



IHM SPOTLIGHT

Sister M. Michel Keenan, IHM

Sister M. Michel Keenan, IHM recently returned from serving as special assistant to founding President, Dr. Kathleen Ross, snjm at Heritage University in Toppenish, Washington. Living in the western part of the country was not unfamiliar to Sister as she was born in Payette, Idaho and raised in Spokane, Washington from the age of four. In 1988, having served at Marywood University for twenty years, Sister Michel and Sister Espiritu Dempsey both experienced a “pioneering” call to serve at fledgling, six-year-old Heritage College located on the Yakama Indian Reservation. Bringing knowledge and experience in education, along with fervent prayer, they were able to further the university’s mission of “providing quality, accessible higher education to multicultural populations which have been educationally isolated.”

Sister Espiritu served first as the Academic Dean and later as Vice President for Academic Affairs with Sister M. Michel Keenan as her Assistant, and Chair of the Humanities Department from 1988 through 2000. Sister Michel reflects on the years she spent in Toppenish as truly rewarding in being part of the growth of Heritage University to over 1,500 students. When Sister Espiritu’s illness recurred in 2000, both Sisters returned to Scranton and, sadly, Sister Espiritu died in 2006. Sister Michel returned to Heritage University in 2007, serving through July, 2010.

Sister Michel was one of three Keenan children who attended the IHM Academy in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho as boarding students. She recalls that not only did they have excellent teachers, but also those teachers, the sisters, became their friends, even engaging in sports

with them and teaching them how to dance so that they could attend social functions. As a high school sophomore Sister Michel was already certain of her call to religious life.

Sister Michel attended telegraph school upon graduation from Marycliff High School in Spokane in 1941. At age 16 Sister Michel was employed by Western Union, first in Ontario, Oregon as a manager of the telegraph office, and later in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho. Small telegraph offices have unusual tasks like chopping wood for the wood-burning stove, hopping on the bike to deliver messages, doing the bookkeeping and many more tasks!

A position at Fort George Wright, a permanent Army base in Spokane, was next and in her “spare” time she completed her first year of college at Holy Names. However, it was time to respond to the call to religious life. Sister came to Scranton in February of 1946 at age 21. The train trip took nearly four days, but she recalls meeting many interesting people, even a few cowboys, which was helpful upon her arrival in Scranton when asked (having come from the West) whether she knew any “cowboys or indians!.”

Upon completing her undergraduate studies in English at Marywood University, she was professed in 1948 and her teaching assignments included, Saint John’s High School, Pittston; Saint Paul’s High School, Scranton; and went on to Boys Central Catho-

lic High School in Portland, Oregon. Along with Sister Coleman Nee, Sister spent three years at the University of Notre Dame where she completed her doctorate in philosophy.

In 1958, Sister began twenty years of service to Marywood University as Graduate Dean and Vice President of Academic Affairs in the Presidency’s of Sister St. Mary Orr and Sister Coleman Nee. In 1978 she was elected Superior General of the IHM Congregation, serving for two terms, until 1986. In the same year, Sister served in the Peace and Justice Center and began to update the history of the IHM Sisters from 1919-1974, published in 2005. Also completed are the history of the sixty-nine native Irish Sisters, and the story of the IHM’s service in Peru.

At 86 years of age, Sister Michel is still active, living in Sacred Heart Community in the IHM Center. ☪



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