

Remembrance of Sister Helen Martin

Given by Sister Barbara Harrington

When Helen asked me to write this reflection, I asked her what she would like to include. She answered that the one thing she felt most important was a saying her mother often repeated, one that Helen felt was very directive in her own life. It's an old saying that many of us are familiar with: "Good, better, best, never let it rest, 'til your good is better and your better, best!" We can see here a clear image of Helen's personal striving: "Good, better, best, never let it rest, 'til your good is better and your better, best!"

I also asked Helen if she could describe the focus of her vocation, her calling. She answered quickly and said she desired "To be a presence to strengthen others." An encouraging presence.

As a friend, I often experienced Helen's encouragement. I also witnessed her earnest desire to be a better person, especially to grow spiritually. In my reflection and tribute to Helen, I hope you will find strong evidence of these, her key values in the quiet, steady and prayerful ways Helen lived and ministered.

Helen was born to Charles and Anna Hoagland Martin on March 5th, 1930 in Ogdensburg, N.Y. It seems her mother's "good, better, best" philosophy was put to the test and lived out in reality since mother had sole responsibility for the care, nurture and financial support of Helen and her four siblings, Charles, Anna, Pauline and Rita, all who are now deceased.

Helen attended St. Mary's grammar and high school in Ogdensburg. She was very active in the parish, attending daily Mass, contributing her lovely voice in glee club, and along with Kathleen Sholette and Kath Hannon, she was also active in sodality and the Legion of Mary. Kathleen Hannon told me that she and Helen frequently helped the organist at church by singing Gregorian Chant for funerals and memorials. Kathleen also described how much they enjoyed alternating breakfast at one another's homes after the funerals.

Helen entered the Grey Nuns when she was 18, earned her bachelor degree from D'Youville College in 1954 and made her final profession as a Grey Nun in 1955. Her first ministries were as teacher until 1972, when she obtained a Masters in Library Science from Villanova. And began her long ministry as a librarian at Wadhams Hall, the Seminary College in Ogdensburg. As assistant librarian under Father Sturtz, Helen was able to guide many seminarians in their academic research and term papers. She also participated in their regular reflections on scripture. Through her presence and helpfulness, and later as a certified spiritual director, she encouraged and facilitated their spiritual formation. It's of interest that among the seminarians at Wadhams during Helen's ministry were Bishop Terry LaValley, Bishop of Ogdensburg and Bishop Douglas Lucia, Bishop of Syracuse.

After her long tenure at Wadhams, Helen took a librarian position at Canton Free Library, where her special organizational skills were needed and appreciated.

IN 1997, Helen moved to our Motherhouse in Yardley to serve as a Grey Nun presence at our Personal Care Center, D'Youville Manor. There, she developed prayer and retreat offerings for residents and staff. Within five years, Helen had retired. She became a volunteer at the Manor and later, she became a resident there herself.

Helen loved her nieces and nephews, their children and grandchildren. Photos of the latter held special place on the door of her apartment at Lafayette. When Helen was in Personal Care, her niece's visits and their shopping trips were special events as were her trips back to Ogdensburg to see her Sister Rita and Rita's family. Helen spent time at the family camp on the St. Lawrence River during those last few visits. She said the River offered many memories of her special times of prayer and reflection there.

Helen had a long life, capped by a 90th birthday celebration that delighted her: Lots of attention, ice cream and many remembrances. Another cause for celebration was the day before her death, when Helen seemed to resurrect from her previous grave condition and became herself again, speaking, eating and relating to her caregivers.

I am honored to offer this reflection today. Helen was a good friend. Her spirituality inspired me. Apparently, it encouraged others as well. I heard her encouraging all of us in her choice of the gospel Beatitudes in today's liturgy. I imagine Helen as the one saying again and again, "Blessed are you", blessed are each one of you. From John in the second reading, I hear her urging each of us, "See what great love the Father has lavished on us".

Thank you, Helen. You strived to move from good to better and now, truly you have reached the "best". Thank you too, for a presence that lifted us.

Now, may you rest in great peace!