

Obituary

Sister Kathleen De Smedt, IHM, 87, died Wednesday, June 12, in the McGivney Way Memory Care unit at the IHM Senior Living Community. She resided at the IHM Motherhouse since 2010.



Sister Kay, as she was known, was born Sept. 2, 1931 in Detroit, Michigan. Her father, Omer De Smedt, was born in Belgium and her mother, Margaret O'Boyle, was born in Ireland. They married in Detroit. Kathleen attended St. Mathew, Detroit, and St. Mary Academy, Monroe, graduating in 1949. That summer, she entered the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary of Monroe and received the religious name, Sister Joseph Rita, in honor of her parents.

Sister Kay earned a bachelor's from Marygrove College and master's degree in education from Wayne State University, Detroit. Most of her teaching ministry was in the early grades of elementary school and included Annunciation, Holy Trinity, St. Catherine and St. Patrick, Detroit. She was a successful principal at Annunciation and St. Matthew School, Detroit; Sacred Heart, Roseville; and for many years in administration of St. Peter Grade School, Harper Woods. At Bishop Gallagher High School, Harper Woods, Sister Kay served as guidance counselor, in administration and as assistant principal.

She lived in Sterling Heights and St. Clair Shores for many years during active ministry, including parish ministry at Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Roseville. While retired and living in St. Clair Shores, she volunteered at area Catholic schools. Moving to the Motherhouse in 2010, Sister Kay reconnected with many friends and enjoyed volunteering among the Motherhouse community and was especially active in supporting the IHM Development Office, Royal Blue Classic and IHM Raffle.

Remembering

We come today to reflect on the life of Sister Kathleen De Smedt, to recall hallmarks of her years among us. Next year, she would be celebrating 70 years spent as a Sister, Servant of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

Like most of the members of our profession class she came at age 18, fresh from high school. In her case, it was a clear choice between accepting an engagement ring at graduation or meeting with Mother Teresa McGivney for acceptance in the community. To Kathleen, the call was clear: she would be an IHM.

She was born in the month that traditionally marks the beginning of the school year, born on Sept. 2, 1931. Perhaps her September birth was a sign of her commitment to formal education as an IHM. Her parents had a home a block and a half away from St. Matthew Parish where she was baptized.

Margaret Rita O'Boyle, her mother, had emigrated from Ireland and her father, Omer De Smedt, from Belgium. They raised a family of four children – elder brother James, and sisters Barbara and Mary Margaret. Today, Barbara and Kay's nieces and nephews, along with other relatives and friends, have come to mourn and to recall happier days as Kathleen joins James and Margaret Mary in eternity.

In the '60s, when we had opportunity to return to our baptismal names, we easily moved to calling Sister Joseph Rita "Kay" instead of Kathleen. Kay described her growing up as a normal happy childhood. Her mother, Kay noted, "was very exact about getting a place near schools, Catholic schools." Growing up in the shadow of St. Matthew Parish, it was understandable that all four children attended St. Matthew School.

Her father worked at Briggs Manufacturing Plant and her mother knitted dresses in collaboration with a milliner who designed distinctive hats for a Detroit department store. Kay enjoyed recalling that once, she helped deliver a dress her mother made to accompany a fancy hat to Hank Greenberg for his mother. Hank Greenberg was a well-known baseball star at the time and lived nearby in Grosse Pointe.

Kay also recalls that in the eighth grade, Sister Marie Ignace described St. Mary's Academy (SMA) as an ideal high school. What attracted Kay was the idea of having her own room in a dorm. She persuaded her parents to enroll her. This marked the beginning of her four years at SMA. It also drew her two younger sisters to SMA when it was their turn.

Constant contacts in and out of the classroom, day and night, led Kay to discover how much she loved the sisters. "I always admired the Sisters and I really felt like they were mothers to us in many ways . . . when your parents came, they came and talked to them and were just beautiful with them." (Remarks from Kay's oral history, July 13, 2010, p. 8)

After the senior retreat, Kay made an appointment with the Senior Director, Sister Thomas Aquinas, to announce, "I want to join your community." And Sister Thomas Aquinas said, "I've been waiting for you to come and say that." (Ibid., p. 8)

In the fall of 1949, Kay arrived in Monroe with about 50 other entrants. It was a time of many changes in the community. She noted, "We were the first ones to stay Home to make four years of college." (Ibid., p. 9)

I do recall that myself. Because I had a year of college before entering, I went out on mission the day after first profession. I recall my return for summer vacation and met Kay on the first day. She was full of enthusiasm. I was exhausted from packing up and helping close down the convent. I remember Kay saying, "Did you read Pius Parsch this morning on the day's liturgy? Wasn't that beautiful?" I had to admit that I hadn't read Pius Parsch or much of anything for some days in the rush of closing down at St. Raymond and I wondered about myself and my piety in the presence of my fervent classmates.

Soon Kay was tasting life on mission. In her first five missions, she drew experience teaching many children in the primary grades. She began teaching grades one and two at St. Patrick School in Detroit. The following year she moved to St. Catherine. Then a move to Emmett's Our Lady of Mt. Carmel in 1955 was followed by five years with grades one and two in Wayne, and in 1962 with grade one at Trinity School. By 1967, she was a seasoned elementary teacher. One day, Sister Alphonsine, the regional superior, came to chat with her and said, "I'm going to change you from here. I want you to be a principal. . . . And you'll be superior, too."

