

Obituary



Sister Suzanne Fleming, IHM, 89, died Saturday, Aug. 27, in the IHM Health Care Center, Monroe.

Born in Detroit on Feb. 4, 1927, Suzanne Marie Fleming was one of two daughters of Albert and Rose (Smiley) Fleming. She was baptized at St. Brigid Church, Detroit, and attended elementary school at St. Brigid and St. Mary of Redford; she graduated from St. Mary of Redford. She entered the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Monroe in 1945 and received the religious name, Sister Mary Albert.

In 1948, Sister Suzanne began a career in education that would span more than 45 years. She taught and ministered in administration at Annunciation and Gesu, Detroit; St. John and St. Mary Academy, Monroe; St. Thomas, Ann Arbor, Mich.; Marygrove College, Detroit; Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Mich.; Western Illinois University, Macomb, Ill.; University of Wisconsin, Eau Clair, Wis.; and University of Michigan (U of M), Ann Arbor. For another 20 years, Sister Suzanne resided in Ann Arbor, continuing her ministry as a visiting scholar and researcher at U of M.

Sister Suzanne earned a bachelor's degree from Marygrove College in 1957 and a master's degree and doctorate from the University of Michigan in 1960 and 1963 respectively. She co-authored and published several publications in chemistry studies and research, and assisted in editing *Building Sisterhood: A Feminist History of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary*.

Retiring to the IHM Motherhouse in 2013, Sister Suzanne entered the Health Care Center in 2015, where she resided until her death.

Remembering

Although she was always tiny and short in stature, many of us knew Sister Sue Fleming well. There were some, however, who missed the opportunity. After all, she undertook ministries not common to us; some of them at a distance. When she retired to the Motherhouse, her fragility often kept her apart. More than once she was confined to Health Care. Even in the independent living area, she was at risk from frequent falls and so did not travel widely in the Motherhouse though she really wanted to move about. Finally, with increasing memory loss, she moved into Memory Care.

In addition, she often approached life from unique perspectives and was not readily understood. Her “Book of Life” page offers a little example of the edge of difference she projected. Like many of us she is moved by the symbolism of water. She says it has made her a child of God. It hydrates her physical being. It is soothing to hear it. Don’t we all share such insights? But her next observation is surely an original perspective: she is moved by its molecular structure – not straight, she says, but bent! And she took the time to illustrate the molecular shape of water, not straight, but bent. This is the water, she says, that is responsible for this world as we know it. Where does that come from? What does she mean?

One would wonder who this diminutive woman was. Where has she been? What is her passion?

Let us reflect a bit about Suzanne Fleming whose religious name was Sister Mary Albert. Let us remember what we know of her. And there we can discover the beauty of another sister of ours who expressed the IHM way of life in her own distinctive way. In 1927 Suzanne Marie Fleming began her life in Detroit. She was the first daughter of Albert Thomas and Rose Evelyn Smiley Fleming. Sue used to tell of her mother at first disclaiming her. She told the nurse, “You brought me the wrong baby. We have no blondes in our family.” Since no other child was born in the hospital that day, Mrs. Fleming adjusted to the surprise tow-head as her own.

Three years later her sister Patricia was born. Regrettably, Patricia Fleming Donaldson died barely two months ago. Surely, Sue and Pat are together with their parents now, while we reach out to the family as they grieve doubly at this time.

Her mother, a long-time teacher in IHM schools and her father, who worked in the auto industry, must have provided their girls a childhood inviting exploration and creativity. They grew up in a loving home. We know that early on the parents assured their daughters they would have a college education and the college would be Marygrove College.

Early pictures of Sue reveal a fine-featured child with blond curls. In the fourth grade Sue’s parents moved her into St. Mary of Redford Parish. There she made lasting friendships. Some of them were other girls inspired as she was by her IHM teachers. At the time of her golden jubilee she pointed proudly to the eight IHM women from St. Mary of Redford’s Class of 1945.

She spoke of the teachers, “The [IHM] Sisters were part of everything we did, from paper drives and proms to debates and sock hops. They were not only teachers, but

friends who helped scrub the gym floor for our 'Senior Snowball' – and then inspected the girls' dresses for modesty before the dance."

After graduation, Sue turned her energies toward entering the convent. As the story goes, her mother hesitated about this decision. At a gathering of the IHM Auxiliary, Mrs. Fleming had met Mrs. Sullivan whose five daughters were in the community. So she gave her a phone call to confer about Sue's desire to enter. Mrs. Sullivan comforted Mrs. Fleming, assuring her that Sue would be happy in Monroe even though her leaving home would be painful for the parents. And so, on July 2, 1945, Sue also entered.

The IHM centennial year was 1945. "That year was like no other," Sue wrote. "There was little silence. Nearly every day, some visiting dignitary gave us recreation." In the account written for her 70th Jubilee year, we read, "By the fall, though, she was getting used to silence, taking classes, participating in the life of the congregation and learning about religious life."

