

Remembering Carolyn (Alicia) Kerwin, IHM
June 17, 1928 – Nov. 30, 2020



On Carolyn's page in the Book of Life, she wrote; "Frequently, I don't know what's around the next the bend, but the Spirit leads." Her life is a rich illustration of this comment: from educator, to care giver, to computer tutor, to Assistant Manager at Matrix Theatre, to a member of the Peace Community.

Born in Detroit in June of 1928, Carolyn grew up in Mt. Clemens. She was 4 when her brother, Robert, died of scarlet fever at age 6. Her brother Hugh died in infancy. Her father, Lawrence, was a brick-layer. Her mother, Olive, worked as a matron at the Macomb County Jail. Rosie Naebers tells that when Carolyn ministered in Dexter, the sisters teased her about going to jail when she went to visit her mother. Carolyn always valued her extended family, especially her cousin, Mary. She loved spending time with them, especially at their cottage near Flint.

Carolyn attended St. Louis Grade School and graduated from St. Mary High School, both in Mt. Clemens. She began her college career at Marygrove College in Detroit, one year before entering the IHM congregation on July 2, 1947. From 1950 to 1954, Carolyn taught upper elementary grades at St. Mary, Marshall, and then at St. Mary, Wayne. In 1954, she moved to Ann Arbor where she began doctoral studies in mathematics at the University of Michigan. Because of the death of her professor, Carolyn never completed her thesis. At this time, she lived at St. Thomas convent, sharing the attic space with Pat Hogan and Mary Margaret Davis.

Carolyn was a brilliant woman who read everything she could, never ceasing to enjoy mathematics. Frequently, when she encountered a very difficult problem, she would call on a friend to assist her in solving it. One of these regular friends was Dorothy McDaniel. Joan Glisky shared that no matter what else was happening, they did not quit until they had the solution, often several hours later. In Carolyn's later years, she played Sudoku regularly. She was also gifted with mechanical talent and could fix most anything.

Carolyn taught one year at Holy Redeemer before becoming a faculty member of the Mathematics Department at Marygrove College, working under the direction of Sister Ignatia. In 1976, Carolyn became assistant professor and developed and taught courses for students who needed pre-college level work. She also served as chair of the department, where she was responsible for recruiting adjunct faculty members.

In 1978, a bend in the road occurred. Carolyn contracted a disease that sometimes happens to people over the age of 50. Her physician sent her directly to the hospital. There, members of her Mission Unit sat by her bed day and night for two to three weeks because she was so immobilized yet thrashing about, trying to get out of bed. Once discharged, she was confined to the St. Mary Health Care Center for one year. During her convalescence, Carolyn served as librarian and offered contributed services. In 1979, she returned to living in Detroit and began tutoring students in English at the University of Detroit. She took on 20 students and worked with them one pair at a time.

Another bend in the road happened in 1981. Carolyn began a new ministry as care-giver, accompanying an elderly woman while her daughter was at work. This required patience and kindness, which was a good fit for her and allowed Carolyn to rest when needed because of her health.

In 1983, another turn. Carolyn journeyed to Florida to tutor people on the computer. This enabled her to live near her mother, whose eyesight was failing. When Olive retired, she and Carolyn traveled the world via freighters, which offered reasonable passage rates. Both women enjoyed travel, seemingly a trait passed on to Carolyn by her mother.

The following is a story shared by Joan Glisky about a trip in Washington, D.C. Carolyn was interested in learning how early residents shaped the canal system along the Eastern coast. Carolyn had a coupon to rent a Volkswagen car for \$6 a day. She had never driven a manual transmission (stick shift), but she knew the principle of it, so off they went. Needless to say, the trip through the hilly streets of D.C. was bumpy as they jerked along and, obviously, annoying to other drivers until Carolyn got the hang of it. Some of her other travel companions were Sister Brigid Mullane, to Ireland, and members of the Peacemakers Group. In 1996, Carolyn returned to Detroit, bringing her mother, who was blind, with her. Olive finished her 100 years of life in our Health Care Center.

All her life, Carolyn had space in her heart for the disadvantaged. Realizing the need for increased kindness between people and groups in the world, she encouraged her students to appreciate the elderly and those less able. Her interest in the new science, cosmology and ecology offered Carolyn a new appreciation of God in the universe. Her service at this time included proofreading Sister Suzanne Fleming's contribution to the IHM "Claiming Our Roots" project.

In late 1990, Carolyn became involved with the Matrix Theatre project in Detroit. Matrix is a theater designed to promote the ministry of social justice. As a volunteer, she worked as office manager, bookkeeper, grant writer and clerical support. Carolyn enabled the other staff to reach out and cement a community of creativity, bringing in others and connecting with the IHM congregation. Shawn Nethercott, one of the managers, said Carolyn was a cornerstone in the success of the Matrix Theatre.

When Carolyn retired, she moved to the Motherhouse and continued her ministry as a contributing member of various peace groups: School of the Americas, Pax Christi, Women in Black and the Michigan Peace Team. Sister Alice Baker recalled shared times with Carolyn at Fort Benning, Ga. Always, Carolyn carried with her the latest *New York Times*, *America* or *National Catholic Reporter* to read and share at table conversations, carpools and overnight motel visits. From her vast travel experience, Carolyn would be the first one to volunteer if there needed to be an adjustment in travel arrangements.

In 2002, Carolyn traveled with the Michigan Peace Team for three weeks to Ramallah, Palestine. During the Team's training, she always had something of note to contribute to the understanding of the Israeli/Palestine struggle because she read so much. Carolyn was in her early 70s at this time but had no difficulty sleeping outside in an open tent watching for Israeli incursions. When the Israeli forces arrived in armored personnel carriers shooting lead bullets, Alice, Carolyn and a gentleman from Oregon stayed on the road for all to see, holding their passports and taking fake photographs.

Carolyn modeled preparedness and caring and in an uncanny way, she could supply companions with any need. Always a saver, if a needle and thread were needed, she would search deep in her goodie bag, giggle a bit and come up with the needed item.

Again in 2004, the Michigan Peace Team, with Carolyn in ranks, returned to Ramallah. Always independent of spirit, Carolyn handled checkpoints and care of her luggage in a very determined manner. It contained materials for her to set up an office and she didn't want anything to be missing. Upon her return to the United States, Carolyn was eager to share her experience and the Peace Team's learnings with others. Always the teacher, she contributed her skills to PowerPoint presentations and circulation of literature.

In summary, Carolyn was a free spirit; rich in curiosity, unusually intelligent, ever-willing to try something new or invite others to share in new ventures and compassionate to the poor.

Carolyn, the Spirit has led you home. We rejoice in your gifts to us and to the world. May you rest in God's loving embrace!

Written and delivered by Judith Bonini, IHM
Dec. 7, 2020