

Remembering Rita (Marie Ambrose) Rennell, IHM
Jan. 11, 1925 – Aug. 22, 2020



Rita Rennell was born at home, on the east side of Detroit on Jan. 11, 1925. She was the second daughter of seven children of Ambrose Rennell, a tool maker from Manistee, Mich., and May (Sullivan) Rennell from New London, Conn. Ambrose and May met when he was stationed on a submarine off the coast of Connecticut during World War I. Rita's siblings were Betty, the oldest, after Rita, were Teresa, who also became an IHM Sister, James, the first boy, followed by Dorothy, Robert and John. When Rita was 4 years old, the family moved from the east side of Detroit to the northwest side to live in a lovely large home in Rosedale Park in St. Mary of Redford parish. Rita attended a public school until grade six when she could walk to St Mary's. She graduated from St. Mary of Redford in 1942 and attended

Marygrove College for two years. During that time, her desire to become a sister, which surfaced in her senior year of high school, was nourished by extracurricular activities during those two years. She taught fourth grade religious education at a local elementary school, visited the children of unwed mothers at Providence Hospital on Saturdays and often made the monthly retreats at nearby St. Mary Reparatrix Convent.

Rita entered the IHM community. On Jan. 2, 1945, she received the blue habit and her religious name, Sister Marie Ambrose. During her second year as a Novice, she taught fourth grade at St. Mary, Monroe. Her first mission was at St. Mathew, Detroit, teaching a combined second and third grade for two years with 69 students. In her third year, she taught first grade. Rita's next missions were St. Cecilia, Detroit; St. Michael, Flint; and St. Stephen, Port Huron.

Then, she was called by Mother Teresa McGivney and asked to finish her degree in chemistry at Marygrove, which she earned in 1955, giving her enough credits to teach high school and begin that phase of her life at St. Martin on the Lake. Two of her former students from St. Martin serve as lectors today, Sister Pat McCluskey and Sister Helen Ingles. After five and one-half years, Rita was again called, this time on the Christmas break, to go to Cayey, Puerto Rico, to teach the sciences and other subjects. Upon returning to the States in 1965, Rita continued teaching at St. Gregory High School, Detroit, and at Marian High School where she was recognized as "teacher of the year." She earned her Master of Education degree from Wayne State University in 1970.

After almost 30 years in teaching, a new call came from Sister Marion Farrell, her provincial, asking Rita to study nursing. After much prayer and discernment, Rita agreed to try it. She attended Lake Michigan College in Benton Harbor and after graduation passed her state board exam for certification as a Registered Nurse in 1977. With hospital experience at St. Joseph Memorial, in St. Joseph, Mich., Rita felt prepared to begin working in our St. Mary Health Care Center. She was assigned to every shift and

came to know and love our sisters residing there. When a new director of Nursing was needed, Rita took on the responsibility and stayed for the next 10 years

Following a year of renewal in religious studies at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Wash., which ended with a month-long pilgrimage to the Holy Land, Rita was called anew. This time to share her many talents in mission in South Africa. She arrived in Pietermaritzburg in September 1988 and was based in Howick with three IHMs.

Rita traveled each week, staying three days at the Holy Family Sisters Mission 25 miles from Howick in a rural area and assisting in a maternity clinic. After several attempts, Rita was unable to be certified as a nurse in South Africa, since she did not have midwifery credits, *not needed at the Motherhouse*, but essential for any nurse in Africa. However, there were many tasks to be done: she assisted the midwives in the delivery and care of newborn babies, helped young mothers waiting to deliver their babies, weighed infants in a hanging scale during post-natal visits, taught sewing in the Mission's Development Program, repaired sewing machines and taught classes in healthy-living skills.

After a few years with the Holy Family Sisters Mission, Rita stayed in Howick and taught the English-speaking children in the parish religious education program and worked in the seminary library of St. Joseph Theological Institute where Judy Coyle and Sue Rakoczy were teaching. During that time, she and all staff and students moved the entire "old library" scattered throughout three different locations at the college into the newly built Denis Hurley Library, all in the space of a single morning and all the books in their right place! It was an incredible task of organization and coordination, thanks to Rita and the other librarian.

In 1992, Rita moved to Mphophmeni Township, (meaning place of the Waterfall) nine miles from Howick to live with me, (Annette St-Amour) and assist with needs in the Black township. Rita assisted a small group of women who had formed a sewing co-op. Soon, they asked her to give sewing lessons to pensioners who wanted to learn to use a sewing machine. They met in the church sacristy in the afternoons. The women walked several blocks carrying their sewing machines on their heads, ready to learn new skills. Rita patiently taught them, over and over, how to thread a machine and to make useful articles from scraps of cloth. They made children's clothes, hot pads and quilts. Sister Annette Boyle received one of those quilts for her birthday — purchased from the women.

Rita adapted readily to whatever was needed and offered service when she recognized a need. She volunteered to bring order to the Redemptorist Formation House Library and assist them with mending or sewing needs. Did they ever appreciate that help! She planted a vegetable and herb garden outside our kitchen door and chased goats away from it. In the evenings, with frequent power outages, we played *Rumikub* by candlelight, laughing as we challenged each other for mistakenly using orange instead of red tiles and blue instead of black tiles due to the dim light.

On weekends, Rita assisted at one of the rural mission outstation communities, Ndebeni, who met only monthly for Mass in a school classroom, but because Rita was

there to meet with them, they came more faithfully every Sunday for prayer and instruction in the faith, with a young woman translating into Zulu when needed. Rita helped prepare catechumens to be received into the Church or to receive a sacrament. A picture of Rita standing with her group was among her 75th Jubilee photos.

Politically, these were the dying apartheid years with much turmoil and violence in the Black townships. It was meaningful to have the sisters stay with the people during these tense years, with political shooting and attacks on the streets and burning of homes. At times, interceding on people's behalf and comforting in times of grief. A special highlight for Rita was the privilege to be an official Observer present at the first democratic election for all: Blacks, Indians, Coloureds, that is, people of mixed ethnic groups, and Whites voting in April 1994. Nelson Mandela was elected president with many people voting for the first time in their lives. It was a wonderful and rare sight to see the people, black, brown and white together, eagerly lined up for blocks in their Sunday-best, waiting to cast their vote. The elderly came whatever way they could find, some were pushed in wheelbarrows or a few carried on someone's shoulders.

With concern for her own health and illness in her family, Rita returned to Monroe in March 1996 and helped in a variety of services at the Motherhouse. She served as a driver, helped in the Creativity Center, worked in the Service Office, visited the sick and weeded in the Organic Garden or shucked beans. She joined the Monroe Community Players and took minor roles, especially choral groups, served as a lector, sang in the choir, fixed sisters' rosaries and helped wherever needed.

Thank you, Rita, for your long life, 95 years of generous service, being a faithful and helpful companion and being so wholesome! You have blessed us with your adaptable and encouraging presence. Rest well, in the loving embrace of God.

Edited from Rita's autobiography and delivered by Annette St. Amour, IHM,
Aug. 28, 2020