryhill went out of existence and was incorporated into the university, the Maryhill curriculum was adopted for the whole university. That same year, Brother Dunstan Bowles wrote of the positive, creative influence of Maryhill. In the almost 90 years since its founding, St. Edward’s has not had “an organization of studies comparable to what the IHMs have begun to work out in 7 months.”

Sister Grace Mary Olfs explains that she favored the decision, but believed that establishing Maryhill was an important step without which the IHMs would not have come nor would St. Edward’s have welcomed women.

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At right: the pioneers plus Sister Hilda in 1967
Standing: Sisters Ann Virginia Bowling, Mary Kevin Kenny, Marie Andre Walsh.
Seated: Sisters Mary Mercy Geohegan, Hilda Bonham, Grace Mary Olfs.

Original five IHMs in 1991 at the 25th anniversary celebration of their arrival at St. Edward’s
Sisters Marie Andre Walsh, Mary Mercy Geohegan, Mary Kevin Kenny, Grace Mary Olfs, Ann Virginia Bowling
Today, the university that IHM helped to grow has been recognized by U.S. News and World Report as one of “America’s Best Colleges” for the 11th consecutive year. It enrolls approximately 5,000 students, has an endowment of more than $58 million, offers 50+ undergraduate and 10+ graduate programs and has spent $150 million on campus buildings and improvements since 1999. Sixty-one percent of the undergraduates and 47 percent of 240 contracted faculty are female. The university remains dedicated to serving a diverse student body. One especially revered program is the College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP), the longest-standing program of its type in the country, which has graduated thousands of students from migrant families. When Sister Anne (Ann Jerome) Crane retired from St. Edward’s in 2007, after 35 years on faculty, the last IHM left the university.

The Last Laugh from the Beyond

Sister Eileen Semonin has many memories and stories from her years as the head nurse of the IHM Health Care Center. Some of them are serious and others are humorous. This is one of the latter.

A senior sister in the center, Sister Eucharia, had over the years earned small amounts of spending money by doing personal sewing projects for others. After awhile, there were conjectures about what she had done with these stipends and suggestions that Eileen should keep this in mind when she cleaned the room after the sister’s death.

It was known that Eucharia kept a locked box under her bed; in fact, she seemed to go out of her way to let others know about a “secret hiding place.” Of course, this all led to the belief that the earnings from over the years were “squirreled away” somewhere in the room. Much conversation and speculation took place.

When sister died, Eileen was responsible for taking care of any of her personal things that were left in the room. Remembering what others suggested she do, she looked for a locked box. Finding it, she pulled it from its hiding place, and, after some searching, located its key. Opening it she saw there was only a piece of paper with a note in sister’s handwriting inside the box. It read, “Ha, ha, ha. Nosey! Nosey! Hope you’re satisfied.”

After a good laugh, Eileen did find some bills; but, sister may well have had the last laugh.

Sister Eucharia’s penchant for enjoying people and having fun was evident throughout her life. A letter to Mother Anna Marie Grix in 1966 from Irvin McConnell, MD, a doctor who had assisted at her surgery, offers a glimpse of this.

…We had a ball, chatting before the surgeon got there, and may I say I’ve never met such a delightful sister. She even corrected my Latin pronunciation of “Ecce Homo,” but forgave me for my classical background. When she gets back home and is feeling better, tell her her anesthesias were given to her with the compliments of a Mason. I’d love to see her reaction. What a wonderful girl!

In her autobiography, she describes herself as an ordinary religious who never did anything outstanding, but said, “I have loved every minute of it, and if I had it to do it over again, I would say ‘yes’ a thousand times.”