



Remembering Sister Mary Kevin Kenny, IHM

We are gathered here this day to remember our beloved sister, Mary Kevin Kenny. Our reflections represent a compilation of facts gathered from the archives, an oral history recorded by Sister Joan Glisky, and my own memories of living with her at St. Edward's University. The facts of her early life were reflected in the long life that followed. On November 10, 1912, Dominic Kenny and Edith McHugh became the proud parents of their second child, Josephine Mary, in Chicago, Illinois. Dominic, a native of Ballygar, County Mayo, Ireland and Edith McHugh, a native of Flatt Bridge, Lancaster, England met when Dominic migrated to England in search of work. It was there that they married and welcomed their first child, a boy whom they named Edward Thomas. Dominic, who had relatives in Chicago decided to join them in hopes of providing a better life for his young family. It was there that four more children were added to the family: Josephine, who took the name of Sister Mary Kevin, when she was received into the IHM Congregation; then Edith, who took the name of Sister Killian when she entered the IHM congregation, and lastly Theresa, and Margaret.

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The flu epidemic hit Chicago when the children were very young. One day, when Josephine was walking in the neighborhood with her mother, she commented that so many homes had flowers hanging on the doors. Why didn't they have any flowers on their door, she asked. The mother explained that the flowers meant that someone in the home had died. Not many days later there were flowers hanging on the Kenny door. The father had succumbed to the dreaded flu like his neighbors. The mother was a teacher, but her certification as teacher was not accepted in Chicago, so in order to provide for her children she decided to return to her home, Flatt Bridge, Lancaster, England, where they could live with her mother while she sought a teaching job in the area.

In 1924, after 14 days of precarious weather at sea, they arrived in Liverpool. The mother was successful in getting a job in nearby Aston/Makerfield, and there she enrolled her children in the parochial school where all expenses were provided by the government. These years were very happy years for young Josephine. She loved school and all that it meant: books, a chance to learn new things, an atmosphere of study. Josephine loved her school years in England. It was obvious when she was trying to explain what the British meant by standards instead of grades in the elementary school. She also remembered the Sunday afternoons in the parish church where the children were instructed in catechism by the pastor. Then followed Vespers which the whole family attended and afterwards returned home to enjoy tea and scones.

Josephine had cherished memories of her childhood days in England always being quick to claim her "English heritage", while her sister Edith identified herself as Irish. To her final days, Sister

Mary Kevin retained an undeniable British accent, while the rest of her siblings lost it upon return to America.

When Josephine completed elementary school in England, the mother decided to move to Detroit, where she had relatives and the young Josephine entered Holy Rosary High School in the ninth grade. At the end of grade nine, at the age of 13, Josephine entered the IHM Congregation. When time for profession came, she could not canonically make a final profession since she would be underage. So, she made a first profession for three years and then one for one year.

Her IHM Years

At profession, Josephine took the name of Sister Mary Kevin. As was the custom, she was sent out as a novice to teach in the Monroe schools. She was involved in the famous bus accident that occurred when the novices were being transported to the various schools to do their supervised teaching. No life-threatening injuries resulted to the novices, but Sister Mary Kevin did suffer from flying glass that affected one of her tear ducts and the result of this injury bothered her all her remaining days.

Her mission career began in St. Thomas, Ann Arbor, where she spent six very happy years as a grade schoolteacher as she attested in an oral history taken by Sister Joan Glisky. The next eleven years as a grade schoolteacher took place at St. Mary Academy, Monroe. For the next 20 years she taught secondary school at St. Felicitas, Chicago, St. Philip, Battle Creek, St. John, Jackson, St. Mary of Redford, followed by St. Thomas, Ann Arbor, Holy Redeemer, Detroit, and St. Mary, Wayne.

She admitted to Sister Joan Glisky, that it was hard to accept her next assignment to Texas, because it meant leaving her family behind. She was one of five IHM's to be sent to Austin, Texas to open Maryhill College, a coordinate college for women on the St. Edward's University campus. At the invitation of Bro. Raymond Fleck, CSC, the IHM's were recruited to develop the new college. While she remarked in her oral history, she enjoyed teaching young people, it was here that she felt her full challenge as an educator. As she said, when I taught grade school, I knew everything I needed to teach. At the university, I had to "learn new things" in order to teach. She loved the challenge. During her graduate studies at St. Louis University, she had been well prepared for her teaching assignment at Maryhill College.