Kay really loved Holy Trinity. She was happy serving the poor children and their families – even helping one mother deliver her baby, but in 1967, she went to Annunciation in Detroit, followed by Sacred Heart Parish, Roseville, and began her years as an administrator. In 1974, she moved to Bishop Gallagher High

School as a guidance counselor and assistant principal. She went with three of her friends and stayed there until 1981, assisting ninth graders transitioning into high school. She had another year in secondary school leadership at Marian High School in Bloomfield Hills, before moving into a very satisfying leadership at St. Peter the Apostle's School, Harper Woods, as guidance counselor and principal.

She described her teachers as excellent teachers of children from pre-school through grade eight. Terry Jankowski was the music director at St. Peter for the same 10 years that Kay was principal. He told me she was the first IHM he told when he was employed at the Motherhouse in Monroe. She welcomed him warmly and thought he would do a good job.

But something special lay ahead for Kay. A call from Father Duane Novelly lured her back to the school of her childhood. St. Matthew was floundering with reduced enrollment and inadequate funds. She could not refuse the opportunity to assist this school so much a part of her affection and so formative of her very person.

Again, it was not done alone. Her long-time friends rallied, too. The school had become a catch-all for an earlier school closing. Neglected classrooms carried not only discarded furniture of St. Matthew, but of St. Brendan as well. How hard they labored to clean up the school, even while they worked to develop an esprit de corps in the St. Matthew student body and among the teachers and parents. It was an exhausting enterprise. Toward the end, Father John Quinn came from the school office to see what was being accomplished. She met him standing outside her office shaking his head.

As she recounts it, "I said, 'What's the matter?'"

Father Quinn responded, "I can't believe what you've done to this school. In the years I've come I hated to come to this school because it was so filthy and so messed up. ... Kay, I've walked around the whole place already ... I can't believe what has been done in here."

His admiration was great. And yet, with all that work, St. Matthew had to close. The problems were financial. And the enrollment did not grow. No one came to

take her place and stay for the long haul. And Kay could not stay. It was time for her to retire. These were difficult times for Catholic schools across the country. Pauline Boucher, who taught at St. Matthew when Kay was there, recognized that Kay was a strong disciplinarian. She defended her saying that she was strict indeed, but she was always very kind to her teachers and the children.

Closing St. Matthew was hard on Kay, but she smiled in acknowledging that the school in her care and with the help of many friends was attractive and in good order when she withdrew. By that time, the Archdiocese had honored her for her many years as principal and administrator.

Principals from the Archdiocese recognized her skills and her dedication. Kathy Walker and Peter Ferguson, also principals and part of her local group of principals, emailed last week and highlighted happy memories of Kay and her contribution to education.

Like Pauline Boucher, they highlighted her characteristic hospitality. They recounted travels they took, not only to the family cottage near Pinckney, but a cruise up the St. Lawrence and car trips through Amish country and trips to northern Michigan. Many of us were guests or went to cluster meetings in Kay's apartment. Pauline remarked that Kay loved to barbeque, and I recall one time she served crème de menthe she herself had made. She was a star at pinochle and loved to watch the Notre Dame games.

Kay loved her family and had fun with her nieces and nephews. She often baked pies for family gatherings with her sister Barb's kids. For her, the Christmas season was a time for fun and parties. Each year, she decorated the house with an elaborate Christmas village. She loved to entertain. In that same spirit, her sister Barbara would come to Monroe to visit with her eight children. She would bring a picnic lunch for Kay and the family and they had fun on the Motherhouse campus.

Kay was an active supporter of the Royal Blue Classic. I am told that she and her sister would bring a deck of cards, a small table and a couple chairs to the golf outing. That way they would watch the golfers and spend time with one another. Before she retired to the Motherhouse, she came regularly with friends to work in the Development Office addressing mail.

Kay was a neatnik – in her apartment, in school and in her room in McGivney Way. This search for orderliness in her physical surroundings was probably what led her as an administrator to seek orderly classrooms, efficient school schedules, constructive learning patterns, clear policies and procedures. People tell how she would first wash her hair before she went to her weekly haircare appointment. Then she would have it washed again in haircare. She attended to her personal appearance and sought the same from the teachers and children in school.

Many of Kay's best friends preceded her entering eternal life. Perhaps now she has connected with her mother, father, sister Margaret Mary and brother James. We hope too, that other dear ones greet her such as Sisters Thomas Aquinas, Alphonsine, Nancy Bartolo, Mary Ann Szmania, Sue Gourley and a host of others. These past few months she has expressed a constant loneliness. Building relationships became, over the years, a special value for Kay. May she be embraced by the heavenly community where Christ has gone to prepare a place for us.

Thank you, Kay, for your long and lively insertion into and shaping of many of our earthly ties. We are confident you will find a vast community of life and love in paradise.

Written and delivered by Joan Glisky, IHM
June 18, 2019