

Obituary



Sister Mary Laird, IHM, age 89, died Wednesday, Feb. 28, 2018, in the IHM Senior Living Community, Monroe, Mich. Sister Mary was born in Detroit on Oct. 7, 1928, to Arlington and Marie (McCowell) Laird. Her parents were Canadian-born and moved to Detroit, where they married in 1920.

Baptized Mary Patricia at St. Martin, Detroit, Mary attended St. Martin Grade and High Schools, graduating in 1947. That summer, Mary entered the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Monroe and received the religious name Sister Marie Rosary. This year, she would have celebrated her 70th Jubilee as an IHM Sister.

After earning a bachelor's degree from Marygrove College, Sister Mary began a teaching ministry that spanned almost 50 years in elementary schools across Michigan: Annunciation, St. Agnes, St. Ambrose and St. Jude, Detroit; St. Michael, Flint; St. John, Jackson; Sacred Heart, Roseville; and St. Patrick, Wyandotte. Within these years, Sister Mary earned a Master of Arts degree in special education from Wayne State University. She was a beloved teacher of young students. She stated she retired in 1998, but continued to tutor, teach and volunteer at St. Jude and East Catholic School while residing in Harper Woods.

In 2005, Sister Mary, along with seven other IHM Sisters and Adrian Dominican Sisters, met to share a vision of ministry that emerged as a tutoring center for elementary children: the Epiphany Education Center. The center is dedicated to assisting elementary and middle school students achieve their potential through individualized programs. The center continues to operate at Samaritan Center and is a member of the Detroit Catholic Pastoral Alliance.

In need of more assistance with her health, Sister Mary moved to the IHM Motherhouse and Health Care Center, Monroe, in 2009.

Remembering

Most of this Remembering is taken from Mary Laird's autobiography, which Sister Alice Baker assembled in collaboration with Mary. Hearing her own voice as she remembers the highlights in her life will surely recall the spirit of this generous, ever-smiling and cheerful, but quiet, woman who shared life with so many for almost 90 years.

My birthday is October 7, the Feast of the Holy Rosary, so, of course, my name is Mary! I was two months premature weighing only 2 ½ -3 pounds; therefore I

remained in Harper Hospital two months, drinking goat milk to gain weight and help with digestion. I was the third child, but the other two children miscarried. With my mother's special devotion to Father Solanus Casey, OFM, who promised to pray for my mother, Marie Philomena Laird, when she went into labor, I guess I am one of his small "miracles."

My father, Arlington Harold Laird, was of Irish descent. My mother's family came from Ingersol, Ontario, Canada, and with the names of Fitzpatrick and McCowell in her background, this would make me 100% Irish.

My early childhood and school years took place on the eastside of Detroit in St. Martin "on the Lake" Parish. We would always joke that it wasn't on a lake, but on a canal! My "brothers and sisters" were actually my cousins - Jack, Paula, Margery, Bill, and Kathy Shook - who lived one street behind us. Often I would be at their home to enjoy family gatherings, a custom we continued for many years.

When Christmas came, we would often go to my Grandpa McCowell's home in Ingersol, Ontario, where we would lie on the round rug near the potbelly stove and listen to Grandpa tell stories. I loved the train ride there, especially when Conductor Boucher would take me out on the platform on the back of the train and point out all of the places from Detroit to Ingersol. My Aunt Kitty and Uncle Charlie would come in their car, and Aunt Kitty would take us for a ride up the hill, driving so fast that my mother would pray very hard for my survival. My uncle, Father John McCowell, loved to take us kids around in his car, too, taking off his Roman collar and throwing it in the back seat.

I have good memories of animal friends. When I was in grade school, I had a small dog named Butch. One day when I was coming home from school, Butch was on the second floor front porch watching for me, and he jumped from the porch when he saw me. Lucky for him, the bushes broke his fall. I ran and picked him up to find him unhurt. In first grade our pastor, Father Hennigan, would bring his dog, a Great Dane, to visit us. Great Danes are very gentle and sociable. The dog would walk up and down our desk rows, his height even with us so we could easily pet him.

In the neighborhood and at school I had good friends. Often my friend Shirley Ann (who became Sister Marie Evelyn, IHM) and I would walk home together. We would stop after a few blocks, talk for a while, and then go a few more blocks, stop and talk again. Our mothers would come out and invite us inside,

but we would only continue talking and walking. Then, once home, we would call each other on the phone and talk some more!

In high school I joined the "Candy Strippers" at Bon Secours Hospital in Grosse Pointe, along with Shirley Malzone who became Sister Francine, IHM. We always enjoyed teasing Sisters Lucretia and Mary Emma. They were not angry with us that we wanted to join the IHMs instead of the Bon Secours Sisters. I had IHMs all through my schooling and I wanted to be a teacher, so IHMs had to be my choice. Sister Mary Rosary, one of my teachers, was my sponsor and later on, a dear friend, as was Sister Ann Joseph. Both knew my mother very well and were very kind to her especially since I was her only child and she was widowed in 1945. Despite my father dying when I was 17 and there being no other siblings, my mother supported my desire to join the IHMs. Before my Dad died he, too, let my mother know of his approval of my wish to be an Immaculate Heart of Mary sister.

