

## Obituary



Sister Josephine Sferrella, IHM, 89, died Wednesday, Aug. 2, at her home, the IHM Sisters' Motherhouse.

Josephine Marie Sferrella was born in Akron, Ohio, to Dominic and Mary (Frattura) Sferrella on May 30, 1928. She attended St. Mary School in Akron under the tutelage of the IHM Sisters, Monroe. In 1946, after high school graduation, she entered the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe, and received the religious name Sister Mary Dominic. Her sister Pauline joined the community in 1951.

A bright and dedicated student, Sister Josephine began studies and earned a bachelor's degree from Marygrove College, Detroit; a master's degree in sociology from Fordham University, New York; and a doctoral degree in sociology and economics from Wayne State University. While working toward academic goals, Sister Josephine taught in Michigan elementary schools at Saints Peter and Paul, Ionia; St. Joseph, Trenton; St. Hugo of the Hills, Bloomfield Hills; St. Joseph, Erie; and in Detroit at St. Catherine, St. Patrick, Holy Trinity and Our Lady of Good Counsel. She was principal at St. Boniface, St. Anne and Holy Redeemer High School before joining Marygrove College as dean of Student Affairs. She was known as an outstanding elementary and high school principal and college administrator.

Her work as an educator and administrator led to direct involvement with the civic and business communities, influencing the greater community to take an active interest in the schools. Her experience gave her a holistic view of the helping professions.

With a gift for administration, Sister Josephine completed her doctoral studies and, in 1982, accepted a position with the Archdiocese of Chicago Office of Catholic Education. For 20-plus years, she served in administration, research and data consultation with Joseph Cardinal Bernadin. During her ministry, she was involved in various services for the IHMs, from the writing of *Building Sisterhood*, a published IHM history, to designing surveys for various community actions.

Sister Josephine retired to the Motherhouse in 2003 and continued active participation in serving her community of sisters as a member of the "Tech Committee" offering computer skills training and advancing the IHM website, and co-directing the Community Learning Process, which focused on various educational efforts for members. In recent years, a decline in health dampened her many involvements.

## Remembering

After collecting and viewing many documents, hearing stories and perusing archival materials about Josephine (and there is a lot), a renowned poet, David Whyte, inspired me to what is significant to say to you, her family, friends and classmates and the IHM community about Sister Josephine Marie Sferrella or "A.J.," as her grand nieces and nephews affectionately call her. I quote:

... life is no passing memory of what has been  
nor the remaining pages of a great book  
waiting to be read.

It is the opening of eyes long closed.  
It is the vision of far off things  
seen for the silence they hold.  
It is the heart after years of secret conversing  
speaking out loud in the clear air. ...  
"The Opening of Eyes," from Songs for Coming Home

Josephine's life is definitely more than a "passing memory of what has been." Rather, it is her "vision of far off things" that inspired and thrust Josephine into a world of futuristic education, research and justice thinking. Then it is her passionate "heart after years of secret conversing speaking out loud in the clear air" to which many of us had glimpses, and which perhaps inspired our own hearts to be a bit more visionary, loving and passionate.

Vision and an acting heart! Joel A. Barker says: "Vision without action is merely a dream. Action without vision just passes the time. Vision with action can change the world." And Josephine was about changing that world!

Vision entices one into "far off things." Josephine's visions were developed by the values that came from many sources; her family, her IHM teachers and community, her opportunities in education, her readings, her students and co-workers and her friends.

Josephine says about herself, "There are many values that come into play at various times in my life. I guess the most fundamental is that which my parents (Dominic, an Italian immigrant, and Mary Christina Frattura) lived and taught: "Love God. Thank God. And don't hesitate to share with others." Consistently, Josephine added at the end of so many conversations, even when she herself was so debilitated, "If there is anything I can do for you, please do not hesitate to ask." Josephine loves to tell of her

parents reaching out to others and of their immense love of people. Most of us personally experienced Josephine's genetic generosity and her fierce loyalty to her family and her friends.

Josephine was the oldest of the Sferrellas' three daughters; she was the first teacher in the family. Gilda, also a teacher and a loving wife and mother died of heart issues in 2009. Pauline became an IHM Sister. Following in the footsteps of her two sisters Pauline chose teaching then pastoral ministry. She died of cancer in 1982. Imagine, all three Sferrella daughters serving in such a noble profession.

Gilda married Joseph Pace, giving us Josephine's only niece, Maria, and only nephew, Paul, who are the joy of her life. As a matriarchal aunt, Josephine enriched the next Sferrella generation with the same values and insights of her parents. When Josephine could no longer travel to Ohio she had great expectations of visits from her family and her grandnieces and nephews. Family connections were so strong in her Italian heart that she was so disappointed when the family didn't keep her informed of their travels or of the children's activities. Everyone enjoyed the family pictures proudly displayed over the archway of her room.