Like most IHMs, Sue began her educational journey teaching elementary school. She had fourth grade, first at Annunciation School and then at Gesu School in Detroit. In 1952 she was back in Monroe at St. John; by 1957, however, she was a high school teacher at St. Mary Academy.

Her quick mind, her ever-curious and natural talent, her love of learning was obvious. With her aptness for research and her love of science, she excelled in chemistry. In that same year, 1957, Sue received a bachelor of science degree from Marygrove College and began an amazing and admirable progression in educational service. Her master's degree and doctorate from the University of Michigan soon followed. She moved along from classroom teacher, to instructor, to professor and into successively more demanding and complex roles as college and university administrator. At first, Sue would describe it as "a natural progression."

The list of her ministries in higher education is lengthy: Marygrove College-professor, division chair, dean, academic vice-president; University of Michigan-visiting lecturer and researcher; Eastern Michigan University-assistant vice president for academic affairs, associate vice president, supervisor of international projects; Western Illinois University-provost and academic vice-president, professor of chemistry; University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire-vice chancellor and professor of chemistry.

She soon understood that this was not simply “a natural progression.” Administration in college and then in university called for enlarged understandings, amplified leadership training and a clarified philosophy. She set out to develop those skills. A number of sisters who experienced Sue’s leadership as administrator expressed themselves appreciatively. Perhaps Sister Dorothy McDaniel summed it up well when Sue was chosen for Marygrove Distinguished Alumna recognition in 2007. She wrote:

I count my Marygrove years there with Sue and our fellow educators as a high point of my own teaching career; I attribute this to the inviting and collaborative working style that Sue modeled. She recognized all, professors and instructors alike in the division as equal contributors . . . As a new instructor I found my insights treated as welcome whether we dealt with course offerings, syllabi, schedules, budget or calendar. Sue affected this democratic impulse at a time when administration followed a more hierarchical mode. (Ref. letter to Rebecca Schrader, 2007)

Another quote from Mr. Tony Evans, Provost at Eastern Michigan University, and later at Massachusetts Institute of Technology described Sue as

“... one of the most respected and distinguished administrators in the institution’s recent history: ‘I can now say that in over 40 years of professional service [Suzanne] was one of the best hires I ever made.’” (Ref. letter to Rebecca Schrader, 2007, p.2)

Mr. Ed Booth, a co-worker, attributed “the rescue of Western Illinois University and two decades of academic and financial stability” to Sue. (Ref. letter to Rebecca Schrader, 2007, p.2)

Responding to a critic who wondered why she was in a secular university, Sue maintained, “Since the whole thrust of our religious community is one of service, where you are is immaterial if one is serving the needs of people.” (Quote from Sue by Martha Sullivan, *Ann Arbor News*, “Sister Sue-serving God in a secular world.” April 17, 1983, p.A4.)

Sue had a variety of achievements. She increased grant revenue at Marygrove enabling students to develop research skills. She helped faculty at Wisconsin University to retain positions in a time of financial loss. She facilitated exchange with Mexican students at Western Illinois University and travelled to the Yemen Arab Republic to assist in evaluating a primary curriculum project funded by USAID. Again, the University sent Sue to South African dependent Swaziland for similar international student expansion programs.

In 1989 Sue retired from the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire. Entering retirement years, she turned her energies to genealogy, tracing all four family lines for four or five generations. She strengthened her long and consistent affection for family, for her sister and brother-in-law, nieces and nephews and their offspring.

If you were to visit her residence you would discover that she also had an abiding love of animals, especially cats. Three of her favorite cat companions were Pepper, Muffin and Misty. In a *Spinnaker* article, she explored her love for these creatures of God and noted, "I realize that anthropomorphism can be suspect. However, I also realize that we as humans have much to learn from what I have come to call the wisdom of our furry companions on the journey." (*Spinnaker*, "Pepper's Wisdom")

In 1991 Sue joined the IHM Claiming Our Roots Writers' Group. Her essay on Mother Mary Joseph Walker shed light on this pioneer shaper of IHM history. She also assisted in revising and editing another essay in the collection. Along with Sister Celeste Rabaut, Sue served in the final stages as volume editor for *Building Sisterhood: A Feminist History of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary*, published in 1997. This is another memorable example of Sue's careful research, her critical proofreader's eye, her generous contribution to the IHM story.

Perhaps these few moments of remembering evoke other memories for us. May we appreciate the beauty and the blessings of Suzanne Fleming. This child of God has lived her baptismal call for 89 years, 70 of them as an IHM Sister. She has confronted many challenges and realized multiple achievements. The baptismal waters have brought her to the final shore.

May her support sustain us as we are nurtured and kept afloat in our personal and community journey Godward. In God's embrace, Sue, may you know eternal rest, deep peace and lasting joy.

Written and delivered by Joan Glisky, IHM
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