

Remembering Rita McFarland, IHM

April 19, 1926 - Aug. 26, 2009

“Existence is a journey toward the sacred -- the divine source and center. Journeys involve moves both forward and backward, turns in direction, and the need for guides on the way. *Journeys hold constant surprises* that remind us the way and the outcome is uncertain.” Rita’s words from her IHM Book of Life certainly tell us that “*the* biggest surprise of her life” was simply a part of her total life’s journey.

If a retreat is about touching the divine source and center, then both Rita and Marge individually touched into that great mystery of God on Wednesday, Aug. 26, at 9 a.m. in Indianapolis, Ind.

Rita’s life journey was always about mystery; the mysteries of God’s love, the curious uniqueness of water, especially the ocean, the questions of peace, justice and reconciliation and the unexpected surprises she found in people.

Rita’s quest for God began April 19, 1926, in Akron, Ohio. She was the second child born to Peter and Lucy (Gregory) McFarland. Marjorie is 14 months older than Rita: two brothers, James born in 1927, and Robert born in 1929, completed the McFarland family. Robert died when he was 5 years old from diphtheria.

Her beloved brother Jim, who married Kathleen Ranagan, carried on the McFarland name with their four children: Rita, Dennis, Martin and Michael, and 13 grandchildren. Their brother Jim died of cancer in 2001.

Peter Joseph McFarland, Rita’s father, a veteran of WWI, worked most of his life at the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company in Akron. Her mother, Lucy, was a teacher who returned to teaching after her children were raised. Rita always felt blessed to have such wonderful parents and a happy home where the "wearing of the green" and other festive occasions were celebrated. Because love was nourished in her home, she felt so privileged to return that gift by caring for her parents. She especially was honored to live with her mother during her final illness.

I think all of us would agree that Rita was human face of God’s Love -- nurtured first by her family and then by her life experiences. Rita endeared herself to every person she met with that cheerful smile, the bubbly personality, the willingness to accommodate, the quick laughter and most of all her self-deprecating humor. As a gregarious person, she searched out her friends to go to the beach, play cards, talk politics, discuss community issues, or enjoy a refreshing drink. Her classmates and her Mission Unit especially knew her heart and loved her refreshingly simple honesty. In Rita there was no guile.

Those of us who knew her father, Pete, with his Irish wit and outgoing personality, remarked that Rita was certainly a "chip off the ole block." Marge confirmed that statement the other day when she told me her mother once exclaimed that “as long as Rita lives, your father, too, will live on.” And indeed, they now all live on together.

At St. Mary School, Rita completed her elementary and high school years. It was during her eighth grade that her first deep friendship happened. Eileen Semonin, a transfer student, entered Rita's already overflowing classroom. The sister in charge asked Rita to share her seat with this newcomer. Rita made a huge, "Oh no, why me," sigh and reluctantly scooted over. What began as an unwelcome surprise developed into a precious and special friendship between Eileen and Rita that provided so many mutual adventures over their long lifespan.

Eileen can entertain us for hours causing us to hold our sides with laughter as she spins story after story of Rita and herself. Oh I can't resist. Just one... As you know Rita was a water bug. If there was water Rita was ready with suit and towel. She loved the ocean, Lake Erie, Sterling State Park, Crawfton or even the little pool at Norman Towers. While in Florida, I always wondered if it was ministry that called her there or the lure of the ocean. She always said, "Why not both?" Anyhow, Eileen and Rita were on the beach at the ocean when Rita spotted a broken piece of glass. Without hesitation she stomped on it with her bare foot -- not sure why -- but of course, she cut her foot and it bled quite noticeably. (Rita cannot stand the site of blood. In the Novitiate she went to give blood and fainted. She came back with a huge bottle of vitamin pills.) Now Eileen, in a flurry, raced to her car to go get help or a bandage or whatever. After securing what she needed she ran breathlessly back to Rita who is now sitting contentedly on the beach surrounded by a bevy of rescuers. One of the onlookers simply had told her, "Go and bathe your foot in the ocean saltwater and that will stop the bleeding." Now a very sheepish Eileen, the consummate nurse, shamefaced berated herself for her un-nurse-like response and quietly sat down with her friend on the sand. More Eileen stories are just for the asking.