Josephine consistently cites her IHM teachers at St. Mary, Akron, such as; Sister Mary Emil Penet, Sister Frances Raphael Beaufaut, Sister Frances Duma, Sister Margaret Cutcher, (Anacletus), among others, as the stimulus for developing her intellectual gifts and leadership abilities, no doubt launching seedlings of educational dreams about her life's work. High school opportunities abounded. Sodality, academic challenges and president of the student council, etc., enabled her to test her leadership potential. The culmination of high school was achieving the valedictorian status for her graduating class.

There is a revealing story about Josephine's high school graduation. As class valedictorian, she gave a fine talk. That wonderful day Josephine received many awards, scholarships, grants, certificates of achievement etc. but to her utter surprise she received a blank diploma. The many warnings by Sister Mary Emil to take care of her behavior demerits were not taken seriously, hence the missing diploma. Among all the other accolades, scholarships and awards, the critical, legitimate piece of paper was missing. Upon arriving home, her father was angry and disappointed about the blank diploma. He had sacrificed so much for his eldest daughter who would be the first in his generation to graduate from high school. As we know, nothing is more important for immigrant parents than education. Josephine bent her head in remorse and vowed never to disappoint her father again. (By the way, Jo did work off her demerits after graduation.)

For 54 years, Josephine thrived in the academic world. Her Book of Life itemizes the myriad activities that transformed her as a person and educator. Her BA in Latin from Marygrove, an MA in sociology from Fordham University and her PhD in urban sociology from Wayne State prepared her well for being a harbinger of educational creativeness.

Some of her opportunities were: sharing the excitement of learning with eager youngsters in elementary grades, as a principal working with strong-minded teachers, collaborating with parents, lay adults and co-ministers, studies in the doctoral program at Wayne State, long involvement with the Sodality Movement, many years of activities with the Call to Action organization, presentations at National Catholic Educators Association conventions, developing policies for school boards, initiating technology strategies at the archdiocesan, parish and school levels, doing research, analyzing data, authoring a chapter in Building Sisterhood, researching for the Story of Visitation (which is soon to be published), directing the professional development of school principals, creating policy manuals for principals in Chicago and finally, her last professional opportunity as associate superintendent in the Chicago Archdiocese and director of Data Research. She particularly loved her appointment as the supervisor of 26 schools in the archdiocese. Josephine often cited stories of the encounters with troubled schools, being a cheerleader for new principals, negotiating with challenging pastors, and stimulating the schools to reach new heights and visions for their students.

Of this ministry in Chicago, Josephine says: "I am affirmed, respected and given many opportunities to use my creative leadership in so many ways. ... For the first time in my life I am placing the personal needs (desires) of Josephine at the top of the list."

Josephine loved new ideas and learning, her eyes lighting up with an introduction of: "Did you know?" As her vision and joys of education expanded, so her sensitivities and heart issues colored her story, sometimes casting shadows that challenge any human being. "It is the heart after years of secret conversing speaking out loud in the clear air. ..."

Josephine, never one to be silent, was usually found in the midst of a serious discussion or contributing a fascinating community story or two around the dining room table at any mission or at the Motherhouse.

Perhaps because of her own physical limitations, Josephine had great sensitivity for those with disabilities. As most of us can attest, Josephine was dogged about speaking

up for perceived unfairness and injustice and she so “desired to be a source of hope, inspiration and warmth in office settings as well as at the Motherhouse”. She never vacillated in asking questions in a public forum. She often spoke when shy folks prodded her to ask questions for them.

One of her greatest “heart” issues revolved around her finishing her doctoral dissertation. As she says in 1981, “I did want to finish it, so that I can say to myself that I accomplished a definite goal after ten hard years of struggle ... to prove to myself that I can do it intellectually; that it is not beyond my capabilities even though the entire process leading up to it has been very frustrating and loaded with one obstacle after another either at Wayne State or within my own community ... the completion of the dissertation seems to symbolize my own worth and value; because at this time I am not able to live with failure without some intense anger and resentment.”

Wayne State complicated things by political capriciousness in the department. They had trouble accepting her as a woman and as a religious. Other institutional crisis and jealousies flowed over onto the students. The IHM community had assigned Josephine full-time study to complete the doctorate. Yet, Josephine at the same time was appointed principal at St. Boniface in the stress of its imminent closing. Then she was thrown into the middle of difficult problems at Marygrove as dean of students. It was also the time of Detroit’s racial upheavals, student demands, and administrative chaos. Imagine trying to probe intellectual, sociological constructs demanded of doctoral studies, with all this chaos emanating from every corner. Josephine could be light-hearted later, but at the time, “being burned in effigy” by an angry mob of Marygrove students was a shocking experience for this “girl from Akron.”

