

Remembering Sharon M. Defever, IHM
April 30, 1940 – Nov. 17, 2023

Today, we come to celebrate the life of Sharon Defever, IHM, who took leave of us quite precipitously on the evening of November 17.

I first met Sharon in 1958, when a group of us (Sharon, Marge Hughes, Beverly Eklund, Joan Figurski and myself), all from the east side of Detroit, were investigating the possibility of entering the community. We hung out that summer, listened to Elvis Presley, and compared notes about our shock in purchasing Bonnie Doon hosiery and Mary Poppins shoes. I could tell many entertaining stories about that summer but let me say it was enhanced by our suspense as to whether Sharon would actually make it to Monroe because her parents were determined that she would not. This did not deter Sharon, who continued making purchases and packed her suitcase at a neighbor's home.



September 1958 found Sharon enrolled at Marygrove College, where she nursed the dream of coming to IHM for four years, which she did in 1962 (Entrance), and celebrated her 60-year Jubilee (of Reception 1963) this past summer. In many ways, Sharon is an example of persistence and perseverance. Becoming an IHM was her dream and her passion... she never let go until the evening of November 17.

Sharon was born in 1940 to parents of Belgian heritage who prized family and hard work. Her father, Albert, was a plumber who built a thriving business, aided by his wife Germaine. Sharon was initiated into the business in high school when, after school, she would ride the bus downtown to pull permits and gather other paperwork. In her autobiography, Sharon pays tribute to her parents and her Belgian heritage, remarking that it is sometimes said that Belgians have a stubborn streak, which she ascribed to her mother. So, you can imagine the standoff between mother and daughter in those years when Sharon wanted to come to Monroe and the mother did not want her to come.

After her formation time and three years teaching in Monroe and Ann Arbor, Sharon was missioned to St. Monica's in Mobile, Alabama, where she remained teaching for 23 years until the school closed. She describes her teaching experience as a time of learning and trying to be stern without success. It was during her time at St. Monica's that she came to learn the full effects of racism and poverty. At this time, she attended the Institute for Black Catholic Studies and became appreciative of the Black American experience. She became exposed to and enjoyed African American music, enhanced by her love of classical music. Sharon indulged her musical interests as a volunteer usher at the Mobile Symphony Orchestra.

St. Monica's in Mobile was a long way from Our Lady Star of the Sea in Grosse Pointe Woods. She learned the devastating impact of hurricanes and the tedious work of cleanup. Here, Sharon continued her search for the Divine, living out of her novitiate desire to walk in the steps of

Teresa of Avila and a renewed exploration of scripture, declaring on her page of life God's awesome goodness and faithfulness to those who search.

After leaving teaching, Sharon trained in Clinical Pastoral Education and worked as a hospice and hospital chaplain. It is in this work that Sharon seemed to find her niche. Living out of Scripture, she found ways to comfort her colleagues on staff and the patients and families to whom she ministered.

Although Sharon returned to Monroe in 2014 after 46 years in Mobile, we did not have much opportunity to catch up. I was looking forward to doing so when I became a resident. I wondered about being 46 years in Mobile. I cannot imagine what it was like to leave a place so rich in relationships and memories after so many years. I knew it was difficult for her to leave Mobile, her friends and colleagues, and to find a new home for her faithful companion, Bailey. It was not easy, but crippling arthritis left her with few options.

Fortunately, when she came to Monroe, she could minister to those in health care. She is remembered by those who ministered with her for her willingness to go the extra mile with people, whether going to the wakes of those who died or going to the patient's dining room to help them and their families break bread and have conversations.

When I think of Sharon, I think of her as someone who persisted against all odds, whether that was coming to the community over the years of objection by her mother or constancy for mission and service for others despite crippling arthritis. She was there for those she served, whether that was the students at St. Monica's - black or white - or those terminally ill and their families, or anyone in need of a chaplain.

It is often said that the eyes are the windows of the soul, which surely seems true in Sharon's case. Her deep, dark eyes, with a twinkle and broad smile, said to everyone she met and welcomed home that they were loved and she cared for them. The plumber's daughter, who, when she could no longer play the piano, organ or violin with gnarled hands, created a CD library and made people's hearts sing because of her loving attention to their souls.

Sharon, we will miss the way you greeted us, the way you spoke so lovingly of your family, and the way you nurtured those who cared for you, whether that was Wendy in her search for faith or Sister Loretta who companioned you in the end.

And we sing with you: Praise, Love, Thanksgiving....

***Written and delivered by Barbara G. Stanbridge, IHM
November 27, 2023***