After high school graduation in 1944, Rita attended Marygrove College for two years. This is when I met Rita for the first time. Our friendship began on the basketball court. She played intramural basketball at Marygrove and shared with Sister Frances at St. Mary's her love of the game. So Rita was asked to be the girls' basketball coach. We girls, giddy with excitement at having a new coach, watched with horror as this elegant woman, fur-coat attired and embellished with high heels, sashayed onto the gym floor. Rita spotted me because I looked like I knew what I was doing and asked me to 'warm up the girls.' We ran through our routines while Rita and Sister Frances talked on the side lines. It was time to leave and, not wishing Rita to leave alone, I invited her to go with us to Wolfs, the local hangout, for a Coke. She very sheepishly said, "I don't have any money", she always insisted that she had a hole in the pocket of her 'fur' coat. I loaned her the nickel and subsequently told her father the story. Immediately he wanted to repay the nickel for the Coke. But I told him, "No, I wanted to have something to hang over her head all her life." So I guess Reet, all debts are now paid. By the way, Sister Frances called Rita the next day and said she had found a coach for us and thanks anyway.

When her brother Jim returned from the service, in a new turn in her life, Rita joined her sister Marge in Monroe on June 30, 1947. At her reception Jan. 2, 1948, she was given the name Lucita, a derivative of her mother's name. As a second-year novice, Rita began her teaching career in the third grade at St. Joseph School in Monroe.

In 1950 after first vows, Sister Lucita was missioned to St. Felicitas in Chicago for five years and then was sent to St. Mary, Monroe, as directing teacher for the next seven years. She began her

high school teaching at Our Lady Star of the Sea in Grosse Pointe Woods, delighting her students with her knowledge of history and world events.

After a few years at St. Mary School Lorain, Rita returned to her alma mater to teach social studies. During this time, St. Mary merged with St. Vincent High School and Rita taught at the newly formed school until 1975.

Rita received a master's degree at Marquette University in Milwaukee. Additional post-graduate studies took her to Eastern Michigan; American University in Washington D.C.; Boulder University in Colorado and Wellesley College in Ohio. Of this time in her life, Rita says, "I grew in confidence and the ability to take charge of my own life by making choices on classes, travel, housing and lifestyle."

Her social studies classroom experience, her on-going collegiate studies and our IHM Constitutions and Directions led Rita into a strong justice advocacy for the poor and downtrodden. In her thirst for information about the global human condition, Rita became a political aficionado and a passionate history buff. Rita was quick to inform us of the latest legislation that would benefit the poor or she would berate Congress for their lack of sensitivity on an issue she held sacred.

Between Rita and Marge, *Time*, *America* and *Newsweek* were constantly shuffled back and forth. Marge told me that Rita attacked an article with the precision of an academic surgeon underlining and starring significant sections. Marge finally decided to read only Rita's underlined parts easily capturing the essence of the author's essay with quick dispatch.

Rita and Marge had a unique sisterly relationship. As Marge would say, "When Rita inhaled, I exhaled." Rita, the consummate peacemaker, protected this relationship with familial zeal. Marge, unlike Rita, was not a card buff. However, Rita insisted Marge partake of our game sessions and lovingly teased Marge into enjoying our playing time together. Marge is not yet a "card shark" but is now a willing participant. Thanks to the 4th floor gamers for many fun evenings of Rummikub, Dominos and Skip Bo. More cards to come, Marge.

As a history teacher, Rita had several occasions to take students to Washington, D.C. It was here she met one of her political idols, Sen. Edward Kennedy. She reveled in attending Senate sessions, special hearings and getting into the offices of her favorite Congressmen. Sen. Kennedy met her one day outside his office and gave her a big hug and said, "Oh it is so good to see you again." Now, of course, recent news confirms that the Senator *did remember faces and people*. And Rita's story is vindicated. How coincidental that Rita and the Senator died on the same day. Imagine! A McFarland, a Kennedy and as we heard Thursday -- a Sweeney -- are now swapping some great political stories and perhaps some Irish blarney to boot.