Another “heart issue:” In the early days of the Associate Program, Josephine, among others, was in a mission unit with folks who were not comfortable with having associates as a part of their group. She especially objected to associates being privy to our financial operations and our constitutions. But Josephine, being the consummate thinker and processor, eventually was able to evolve to a new level of consciousness and appreciation for the wonderful contributions of our associates and their place in our life and ministry. She eventually became a strong supporter of associates especially the new forms that were being experienced by our lay co-workers right here at the Motherhouse.

Josephine had strong opinions, usually based on good research or often just strong loyalties. She shared them with a fiery passion, which sometimes alienated others. Her father had her pegged early, and often said of his eldest daughter that she was quite “hard-headed.”

True to her parents' teachings and her Italian heart, "to share with others," Josephine gave of her energies wherever she lived and ministered. All who lived with her attest to her generosity. In her final years at the Motherhouse, she enthusiastically offered her talents and vitality, whether it was as director of the Tech Committee, fixing computers, as a lector or prayer leader, creating labels, designing posters and special Christmas cards, advising and writing sensitive legal documents, soothing "feathers" of a patient in Health Care, directing the Social Committee, doing research, buying tulips for the garden, purchasing tickets online for travelers and designing and analyzing surveys.

At the Motherhouse alone, I think Josephine designed and processed at least 10 surveys. Josephine loved data of any kind! She would pour over charts, line graphs and spreadsheets like she was selecting an expensive dinner entree. Eventually, she produced a detailed analysis of useful and satisfying data for the client. She loved being a co-director, with myself, of our Community Learning Programs, CLP. It gave us an opportunity to do special projects, research, surveys, and assist in developing our first IHM website, working closely with Leadership and Communications.

A personal note: When Josephine moved to the Motherhouse she had about 40 boxes of books. Needless to say, Josephine loved books of every type of genre. More commonly than not, after a conversation with her about something that I was probing, I would receive a package in the mail of a recent book on just that topic. She also knew I was interested in Ilia Delio's writings, a current theologian. I think I have every book by this author, thanks to Josephine.

Her vision was ever unfolding by the exposure to many kinds of writers. However, I was not the only recipient of great books. Josephine took it upon herself to share, more likely educate, cardinals, yes, the cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church. Cardinal Bernardin and Cardinal George of Chicago were often the recipients of her passion for a justice issue or a new theological insight via the latest publication on the topic. Josephine told me she had some wonderful discussions, especially with Cardinal Bernardin, about a new book she sent to him. She always received a follow-up personal note of thanks. Cardinal Joe Tobin from the Archdiocese of Newark, N.J., and a good friend of Jo's was here at the Motherhouse recently for the opening of our Assembly. He was asked if he would administer the sacrament of the sick to Josephine, since she was already quite ill. After the anointing, Josephine gave the cardinal some close-up finger-pointing advice on how to be a good cardinal.

Josephine says of her life, "Perhaps the deepest transformative moments of my life have come as I walked the last journey with those who are very dear to me:" Her mother and father's death, her sister Pauline's fatal cancer, the death of her dear friend Sister Mary Charboneau, her long and faithful care of Sister Marguerite Daly, and finally, the unexpected death of her last sister- sibling, Gilda Sferrella Pace.

Now she is experiencing the ultimate transformation. Yes, Josephine lived in a world vision shaped by a loving Italian family, excellent teachers and mentors, a risk-taking and visionary community, transformative experiences with people, institutions and educational systems. Now she leaves that world tested a bit, her expectations and reality never fully satisfied. She always told me even in her last days, "I can't be sick I still have so many things to do." But with her heart, the one thing of which she is assured is articulated in the last line of her Book of Life: "When I speak, let it be of blessings and gratitude, let your glory within me shine out to the world."

Josephine's visionary and passionate heart, sometimes illusive behind the clouds of disappointments, losses and disabilities, is now free to explore and shine out to the heavens and the Earth.

Truly, she is like the Moses in the final lines of David Whyte's poem:

It is Moses in the desert fallen to his knees  
before the lit bush.  
It is the (one) throwing away (ones) shoes  
as if to enter heaven and finding (oneself) astonished,  
opened at last,  
fallen in love  
with Solid Ground.

Yes, dear Jo, with your feet on the sacred ground, no longer wheelchair-bound, your Vision and Heart now coalesce. You lived Micah's challenge on the front cover of your booklet – you have lived justly, loved tenderly and walked humbly with your God – all enfolded in the Liberating Mission of Jesus. Now go in peace, dear friend.

Written by Joyce Durosko, IHM

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