

Remembering Shirley Houff, IHM
July 18, 1935 – Dec. 28, 2021

Shirley Houff loved to talk with and tease people. She enjoyed jokes and had a wry sense of humor. She could also make fun of herself. One incident, one she frequently repeated, took place in a primary classroom where, as a substitute, she was reading a story to the children. Shortly after beginning with great drama, Shirley heard a little voice pipe up from the back of the room: "SHOW US THE PICTURES!"

Today we look at some "pictures" from Shirley's long and active life.

First of all, the earliest days

Shirley was born July 18, 1935, to Vivienne LaFleur and Martin Houff in Lorain, Ohio. She grew up with them and her older sister Vivian in a large home shared with her grandparents Olivia and Albert LaFleur, whom she called "mimere" [mih'mare = grandma] and "pipere." [pih'pare = grandpa]. They lived close to Lake Erie, and just east of the Black River. Shirley attended the local parish grade school, St. Anthony, where she was taught by Franciscan Sisters. As a child, she enjoyed riding her bike, swimming at the beach and playing ball with the neighborhood kids. For high school, she attended St. Mary's, Lorain, staffed by IHM Sisters and located on the west side, across the river and a few blocks south. She described walking over the bridge in any weather. During high school, she continued to enjoy playing sports and being active outdoors. She volunteered at the local hospital as a "candy striper" nurses' aide. Her friends from those days remained in touch for decades, getting together many summers for reunions.



Shirley was close to her father, who worked in accounting for U.S. Steel, and she shared his interest in math and puzzles, especially crossword puzzles. He would often remark, "Shirley is going to the convent," or something similar. Shirley took time to decide which religious community to join because she had seriously considered becoming a nurse and looked into communities that did nursing. After some reflection, she decided instead to join the teaching community she had come to know in high school.

She entered the IHM postulate in September 1953 and was received in June 1954. It was the Marian Year [Commemorating the 100th anniversary of the proclamation of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Mother] and most of the new novices were given some form of Mary's name. Shirley became Sister Angela Mary. Her family probably appreciated this since one of her mother's brothers was a Franciscan, whose name in religion was Father Angelus.

Next, a snapshot from formation time

Shirley had a strong voice that could command a classroom or any other room. [Redemptorist Father Gil Enderle once called her “Crowd-control Shirley” when she managed his book-signing sessions at the Motherhouse.] Her voice was easily heard in a refectory reading. At one time, as a junior sister, she was reading from the history of the community, *No Greater Service*, in the professed sisters’ dining room. There was a lengthy section on the acquisition, resources and operations of the large farms the sisters managed beginning in the 1920s. After one particularly detailed section on statistics of the beef herd and numbers of turkeys and chickens, Mother Anna Marie Grix drew her aside and said, “Let’s get off the farm...” And so they did. And moved along to another chapter.

Now some views from a long teaching career

In college, Shirley excelled in mathematics and acquired a master’s degree in mathematics from Wayne State University. Her first assignments, however, like most IHM sister-teachers, were to elementary school. She taught a year at St. Charles in Detroit and then was in the pioneer group that opened St. Regis in Birmingham. Since the convent wasn’t ready, the four IHMs lived at Marian High School down the road while they taught grades one through four, which made up the entire school that first year. The school grew, but the convent was slow to materialize. Shirley had happy memories of this mission and the good times enjoyed with Kate Seidenwand, Jan Soleau and Kate O’Brien. Kate called their life together, “a lively adventure.” They “kept a regular horarium, prayed in chapel together, laughed a lot, celebrated every chance we could, often having recreation and supper in our incomplete house.” They shared many activities with the sisters at Marian, where Sister Thomas Aquinas Walmsley was principal and superior. At St. Regis, Shirley “enjoyed the kids, had a sense of discipline that created a wholesome spirit. She was a high-energy teacher.”

After several grade-school assignments and summers of graduate study, Shirley was missioned to teach high school math and became a pioneer again, being one of the original staff at Lorain Catholic [Lorain, Ohio] in 1969. After 12 years there, she and her good friend and fellow math teacher, Ellen Mary Green, decided to find teaching positions in Arizona, where both had family. Ellen’s brothers lived there, and Shirley’s father had moved there after his first wife’s death. Shirley and Ellen Mary were hired at Xavier College Preparatory, an all-girls school operated by the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Phoenix and taught there for over 20 years. Shirley also served as a guidance counselor for the last seven years. Mary Ann Mahoney remembers that during this time there were “quite a few IHMs there [in/near Phoenix]....we would get together for meetings and birthdays...Occasionally...we would meet at Shirley and Ellen’s for a delicious meal. Shirley was a great cook and a fine hostess...she was always generous and willing to help.” Traveling around the Southwest, Shirley developed a love for the landscape and art of the region. She kept artwork from the area prominent in her living space ever since. Shirley tells stories of sharing trips down

to Mexico with her Dad several times. After her father died, she took care of her stepmother until she too passed away. Eventually, Ellen Mary also needed professional nursing care there. She died in 2005.

Finally, a few last pictures

After settling things in Arizona, Shirley was invited back to Monroe by Paula Cooney to oversee the Motherhouse Transportation Office. Although the move was hard, Paula notes that “with Shirley’s outgoing personality, she seemed to make friends and find a place at the Motherhouse...she found many ways to offer her support to others.” She got acquainted with residents and staff and re-acquainted with classmates and IHMs she hadn’t seen in many years. Co-workers said she was “organized, responsible, had new ideas and was honest.” Camille Brouillard noted, “She had a wonderful sense of humor...and was very kind to the sisters that she drove...” Several other sisters remarked on her “sense of humor, witty and teasing remarks...always a joke or a laugh is a strong memory...” After serving in the Transportation Office for seven years, she retired from full-time work and became a volunteer in Archives and a variety of other departments.

I got to know Shirley when she moved to Monroe, appreciated her help in Archives, and enjoyed her company on many walks and holiday visits. She had a beautiful singing voice and loved music, especially opera. She also remembered the lyrics to many “golden oldies” and would sing a few lines at appropriate times and inquire if we, too, remembered and could sing along. She showered our little dog with treats and attention, and Maisie repaid her with adoring canine affection.

Until recently and the progression of her illness, Shirley could still enjoy taking walks outdoors, talking and joking with residents and staff she encountered. As her energy ebbed, Shirley found support in the company of her long-time friends and classmates, especially Laura Hardage, her “next in rank.” Sitting with her for many hours, Laura brought both the comfort of a pastoral minister and that of a good friend to Shirley’s final weeks.

Now her energy is spent, and her voice is quieted. We thank God for her long teaching career and the many students she influenced and counseled. We thank God for her service to the sisters and residents here. We thank God for her warm friendship, her humor, her generosity, and her kindness. May she rest now in peace.

Written and delivered by Donna Westley, Jan.4, 2022

NB: Donna Westley is a former director of the IHM Archives.