

Remembering Mary Ann Ford, IHM July 3, 1932 – Aug. 10, 2022



Mary Ann was born in Detroit to Ambrosia (Evans) and George Connelly Ford on July 3, 1932. Given her birthday's proximity to the national holiday, in childhood, she assumed the fireworks honored her birth! When she was four-years old, her brother George was born. Mary Ann's father was an artist by profession. In addition to working on the Fisher Building in Detroit, he painted the ceilings of the IHM Motherhouse foyer and St. Mary Conference Center. She was very proud of that and enjoyed helping in her mother's special education class as well.

Mary Ann's first experience of Catholic education was at Gesu parish school. This is where the inkling of a call to religious life awakened. It was nurtured by several IHM Sisters as well as Jesuit parish priests there. Both communities emphasized the holiness inherent in diverse humanity. The call persisted through her experiences at Immaculata High School and her one year at Marygrove College. She was sensitive to conflicts among people from different cultures and the need to respect differences and to hear one another, a call-within-a-call to be a maker of peace. On Aug. 22, 1951, Mary Ann's family drove her to Monroe and she entered our community. At reception, she received the name Sr. Madeleine Marie. She later claimed her nickname, "SMAF."

Her brother George married Dorothy and they had two children, Ruth and Russell. Mary Ann loved having a sibling and being both auntie and later great aunt to Zena. Mary Ann admired niece Ruth's business acumen and appreciated her assistance in grading math papers. Russell was appreciated for his technological expertise, which helped her too.

I would like to invite you to a small exercise of the imagination. As you think about this universe, what body might symbolize Mary Ann from your perspective? (Pause) How many sought an image with luminosity—brightness? A sun or another bright star? You probably recognized Mary Ann's brightness, love of learning and zeal! She describes her first six years working in elementary schools in Detroit's Corktown as a rude awakening to poverty. She came to love two people there for their great love for the materially poor, Sr. Maura Morrissey and Fr. Clem Kern. She fondly remembered Fr. Kern coming to discern with the sisters where he needed to focus his ministry.

Her one year in Cayey, Puerto Rico, opened her eyes to the poverty outside the Continental U.S. It "stretched [her] to see, not just hear about, troubles in Third World places."

Mary Ann shone in her knowledge of and sharing all manner of mathematics. She also loved teaching religion classes. Her energy and insights impressed her high school students. Harry Posner, now a Monsignor in the Old Catholic Church, shares his love for Sister, stating, "She changed my life" as she reminded his Bishop Foley class that their call was to "change the world."

She was undoubtedly the first in the congregation to respond strongly to the needs of the Dignity Detroit LGBTQ community early in the mid-1970s, before it was safe to do so. She recalled, "I was fortunate enough to meet a couple of men who treated me like a queen...[They] were absolutely the most beautiful people." She took on the role of chaplain for the community, guiding new members through the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults process, counseling and serving as a pastoral presence. "God puts people together in many different ways," she said. "It's the willingness to see God in everyone. And do not judge! God did not make us to be our neighbor's judge." She and Sr. Jeanine Grammick of New Ways Ministry were friends since the 1980s. Jeanine says, "Mary Ann was instrumental in getting Dignity to meet at Marygrove College when Bishop Ratzinger's letter prompted bishops all over the U.S. to evict Dignity chapters from churches. Mary Ann was a wonderful religious and very devoted to LGBTQ Catholics and their families and friends. We have lost a friend on Earth but have gained a powerful ally in heaven."

Many sisters commented on Mary Ann's beaming smile at events on the Monroe lawn in support of important IHM values. At Jubilee this year, she came very alive, responding to the song, "This Little Light of Mine."

Perhaps you imaged Mary Ann as a body in motion? A comet? A shooting star? This recognizes your awareness of her many activities and her leadership. In addition to her roles as educator and math department head, she was a member of IHM Peacemakers, a peace activist, an organizer of the IHM Sisters and Friends team, which participated in annual AIDS Walks in Royal Oak, an active member of the IHM AIDS Committee and on the Core Team of the Michigan Peace Team for many years.

Another community that Mary Ann served was the Palestinians, particularly those in Gaza when she was there with the Michigan Peace Team. Sr. Elizabeth Walters recalls when she and Mary Ann went together to Palestine and Gaza:

We lived and ministered in Rafah, Gaza. We first went following the crushing of Rachel Corrie by an Israeli bulldozer (2002) to be a support to the peace team. Residents that had witnessed the tragedy. We went to help keep people out of harm's way. We were eyewitnesses to the destruction of 1,000 homes, crops, fruit and date trees, all destroyed by Israel, and the constant bombardment and shooting by the Israeli Defense Force and settlers. We experienced the air, land and sea imprisonment of Palestinians in Gaza firsthand. Mary Ann was very courageous, prayerful and compassionate. I admired her very much.

For several years Mary Ann sponsored a Palestinian olive oil fundraiser in interested parishes. She also participated in protests against local injustices, such as water shut-offs in Detroit.

Mary Ann retired to Monroe in 2017, where she was a presence of affirmation and care. "I strive to reach out to everyone who I can assist as others have reached out to me."

She was grateful for her calling as an IHM lifelong-learner reading recently about the emerging universe.

I wrote the following poem to honor her.

On the Cusp of Fire

Dedicated to the memory of Sr. Mary Ann Ford, born on July 3, 90 years ago

her firecracker outbursts were rare
more heat than light
and gladly forgotten
but her sparkler eyes
and zealous deeds
shone like the sun

the light of deep faith
led her into danger zones
facing military might in Gaza
and hierarchical threats of silencing
in Detroit

yet her spark of trust
in the One
and the imperiled
impelled her forward

leading with the Light
she invites us to
embrace
believe
and lead
from light
into Light

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Delivered by Barbara Beesley, IHM, Aug. 19, 2022**