

Remembering Mary (Mary Andre) VanGilder, IHM
Oct. 28, 1924 – June 16, 2012

Today we remember our dear sister, Mary VanGilder.

As we like to put it: Mary was a Monroe girl.

Mary Elsie VanGilder was born, with her twin, Maryon, on Oct. 28, 1924, in Monroe, Mich., to her parents, Harold Walter VanGilder and Lilas Mary Baumie. She was one of five children, sisters Maryon and Blanche, and two brothers.

She belonged to St. Mary Parish, attended St. Mary grade school and graduated from St. Mary Academy in 1942. [I must leave childhood remembrances to her family.]

After one year at Marygrove College, she returned to Monroe to enter the IHM community. I have known Mary since that day, Sunday, June 27, 1943 – almost 69 years!

When I wondered how to sum up, gather the richness of this long and beautiful life, Mary herself provided me a framework. On her Book of Life page, Mary listed three significant dates: that of her entrance, her reception date, Jan. 2, 1944, when she received the religious name of Mary Andre, and the date of her final profession. Under a small picture of herself she put only six words: Teacher, Artist, Mentor, Sister, Friend and Minister.

Teacher and Mentor - Mary was sent out as a novice to teach. From March 1945 until June 1954, she taught third and fourth grades and functioned as a critic teacher for Marygrove College education students at Gesu and St. Mary of Redford. In August 1954, she helped open Our Lady of Assumption in Albuquerque, N.M. where she taught third grade until being called home to Monroe in January 1955 to St. Joseph Monroe as critic teacher for juniors from the Motherhouse.

Artist - For the school year 1955-56, she attended Marygrove College full time to complete her bachelor's degree with a major in art. In May 1956 she moved to high school, teaching a variety of subjects among which was her art, at a number of schools: Immaculata, Our Lady of Lourdes, Holy Redeemer. In 1962 she moved to Immaculate Heart of Mary High School in Westchester, Ill. She was very active in art education during her years in the Chicago area. She received grants and participated in workshops on "Newer Media" and served as vice president of the Chicago Archdiocesan Art Teachers Association. Along the way, Mary earned a master's degree in fine arts from Wayne State University and a master's degree in humanities from University of Chicago. She returned to the Detroit area, serving at Marian High School and St. Mary of Redford, where she taught primarily art and art appreciation.

Mary's own artistic work paralleled her teaching. Actually, her creative endeavors began early in life. I remember she played piano beautifully, accompanying me as I played my violin (by request) on the very day we entered. Novitiate celebrations were the occasion for many original productions. Not all were successful. One memorable disaster was with her handmade paper mache IHM dolls fashioned for Mother's feast. Unfortunately, the mice found her storage space and nibbled them to pieces before the big day.

Her oil paintings, silk screen and watercolors are masterpieces of design and color. On the easels in the back of Chapel are a select few which usually grace our Board Room and Community Room. One lovely piece is over the mantle in the Gathering Room at River House. The delicate sketch of a spray of tiny orchids decorating her page in Book of Life symbolizes well her love of beauty.

Mentor and Minister – The fall of 1969 began a new phase of life and ministry: her college teaching of art and her ministry of Newman work at St. John Fisher Chapel in Rochester. From 1970 through 1996, she taught art at Oakland Community College and worked in campus ministry at St. John Fisher. In 1996 she became pastoral associate at St. John Fisher and remained active until the spring of 2012. For over 40 years Mary has been a true Church woman, forming a community of faith which was home to her.

Statements on Mary's recent Commitment forms reveal how vibrant was her life in mission.

2008-09: "I continue to work as a member of the Pastoral Team at St John Fisher Chapel. My responsibilities include promoting ecumenical awareness which relates well to 'right relationships' as an element of peace. I provide seminars in World Religions and participate with local clergy for the Rochester area community. I am also engaged in pastoral care for retirement/nursing centers in the area. In addition, I prepare and provide scripture reflections (homilies) for liturgies and work with the Worship committees to prepare seasonal liturgical themes for spiritual development and celebrations. I also help with the RCIA program. I facilitate two discussion groups which meet monthly and study contemporary authors of scripture study. I still have time for fun and social events."

2010-11: "My ministry continues to be fruitful and rewarding. My IHM spirituality is the source of my being able to continue in Church ministry. It provides a broad base from which to read the signs of the times. The many facets of my local community involvement are enriched by my IHM background and grounding. I continue to work with a variety of ministries at the Chapel: Worship/ritual planning, art and environment, Ecumenical awareness, Adult Faith Formation, scripture reflections (homilies), communion services at retirement facilities, Pastoral Team planning, Intentional community, Discussion groups, etc."

Sister and Friend - Mary the teacher, learner, artist, mentor and minister has always been at the same time both sister and friend to so many: her family, her class, her mission unit, her students, her parish and her IHM community.

A few quotes sent to me as I was composing this Remembering reveal aspects of this strong woman.

"...In 1967...I arrived at St. Mary of Redford to begin my first teaching assignment...I was anxious about this new, huge place...Mary was my lifesaver. Her kindness, welcome, reaching out, inclusiveness, wise words and free spirit supported me...."

[Paula Cathcart]

“In the ’90s...I was in Monroe...and I asked Mary to travel with her to the Mid-Michigan mission unit meetings. Mary welcomed me openly, inviting me to...her condo, sharing an evening meal, staying overnight at her home, and traveling three times a year to Standish or Bay City.”

[Jean Ann Campana]

“The one thing I remember about Mary is how forward-thinking she (was) and how she (was) able to think outside the box. She (was) not confined by narrow parameters and she (was) always pursuing freedom and the truth.”

[Gail Addis]

“I have marveled at Mary’s sense of inclusion and interconnectedness of all. In her quiet way, she spoke volumes of the goodness of all people.”

[Sharon McNeil]

“Mary’s was a life beautifully, generously and wisely lived. It was an honor to have known her. I also celebrate her love of education, especially with regard to growing in our understanding of God, Jesus and the Church.”

[Annemarie Askwith]

“We have known Sister Mary VanGilder for over 20 years as members of the St. John Fisher Community. She has been a source of wisdom and inspiration: a teacher, a guide and a friend. This remarkable woman will be missed by our St. John Fisher Community. There will be void that cannot be filled. We love this woman!

[Joanne and Jack Stroebe]

It seems fitting to close with a poem from one of Mary’s favorite poets, Mary Oliver.

Song of the Builders
by Mary Oliver

On a summer morning
I sat down
On a hillside
To think about God –
A worthy pastime.
Near me, I saw
A single cricket;
It was moving the grains of the hillside

This way and that way.
How great was its energy,
How humble its effort.
Let us hope
It will always be like this,
Each of us going on
In our inexplicable ways
Building the universe...

Dear Mary, in elegance and style and humble effort, you have been building the universe, in God's love.

Marie Gabriel Hungerman, IHM

June 18, 2012

The orchid spray on her Book of Life page speaks to me of Mary's own elegance of style and fragile strength.