In the first years of Maryhill College, the five original members had to wear many hats. For Sister Mary Kevin, this meant serving as Director of Admissions, Recruitment of new students, designing the teacher certification program, chairing or serving on numerous committees, teaching World Civilizations, placing and supervising student teachers. She was also sent out on recruiting trips throughout Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. All these tasks were accomplished with consummate perfection. One challenge on which she thrived was the designing of a course in Russian History, a course to which students flocked when it was offered. She joined a colleague to bring a group of students on a tour of Russia, a highlight in her life. One could never quite repeat the words she used to describe her experiences on that trip especially the cramped positions they had to keep on the Russian aircraft that carried them overseas.

Many changes took place in IHM life during her years in Texas. With the resignation of Bro. Raymond Fleck, CSC, President of St. Edward's and the hiring of a layman, Edgar Roy, as president, Maryhill College was dissolved and Sister Ann Virginia's position as Director of Maryhill was abolished. Numerous changes took place at the University, which then became co-ed. Also, changes in the IHM Congregation were occurring: change of habit, not an easy change for her; change of residence several times within a short period; change of government structures eventually assigning the Texas local community to the Southwest Province; living in a house designated to experiment without having a superior. Community living had its challenges. For a person of independent nature, though completely obedient, Sister Mary Kevin found it very hard to spend money. I was responsible for the "kitty" and each week when I tried to reconcile the finances, everything balanced, but I could never find out who had spent fifty cents for toothpaste or ten cents for a postage stamp. Eventually I realized that she simply could not let others know that she had spent money.

It was especially difficult for her to have to depend on others to drive her where she wanted to go. For many years she trudged up and down hill to a nearby high school to supervise the student teachers. It was particularly painful for her to have to ask a student teacher to drive her to a more distant school so she could supervise him or her. She had never learned to drive.

During this period her love of animals came to the fore. The campus was alive with feral cats. One time she had tamed a mother cat by providing food to the ravenous mother-to-be. When we had to call the SPCA to pick her up, she pleaded with the attendant to be sure that the mother was allowed to deliver her kittens. One day, in our half-basement she discovered a week-old Siamese kitten. She provided a box and a towel to make it comfortable and fed it with an eyedropper. She noted that the kitten had trouble opening one eye, so she used eye drops for it. A few days later she went to see her kitten and found that it had been killed by a raccoon or a possum. She was inconsolable for several days.

In our early days at St. Edward's one of the Holy Cross brothers, Bro. Mark Rufe, took a fancy to her and would like to tease her. She pretended to ignore him, but we knew she really relished the attention. One evening during a Holy Cross celebration, to which the Sisters were invited, Bro. Mark, who had partaken freely of the libations provided, rose from his chair, grabbed the back of Sister Mary Kevin's chair and whirled her around the dining room floor. A look of shock appeared on her face, but there was no escape. From time to time we would tease her about the episode, but she would always shrug it off.

To this day, her former students still ask about her. They respected her scholarship, even if they griped about her strict requirements. She had a ready wit with which to respond to their questions and remarks when the occasion called for it. They enjoyed this and recall with affection this tiny scholar with the keen wit. She had a fantastic memory. Those of us who are familiar with her wit would not find it difficult to imagine the words she used when a student turned in a term paper which she immediately recognized as taken word for word from an article in Newsweek.

In 1979, at the end of the University year, Sister Mary Kevin requested a year of renewal and was assigned to hospitality House in Detroit where she spent three years. In one sense this was a fulfillment of a dream. Over the years her great love of prayer was a constant theme in her com-

mitment forms. From 1984 she spent her years in service to Marygrove. Here she treasured the opportunity to be of service in an educational enterprise that would improve the lives of blacks through education. In her words, it was only through education that the black community could improve their lot in life. Here at Marygrove her love for animals reappeared. She felt sorry for the squirrels in winter looking for the nuts they had hidden but could not find, so she fed them. Her companions protested that she was only feeding the rodents, but she did not mind, she kept right on.

In 1999, she retired to the Motherhouse to be of service to her sister, Sister Edith, formerly known as Sister Mary Killian, who was declining in health. She treasured the special opportunities to rise very early and go to the chapel where all was quiet, and she could be in the presence of the Lord for several hours before the beginning of the Liturgy.

And so, we end our reflections recalling the themes that characterized her life: impeccable scholarship, generous service and constant prayer.

Marie André Walsh
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