It was after her year of renewal, Apostolic Spirituality for the Global Community at Mt. St. Joseph College in Cincinnati, and after earning a master's in religious studies at Orchard Lake, that Rita discerned a different ministry and life change, again a new turn in her journey. She alternately worked with adults as pastoral minister and as a religious ed coordinator both in Indialantic and St. Petersburg, Fla. In addition, she began and served as moderator for a support

group of widowed, separated and divorced persons; was an active member of the parish Peace and Justice Commission and ministered to the sick in the hospital each week.

This latter experience carried over into her retirement years for Rita faithfully visited the sisters in our health care center. With the same passion she exhibited for teaching and political affairs, she lovingly brought her energy with her cheerful and sunshine personality to those sometimes left out of the mainstream by disability or chronic illness.

Her 15 years at Holy Name Parish introduced her to inter-community living, where besides living with another IHM, Sister Shirley Hinks, Rita fashioned long-term relationships with Janet Stankowski and Diane McMeekin, both Adrian Dominicans, and Pat Dempsey, a Sister of Charity of Cincinnati. Rita treasured these special "surprises" and maintained regular communication with each. Thank you, Janet, for being with us to celebrate Rita's life.

Marge moved to St. Petersburg, in 1990 where she ministered at Holy Cross Parish. Rita then joined Marge. This life turn allowed the two sisters to live and minister together for the first time since leaving home. During her eight years at Holy Cross, Rita served as pastoral associate where she specialized in ministry to the sick. In this role she recruited and trained volunteer lay ministers of the sick and continued her ministry visiting the sick in their homes, hospital and nursing homes.

In 2002, on the 19th of June, Rita and Marge again freely entered a new phase: they headed north and moved to Norman Towers in Monroe, prior to their return move to the IHM Motherhouse in 2008. They had now made the round-trip journey with its many twists turns and with the wonderful surprises now all wrapped in memory.

Judy Smith, our Health Care Administrator, would say at the arrival of the McFarland women, "These women are two models of healthy seniors who bring new life to our IHM Motherhouse."

Everyone in this room has your own private stories of Rita's touch on your lives. In a moment Rita, her niece and namesake, will share the family's reflections of their aunt.

But I think we all can agree that Rita loved life, loved the God of that life, loved people, especially her family, loved the Earth and water, loved all her ministries, especially advocacy for sick and the left-outs, and she certainly loved history and politics.

We shall miss that quick Irish smile, the catchy laugh and the lighthearted competitiveness of her game-playing gatherings. But I think the hallmark of her life was the humble and honest recognition of the gifts of others. She made us all bigger as she became less. And that is the way Rita died, at peace with herself, with her God and with the world.

Respectfully submitted
Joyce A. Durosko, IHM
Aug. 30, 2009

Rita Fishel, Rita McFarland's niece and namesake, added this after the Remembering given by Joyce Durosko.

Hi friends, this is what I wrote about Aunt Rita. It's a quick, but thoughtful, reflection on my aunt. I tried to keep this "general family" and I tried to keep it brief.

AUNT RITA. Hear her name and the first thing that comes to mind is joy. Her smile and her willingness to join in ANYTHING at ANY TIME ~ Whether the event was fun-filled ~ horseback riding, boating, learning to shoot a shot gun ("was that a REAL gun?") or work-filled ~ cleaning the Thanksgiving mess in the kitchen or stripping beds and cleaning bathrooms at the end of a visit, Rita was always completely and joyfully engaged in what was going on. She was the first to respond to the word "party" and the last to head to bed. She was packed for any vacation opportunity at a moment's notice. She loved a bargain, and loved to shop (Beall's Outlet will never be the same.) Aunt Rita wrung every drop of joy out of every day of her life.

From our earliest memories, she was a role model. Her gentle compassion, tender and sentimental relationships, treasured friends and "joi de vive" drew us to her like a magnet. She could comfort us with heartfelt compassion as she did with the passing of her beloved brother, our dad, and she could laugh hard and long at herself when the opportunities arose ~ such as whenever she attempted to use her camera. When Rita was at the party, you know you'd be roped into playing a game.....often it was Skip Bo. She was our action gal. She was a doer, not a talker. Her full and completed life is the testimony to her beliefs. She appreciated and used up all the gifts her Creator gave her.

So, Aunt Rita, to quote you, I ask...."Could we just have had 10 more minutes?"