I entered the community on July 2, 1947, received the habit on January 2, 1948, and was professed on January 2, 1950.

We were the first class of temporary professed sisters to stay home to complete our bachelor's degrees before going on mission. We had six to ten months of grueling work under Sister Mary Patrick's tutelage. That included practice school, house charges, kitchen work, charge of a senior sister, and study, which was in capital letters. I have a Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in Biology from Marygrove College, Detroit, and a Master's in Special Education from Wayne State University, Detroit.

My mission experiences were varied, mostly in large schools and parishes in Michigan. I ministered in places dear to our IHM memories – St. Agnes, Detroit; St. John, Jackson; St. Michael, Flint; St. Patrick, Wyandotte; Annunciation, Detroit; Sacred Heart, Roseville. I loved every minute of my mission years. The children were an inspiration to me, funny, rich in compassion, generosity and possibility. It was always a joy for me when I would "see the light go on" in that moment when they finally knew they could read!

There is many a story to tell, but I think this is my favorite. There was a young boy name Richard who had difficulty saying his R's. So he would say his name was "Wichawd." One day, Richard brought the note back to school that said his parents had seen the pack of graded papers that were sent home during the past month. The signature consisted of lots of large circles, rows of loops at the

bottom of the page. So I took Richard and the note to the principal, Judy McCusker, to get her reaction. Judy, with a very serious expression, said to Richard, "What is this, Richard?"

He said, "It's cuwsive."

Judy said, "Who signed this?"

Richard said, "My mothew."

"Do you know what this says?" Judy asked.

"No," said Richard.

Judy responded, "It says 'I will not sign this paper.'"

"It does?" said Richard.

I had to leave the office I was laughing so hard!

In 1970, two huge changes in my ministry and living occurred almost simultaneously when the citizens in Michigan voted down Proposal C. That meant Catholic schools would not receive any monies from the state. I had been teaching the previous five years at Sacred Heart School in Roseville. We had four buildings of Grades K-12 and all were closed after 1970-71 school year. I was in need of a new ministry and fortunate to be invited to teach first grade at St. Ambrose Elementary School in the Detroit/Grosse Pointe Park area. I also had to find housing and companions and to begin my life of "commuting."

Along the way I shared housing and ministry with several sisters. St. Ambrose was my longest place of mission: I remained there for 27 years from 1971 until 1998, teaching mostly first-graders. By 1973, Sister Alice Baker came to live and teach at St. Ambrose. By 1998 as St. Ambrose's future was uncertain I volunteered as a tutor at St. Jude School where Alice had already moved.

In 2005 we joined with Sister Marie Cyril Delisi and four Adrian Dominican Sisters in founding the Epiphany Education Center. We tutored students from Grades 1-8. We located in the old Samaritan Hospital thanks to an offer of space by Brother Francis Boylan, a Holy Cross brother and director of the Samaritan Center. We were in a Detroit location where four out of five children do not graduate from high school. Epiphany Education Center began with much shared planning, much work, many volunteers and supporters. It has been a challenge, but Epiphany Education Center still continues. As I was quoted in an article in *The Michigan Catholic* about Epiphany, "The Lord has just let everything fall into place – things just keep happening."

There, I was able to use all my past experience and special education skills to serve the inner-city children. I loved my work with the children and the staff.

This was for me at the heart of my work for social justice. Alice and I had gone to the School of the Americas demonstrations for seven or eight years. We were even arrested two or three times there. We continued working to resist nuclear war and to call for peace and nonviolence. Still, I am especially grateful to have taught full time for 48 years. I have a special love for the City of Detroit and its needy children. I see my teaching as a long-lasting commitment to the principles of social justice.

For 36 years, Alice and I lived together. We shared so much. We came to know each other's families. We visited them and took other vacations and trips. Until my mother died in 1978 she was included in all of my relationships. She was deeply supportive, even taking the bus to visit me when I was at a distance as in Jackson and Flint.

In closing, I would like to say how much my religious vocation means to me. Though we no longer wear the blue habits, to me IHM means we are under Our Blessed Mother Mary's love and protection every day. We rely on her help.

In January of 2009, Mary came to the Motherhouse Memory Care Unit with mild dementia. Willingly, but surely not without some deep sense of letting go, Mary gave herself to life in Monroe. She entered into the activities of each day. Thanks to Sister Dorothy Eddy's invitation, Mary developed a lively interest in art and ceramics classes. As well as she could, she visited with the sisters. She shared prayer, singing, laughter and the daily opportunities that came. Only recently she had to move into the Health Care area for more attention to her diminishing health.

As Sister Alice Baker said, "Mary's not one to talk." If you did not know her, you wouldn't guess how fully and beautifully she had given herself to others over these 89 years. Now Sister Mary Patricia Laird has moved beyond time's boundary. She stands before God who knows about all the energy, enthusiasm, dedication, patience and love this humble sister demonstrated over the decades.

We are grateful for her days and years among us. With remarkable witness, without fanfare she embodied the Christian life in the IHM tradition. Well done, good and faithful, Sister, Servant. Enter into joy.

-Written by Alice Baker, IHM, with Mary Laird, IHM, and Joan Glisky, IHM
Delivered by March 7, 2018