

Obituary



Sister Julie Slowik, IHM, 76, died Thursday, March 30, in the IHM Health Care Center, Monroe, Michigan.

Stanley and Helen (Rachubka) Slowik welcomed the birth of their first child, Julia Ann, on July 30, 1940, in Pontiac, Mich. A brother and two sisters would complete the family within a few years. Julie, as she was known, attended St. Hugo of the Hills (Bloomfield Hills) and graduated from St. Frederick High School in Pontiac. Julie entered the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Monroe in 1958 and received the religious name Sister Marie Benedict.

After earning a bachelor's degree from Marygrove College, Detroit, Sister Julie spent several years teaching at St. Gregory, Detroit and Ss. Peter and Paul, Ionia, Mich. She later earned a Master of Arts degree from Catholic University of America. This was a formative achievement to begin her ministry in formal religious education.

Her desire to be of service and community for others led her to a variety of ministries, such as community organizer and religious education director at St. John Parish in Roswell, N.M.; parish pastoral ministry with the poor in the Diocese of Juarez, Mexico; and many years at St. Anne Parish, Detroit, as a pastoral assistant. Much of Sister Julie's ministries focused on poverty, justice issues, integrating the Gospel into daily life and growing faith-filled relationships in many urban and Hispanic communities.

In 2015, illness curtailed her work in Mexico and led to her return to the Motherhouse. Sister Julie enjoyed, again, living and sharing in community with the IHM Sisters. She volunteered within the Motherhouse and was able to volunteer at Annunciation House, a center serving the migrant, homeless and economically vulnerable people of the borders in El Paso, Texas.

Remembering

Today, it is our privilege to take this opportunity to remember and celebrate the many gifts Julie was given and developed over 50 years of ministry in Michigan, Illinois, New Mexico and Juarez, Mexico.

Julia Ann Slowik, born July 30, 1940, was the first child of Stanley Slowik and Helen (Rachubka) Slowik who married in 1935 at St. Andrew Church in Detroit. Stanley, a pharmacist and dentist, was born in the mining area of eastern Pennsylvania. After the death of his parents, he came to Detroit and lived with various brothers and later at St.

Joseph Orphanage. Helen, born in Connecticut, moved to Chicago with her immigrant parents and then to Detroit where they found factory work. Although Stanley and Helen knew each other through their close Polish community, romance blossomed when they discovered their common love of Dickens on a trolley car. Brother Joe was next to join the family when Julie was two, followed by Mary in 1947 and Cathy in 1951.

The family home was on Squirrel Road in Auburn Heights. Their nine acres of property included 3 acres of orchard. Family life included weekly Mass and family singing (having attended Trapp Family Sing Camp in Vermont) and daily rosary and piano practice. There were plenty of activities for Julie at home including helping her mother with the younger girls and working in the orchard. Julie attended St. Hugo Grade School and St. Fredrick High School in Pontiac. In high school she sang in the choral and played basketball (good preparation for her future formation classmates) as well as being active in Sodality. While no mention was found in her papers of the specifics of her vocation, she does refer to the kindness and support of several IHM teachers.

Love of nature, especially noting her mother's example of gardening and bird interpretation, and love of music were themes throughout Julie's life, along with a passion for social action.

Julie's formation began with her entrance in 1958. Upon graduation from Marygrove, Monroe campus she began teaching at St. Gregory in Detroit, then Ss. Peter & Paul in Ionia. She made final vows in 1966. In 1968, she returned to Monroe assisting in the Novitiate and as Motherhouse Liturgist. In 1969, she was appointed coordinator of the IHM formation house in Washington, D.C., and received her master's degree in religious education from catholic University in 1971.

Throughout her life she was driven to understand herself and her experiences so that she might be an effective minister. Records from countless workshops and programs (for example the Mexican American Cultural Center in San Antonio, Texas or a month of renewal at Maryknoll) show her intense desire to be of service. "Julie was whole-hearted, totally given to whatever she did. She was deep, pondering life and how to be a witness to those with whom she ministered," Sister Roberta Richmond.

Much of the information about Julie's ministry comes from Mary Jo Maher's book, *A Compelling Vision*. She writes that in 1973 Julie, who was Chairperson of the Theology Department at IHM Westchester, learned from Sister Margaret Brennan that United States Hispanic bishops predicted that by 2000 nearly 50 percent of U.S. Catholics

would be Hispanic. The next year, Julie was employed by the Diocese of Santa Fe, New Mexico.

“When Julie was in Roswell, N.M., she was a community organizer. All her life Julie had great passion for local empowerment and loved getting the locals fired up to improve their lot,” said Sister Joyce Duroske.

The people in her parishes helped Julie get a place on the slate for the Roswell school board, but she wasn’t elected. She also worked with people in Hondo Valley over land and water rights. She continued working with Spanish-speaking communities in Dexter and Roswell, N.M., in the Diocese of Las Cruces but became determined that IHMs should have a presence in Mexico so when the Franciscan priests she had worked with in Roswell decided to staff a parish in Juarez, Mexico, her path became clear.

