

Remembering Sister Nila Neil, IHM

May 17, 1021 – Aug. 13, 2018



When I asked Sister Nila when she was born, her eyes twinkled and she recited a bit of poetry from “Much Ado about Nothing”:

“You were born in a merry month!
Nay, sir, my mother cried,
But then a star danced
And under that was I born.”

Yes, it was in the merry month of May in 1921 that Nila Neil was born in Toronto and was baptized Anna Mary. Her mother, Mary Cournane, of County Kerry, Ireland, and her father, James Neil, of Armagh, Ireland had come to Toronto, and later to Detroit to find work and make a better life for their family. Anna Mary had a sister, Sarah, and two brothers, Martin and Courtney. Anna Mary was just 9 years old when Courtney died at age 6 after being hit by a car.

In Detroit, Anna Mary attended Holy Rosary Grade School. She remembered clearly that Sister Nazarita taught her to read in grades one, two and three. She also was confirmed at Holy Rosary, perhaps when she made her First Communion.

The times were difficult, so the family moved to Las Vegas in search of work, as did many construction workers for the Boulder Dam was being built at that time. There she attended public school, meeting children from 48 states and Mexico. Nila said that some of the best teachers she ever had were in those public schools.

The family moved back to Detroit in 1937, where Anna Mary finished at Girls’ Catholic Central High School. I asked her about recognizing her vocation, and she said that as a child and teenager, she was always satisfied on the surface, but she knew that there was something more, something deeper. And besides, she was always teaching her dolls their Hail Marys and Our Fathers. Thus it was that on June 22, 1939, she came to Monroe with the IHM Sisters who were returning to the Motherhouse for the summer.

Nila was received in 1940 and professed in 1942 and 1945. She taught at St. John School, Monroe, in 1941–1942 and then was assigned to St. Louis School in Mount Clemens. She remembered that our country was deep in World War II and there were soldiers everywhere in town because of Selfridge Air Force Base. There was so much poverty. Families had come from the south to work in the factories. Nila said that she often saw children without shoes, and without a lunch. Her family always had lunch because they grew a vegetable garden and she said, “My mother could stretch a dollar as if it were made of rubber.”

In 1945, Nila was missioned to Chicago where she remained for five years. She loved her time in Chicago. There were other young sisters there, and they occasionally got to go to the planetarium.

It was in 1958 that Nila was assigned to Our Lady of Good Counsel School in Detroit, where Sister Adele DuRoss was principal. Adele was a “peach” Nila said. It was during this time that her mother died, and then later her brother, Martin, died in California.

Having spent five years at Good Counsel where she was introduced to junior high students, Nila was next missioned to Immaculate Heart of Mary High School, in Westchester, Ill., where she taught English and reading in grades nine through 12. She then taught at Marian High School in Bloomfield Hills. Nila also taught catechism, managed the Sodality girls and the Young Christian Students, among her other duties. Nila remembered that while she was at Marian High, the community changed from long habits to street-length habits. One of her students shyly brought her a bottle of nail polish to mend the runs in her stockings. “I thought that was so sweet,” she said.

It was to Universidad Catolica in Puerto Rico that Nila was assigned from 1967 to 1972. “Puerto Rico has a warm climate, and the warmest people in the world,” she said. Outside of the school scene, if you asked someone a question in Spanish and they knew English was your first language, they would respond to you in English, as an act of courtesy.

From 1975 to 1978, Nila taught English as a Second Language at St. Ludmilla School in Chicago. This was an all-Spanish school for Mexican children and staffed by the Adrian Dominicans. Nila took two buses and walked seven blocks to and from school every day. It was an experience she valued. She met other women on the bus, and they talked of things women talk about and traded recipes. Of course, we remember Nila riding the bus in Monroe: to the library, to the grocery store, to wherever she wanted to go. Her final years of teaching were spent teaching English at Holy Redeemer High School in Detroit. She remembered the Holy Redeemer students as “nice kids” with a great spirit, but not much for school work. Since they were resistant in memorizing a few lines of Shakespeare, she would often dramatize it for them. We can just imagine her standing before a class of boys stating, “Is this a dagger I see before me?” from *Julius Caesar*! She told me another story about being frustrated with one of her boys. “I’m going to say a bad word; no, I’m going to write it on the board, so you won’t go home and tell your father!” The young man put his hands to his ears, teasing her further.

In 1982, Nila determined she was getting too old for teaching, and took a job as support staff at St. Mark High School in Wilmington, Del. Later, she took a position as school secretary in Tujunga, Calif., where she had a fantastic view of sun and clouds and mountains. “Even from childhood, I loved to go where there were mountains,” she said.

In 1988, Nila became secretary for the IHM Central Administration, working with Sister Dorothy McDaniel and team. After that, she worked in Archives for seven years and in the IHM Library for eight years. In 2010, Nila finally retired, but she continued staffing

the library charge desk. I remember her at the desk covered in a big shawl, willing to talk with anyone about this or that book she was reading. When asked what her favorite literary pieces were, she replied "I'm a 'catholic' reader, I read everything: poetry, prose, mysteries." When asked what her favorite children's story was, she replied without a minute's hesitation, "*Wind in the Willows*. I must have read it 20 times. I used to read it to the children." And when asked her favorite woman author, she replied, "Emily Dickenson" and immediately recited all three verses:

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul
And sings the tune without the words
And never stops at all.

And sweetest – in the Gale – is heard
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chilled land
And on the strangest Sea.
Yet – never in Extremity
It asked a crumb of me.

A broken hip, and later, a broken wrist, sent Nila to our Health Care Center in 2014; but she continued her love of all things literary. Often she could be found in her wheelchair, sitting under the nearest light, reading her latest book. What a rich kaleidoscope of memories she treasured, and we, with and through her.

Written and delivered by Roberta Richmond, IHM

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