

Remembering Hilda A. Skelley, IHM
June 28, 1937 – Aug. 2, 2023

Hilda was born June 28, 1937, at St. Joseph Mercy Hospital in Pontiac, Michigan and baptized the same day. Perhaps because of her tiny size, this was followed by a parish baptism on July 2, 1937. She was the third of five children of Irish and German ancestry born to James and Catherine (Meyers) Skelley. Her siblings were Catherine, now deceased, John, Patrick and James. Patrick died at age two and James at 11.

Hilda's father was an automotive engineer with General Motors. Before her marriage, her mother taught her employer's clients how to use a comptometer. A comptometer was a multi-key calculator that was the precursor to today's ten-key adding machine. Both parents were from the Williamsport, Pennsylvania, area and shared farming backgrounds.



The family initially settled on West Lincoln Avenue in Birmingham at a time when much of the area was farmland. A three-acre plot was purchased and was the source of fresh vegetables, fruits and berries. Tending to the large garden provided summertime tasks for young hands and healthy, home-canned food for wintertime meals. When she was four, Hilda's paternal grandfather, Jim, came to live with them. He became an endearing presence, walking her partway to Holy Name grade school and meeting her after school for the walk home. From her oral history, Hilda says, "When I was in second grade, I was coming home from school and was going to meet 'Grampy, where I always met him, which was right across the street from a medical institution. One of the nurses came out and told me to go home because my grandfather was sick. I said: no, Grandpa would be sick, he can't get sick, he has to come. So, I sat in that corner until my father came at 6 o'clock and picked me up because I was sure Grampy wouldn't leave me alone. And I came home, and he had had a stroke." Unable to care for him medically and financially, Grampy was moved to an old folk's home and Hilda could no longer see him, a source of much sadness.

Hilda's parents were immersed in charitable works. Her father, James, was a St. Vincent de Paul Society member. It was not unusual for him to come home after work and ask his wife Catherine to pack up the family's supper because some new family had moved to the area and did not have food. Catherine would then quickly prepare a simple alternative meal for her family. She was a longtime member of the Ladies of Charity and made, repaired, sorted and distributed clothing with a hearty and cheerful spirit. On Saturdays, when the children were 10 years old, they would take the bus up Woodward Avenue to St. Elizabeth's Briarbank to clean the rooms of the elderly residents. Such family outreach was formative of Hilda's spirit of generosity and simplicity.

Hilda went to kindergarten at Baldwin Junior High, followed by eight years at Holy Name grade school, which was staffed by IHMs, then St. Mary's High School in Royal Oak, staffed by the Adrian Dominicans. Holy Name parish was pivotal to the Skelley family, though the family went to Queen of Martyrs when it was established. When Hilda was three or four years old, she became the flower girl for every Parish event! She was petite, had long auburn hair with big curls, and could hold the basket and process "just the right way." She ended her professional career by refusing to be the flower girl at her high school graduation ceremony!

When Hilda was in the eighth grade, she got a job at Grinnell Brothers. Siblings Catherine and John were already employed there. Grinnell Brothers was a major record and musical instrument store, but the Birmingham store also carried household furnishings. Grinnell's main store was in Detroit and often hosted major recording artists such as Frank Sinatra and Perry Como. The Skelleys went downtown and were thrilled to hear and meet the performers. Hilda was in charge of the record department in the eighth and ninth grades. While in the ninth grade, the store's bookkeeper took a maternity leave and Hilda's supervisor asked her to work with the bookkeeper to learn the system. When the bookkeeper chose not to return, Hilda became the bookkeeper and worked daily from the end of her school day until 6 p.m.

Vocation Week rolled around during Hilda's sophomore year at St. Mary's High School (Royal Oak). To again quote Hilda, "It was religion, and she was talking about different orders and she was just downplaying the IHM terribly. And I don't know where I got the courage, but I stood up to her — stood up in class and I said, Sister, you have no reason to speak like that of the IHMs because there are only two people in this room that know who the IHMs are and you are making them sound terrible ... She sent me out and said, 'You're expelled.'" Hilda went to the office and was sent to the rectory to see the pastor, Fr. Cairns (Rev. George J. Cairns). He had high regard for the IHM Sisters. He told Hilda she was not expelled and walked immediately to the school ... and Hilda returned and graduated from St. Mary's. In retrospect, Hilda was touched by the spirit of the IHMs ... the simplicity of life, an emphasis on poverty and the sharing among all that "no one IHM had something better than another" ... living a common life. These values attracted Hilda to the IHMs.