“Julie was a wonderful missionary and really bonded with the people. She lived very simply and needed very little. She was sustained by her interaction with the people and brought joy to the poorest of the poor. She was full of enthusiasm for this mission. I visited Juarez several times and was always humbled by the work of our sisters and how they bonded with the poor, especially the women,” said Sister Joan Mumaw.

With the blessing of her provincial, Julie moved to Juarez in 1985 alone. Initially she lived with a family in her new parish, Jesucristo Sacerdote, and began pastoral ministry with the poor. This included: home visits, visits to the sick, religious services for the dead, counseling, finding food and clothing, forming catechists and leading adult bible groups, accompanying the people in their religious devotions.

Proud of her Polish heritage, Julie knew that she had to enter fully into this new culture (even if dancing on cobblestones became hard on her hips!). “Solidarity with the poor deepened my roots into the river of life...to take off the shoes of my own language, culture, customs, way of thinking and enter into the holy ground of a new people, changed my life.” She said in her, *Book of Life*.

By 1986, Julie was joined by Marcella Regan. Early on they learned the base communities’ process of “See, Judge, Act” and continued to develop these methods in the various groups they participated in, chiefly with women. “I had a gradual conversion as I saw this training enable people to make the decisions of the community.”

At one point, Sisters Julie and Marcella were living in a three-room house but two rooms had dirt floors so they chiefly used the front room, with low bookcases to give them privacy. The front door opened on the foot of Julie's bed and the sink was at the head of Marcella's bed; when groups gathered around their kitchen table, extra people sat on their beds.

Over the next 10 years, religious from various congregations spent time with the IHMs. Some came weeks, some came for months. In 1987, they provided a two-week cross-cultural immersion program where visitors saw projects in Juarez and spent 5 days with families in rural mountain villages. "Julie was instrumental in helping the people to build a small church on top of a hill. She was amazing in getting local folks, local politicians committed to this project and finding the money," said Sister Joyce Durosco. It went up one cinderblock at a time. Julie also joined the El Paso Symphony Chorus.

In 1989, Carmen Armenta-Lara moved in with Julie. Carmen became an IHM Associate in 1992. Maureen Kelly moved from Puerto Rico to assist in Carmen's formation. Carmen made final vows in 1999. In 1997, Julie traveled with two members of the Michigan Peace Team to the Mexican state of Chiapas, hiking into mountains, close to the Guatemalan border. They were there to find and support indigenous people in hiding because they were being attacked by their government over their protests against NAFTA and the loss of their livelihood. [Also on Christmas in 2002, she traveled with 11 members of the Peace Team (including Sister Elizabeth Walters) to the West Bank.]

Julie had met a sister from China on a retreat in Milwaukee and was invited to visit China. In 1998, she visited Hong Kong, Macau and the mainland. She raved about the beauty of the rural places. "There was a wall-hanging over Julie's bed, where she could see it. It expresses the journey we all make from the village below, through the highs and lows to the highest peak, to eternity. She bought it in China because she loved it," said Sister Robert Richmond.

Julie returned to Detroit to be close to her elderly mother. While serving as pastoral minister for the Spanish-speaking at Mary Mother of the Church Parish, and later at St. Anne, "Julie was also involved in advocating for Latino community of Southwest Detroit. She eagerly joined in their constant pursuit of justice and efforts to make their voices heard in the social and political arena of the city, always respecting the cultural heritage of the people," said Sister Dorothy Diederichs. She also participated in Carolyn McDade's chorus with women from the Great Lakes Basin.

Returning to Juarez in 2008, she continued ministry in a new parish and neighborhood, moving occasionally and finally living back in the "colonia" where she had worked in the '80s and '90s. She was known throughout the area and invited into many homes and countless events. She was horrified by the increase of violence, murders and corruption. She volunteered at the Human Rights Center and took training in practices for healing from traumatic stress. Julie continued her previous ministries including preparing homilies and providing services of the Word and Communion (She asked her friend Sister Rose Graham to make sure her stole was in her coffin.) Julie knew the importance of supporting youth against the culture of violence and drugs. She worked to build self-esteem with those preparing for confirmation, the "quinceaneras" and of course, a youth choir. Living with the poor in a violent situation Julie saw people who knew how precious life is and with them she wanted "to celebrate life in liturgy, in fiestas and in dance."

When she needed to retire to Monroe in 2015, she was anxious to participate in various projects: the Spanish Mass at St. Mary, jail ministry and the Motherhouse Elder Council. When her health prevented that, she was able to write an advocacy letter for the nurses on third floor!

IHMs have a saying "where one IHM serves, we all serve." Julie took our constitutional aspirations to heart:

"With Jesus, we share the joys and hopes, the griefs and anguish of all our sisters and brothers in the human family.

With Jesus, we share the cry of all God's people, especially of the poor and abandoned, and with the power of his Spirit, we respond to their cry."

-IHM Constitutions, Chapter 2, Article 10

Reflecting on your life, Julie, we too are on Holy Ground and we reverence the work of the Spirit within you.

Written and delivered by Anne Marie Murphy, IHM, April 4, 2017