Hilda entered the IHM community on Sept. 6, 1955; was received into the Novitiate June 17, 1956; received the name 'James Ellen,' pronounced first vows June 29, 1958, and final vows June 29, 1963. She earned a bachelor's degree from Marygrove College (1960) and a master's in education from Wayne State University (1970). Undergraduate classes in English and History were taken on the Monroe Campus of Marygrove. Her preferred study would have been Mathematics, but this major was only offered in Detroit. The times were such that those in administration did not permit IHMs in formation who did not have prior college experience to travel to the Detroit campus.

While in formation, a stunning personal event occurred, which Hilda relates in her IHM Book of Life Page: "After a family visit while in the novitiate, my little brother, Jimmy, came running back to me, hugged me, and whispered something to me that has stayed with me. He said he was sorry for being so selfish; it was all right for me to be a sister to

everyone; he was willing to share. These were his last words to me as he died suddenly within the next month. Again, the influence of service to others with love."

Hilda's first mission assignment was to Gesu, Detroit (1961), where, with great delight, she taught first grade for two years. She moved to St. Felicitas (Chicago) in 1962 for six years, teaching first, second and third grades. On weekends, she taught catechism to learning-impaired children, an experience she dearly loved. These commitments led to related Archdiocesan classes taught by the remarkable team of Fr. Henri Nouwen and Jean Vanier. Additional services at the Archdiocese were reading supervisor and instruction of Archdiocesan teachers on teaching math to young children so that essentials of division, fractions, and the new math were learned. Community life at St. Felicitas was very enjoyable with sisters who lived life with much fun.

During Hilda's last year at St. Felicitas (1967-68), the IHM leadership team visited the convent and school with a major change of mind for Hilda. She was responsible for the convent's "books" and had impressed the Congregational Business Office with her skill in recording and reporting the house's financial affairs. At the end of each school year, such records were conveyed to the Business Office for review and important data collection. This information was highly significant when the Congregation decided to enter the Social Security System and various categories of living expenses had to be accumulated for the entire community. Hilda was asked to serve the following year not only as principal for St. Rene, a new school in a Chicago suburb, but also teach first grade, serve as the house superior, and return to the Motherhouse to serve in the Congregational Business Office. Despite being unprepared to be a grade school principal, Hilda felt she "did a pretty good job," but she cried on the flight to Detroit.

In the Summer of 1969, Hilda joined Sisters Fran Mlocek and Harriet Singelyn in the Congregational Business Office along with Sr. Jane (Marmion) Johnson. Hilda's service spanned 22 years, with a brief two-year interlude (1971-73) as assistant treasurer at Marygrove College. Hilda's Monroe responsibilities included accountant, personnel director, auditor and assistant general treasurer. The 1960s and '70s were years of major changes in accounting, reporting and financial decision-making procedures. Hand bookkeeping evolved into machine accounting, then computerized systems that allowed extensive analysis and better data for determining personnel, ministry and financial decisions. Hilda was highly instrumental in successful transitions through ever-more complex computer systems and equipment. A single chart of accounts had been created, encompassing every level of IHM's financial, ministerial and personnel activity. Hilda and Harriet became auditors who visited each IHM-sponsored school and province for detailed analyses of membership living expenses, which were instrumental in providing data needed to report each sister's taxable Social Security income. Hilda's ability to move the community into the electronic world was extraordinary.

The years 1989 and 1990 brought a time of renewal and service at St. Mary Catholic Central as a support staff member. The years 1991-95 were spent at Springbank Retreat Center in Kingstree, South Carolina, in new endeavors as plant manager, building and grounds maintenance, food preparation and purchasing. It was there that "The simple way of the Native Americans, their love of and respect for all of creation..." began to influence Hilda's life.

Returning to Monroe for a year of transition (1995), Hilda was hired by Danny's Fine Foods as a cashier to provide some income toward her living expenses. Her presence evolved into filling the accountant's position at Danny's through 2017, often in her "spare time." She secured a full-time position with Quality Software (1996-2012), which involved the installation of computer systems for company clients, writing syllabuses and teaching client employees. An interesting evolution at Quality Software was being the accountant for a very fine restaurant, Evans Street Station, in Tecumseh, Michigan.

From 2017 through her remaining years, Hilda resided at the IHM Senior Living Community. Her prayer in her *IHM Book of Life* page characterizes Hilda's life and spirit:

With His power,
He would like to accomplish
great things through me,
using me
to mold others by my influence,
to change the direction
of the coastline in some lives,
to shape surroundings for Him —
gently or firmly,
to lift great logs of guilt or worry
from shoulders,
to make safe caves for those who need
comfort from storms.
All this, He would do through His power in me
in my every day walk.

Thank you, Hilda, for your life and presence among all who met you on your walk, especially your IHM Sisters in community.

Written by Frances A. Mlocek in collaboration with Hilda A. Skelley on June 29, 2020. Delivered by Alice Baker, IHM, Aug. 4, 2023