

SOWING THE SEEDS OF VOCATIONS IN NEBRASKA

100 Years of Ministry in Nebraska (1916-2016)

PART TWO OF A THREE PART SERIES

Extended Versions of the stories found on Pages 10 and 11 of the Summer/Fall 2016 Dome

Sister (Mary Joanela) Shirley Ann Simmons

ENTERED IN 1942

While living in Heartwell, NE, a young couple named Niles and Ella Simmons welcomed their first of four children, a daughter, Shirley Ann, on September 12, 1924. In the years that followed, two sons and another daughter were added to the family. At the age of five, Shirley Ann started school, and then the family moved to Sutherland, where she continued and finished grade school in District #27, where she had all lay teachers. She loved going to school, did very well and participated in the county spelling contests annually. While her father was head of the school board, she completed the eighth grade. Her mother had been a teacher before marrying, so education was considered very important. Shirley Ann graduated from the eighth grade, and because her family lived a distance from North Platte where there was a Catholic high school, she lived and boarded with a Catholic family there, so that she could attend St. Patrick High School. Graduating from there with a 4-year scholarship to Ursuline College in Louisville, KY, in 1941, she travelled south.

She wasn't fond of going so far from home for college, as she was planning to attend Kearney State Teacher's College in Nebraska, and becoming a teacher as her mother had been. But, then when she graduated with a 4-year scholarship to Ursuline College, it was during the Depression Era and times were difficult, she didn't think it very wise to give up the opportunity of using it. So, she took advantage of it, and here she is writing about it today.

During her freshman year of college, she felt called to become a religious Sister, so in January of that year, she requested and was received into the Ursuline Order here in Louisville.

Sister eventually graduated from Ursuline College, and after teaching in Louisville Catholic schools for several years, and even in Maryland, she was sent west to Nebraska. While teaching at Blessed Sacrament School in Omaha and attending classes on Saturdays, and 8-week summer sessions, Sister received a master's degree from Creighton University.

Years since then, Sister Has been missioned at St. Boniface (second time) St. Elizabeth (principal and superior) Our Lady of Lourdes here in Louisville, and again at Blessed Sacrament in Omaha, St. Patrick's in Sidney (principal), McDaid in North Platte, St. Luke's Ogallala (principal) and finally as pastoral minister the last several years.

Then it was decided that Sister should retire to Louisville to live at the Motherhouse. Not ready to stop completely, as a day each week she accompanied another sister to a senior center and together they served the Senior citizens their noon meal that came prepared.

Finally it was decided that it was time for sister to retire completely, so now she lives at Sacred Heart Home with lots of memories of by-gone days, and wishing she could still be of use. Amen.

Sister (Stanislaus) Theresa Kruml

ENTERED IN 1951

Sister Theresa Kruml attended a public school in Ord, NE, from Kindergarten until the middle of third grade when World War II began. Her family moved to a small farm west of Burwell, NE. There, she and her siblings attended a one-room country school. During her freshman and sophomore years she attended St. Patrick's Academy in Sidney as a boarder from 1948 to 1950. She met the Ursuline Sisters of Louisville at St. Patrick. "I loved the sisters and would clean the bathrooms, assist with the little grade school children or any other tasks to be near the sisters.

Her two favorite sisters in Sidney were Sister Clara Nolette and Sr. Michaela. "I spent Saturday morning with Pat Ferguson cleaning the chemistry room for Sr. Clara. The rest of the time I spent helping Sr. Michaela after and before school. She was very kind and helpful to everyone. Her disciple in the dormitory taught me many lessons for my ministry with children."

Sister Bernard taught Latin and was a strict disciplinarian. "However, we all knew we could get out of my class by having her tell about the great flood in Louisville," Sister Theresa recalled.

In third grade a priest told Sister Theresa that one day she would be a Sister. However, no priest would give her advice as to where she should go. In high school, when word came that Sister Rosalin Schaeffer, then the Ursulines' Mother Superior, was visiting, Sister Theresa sought her out. The sophomore student recalled being in the parlor and requesting to entrance. "(Sister Rosalin) requested written permission from my father during halftime at a football game."

All was set in motion. "I had no study halls during the day and (my teachers) added classes so I could graduate in three years." At 16, the high school senior left for Louisville, KY. Her first plane ride was to the convent. "I have many memories of those days at the boarding school and remember vividly our daily routines. Monsignor Link wrote my letter of recommendation because my parish priest was never a letter writer. My two brothers went to the seminary and my two younger sisters followed me to the convent later."

Sister Theresa shared memories of daily living as a boarder. Since the boarders had to eat breakfast before mass on school days they had Holy Communion in the school chapel and Morning Prayer before breakfast. After mass they went to the classrooms. Dormitories were off limits during the day. "During freshman year I slept with

10 other classmates in a long room on small cots with one chair and an apple box stand beside the bed. It had a curtain around it with a mirror on the wall."

Lights were out at 10 p.m. As a sophomore, Sister Theresa and her sister Georgia Jean had a little room to themselves. "I got up early to help the little ones get ready for school."

At night the boarders would go on long walks around town with the presiding sister before study hall. Everyone had to sign in and out every time they left the property. Older girls took turns helping serve the meals and doing dishes. "In some ways, convent life was easier for me than others because of the discipline I experienced at boarding school. Because of the distance, my siblings and I only came home Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter. During the summer we really enjoyed being home."

When Sister Theresa made her final profession she had to rewrite her will because she was a minor when first professed. Her 21st birthday occurred on an Ash Wednesday while teaching first grade at St. Vincent de Paul. From there she went to St. Rita's in Okolona, KY, where her largest class was 69 first graders. "They were good as gold because my religious name was Sister Stanislaus and they thought it was Santa Claus."

Sister Rosella McCormick

ENTERED IN 1956

I attended the McPherson County Public Schools in first grade through ninth grade. My family lived in a county that had no Catholic Church or school. As I reflect on that period of time, I am especially grateful to two teachers: Thayne Roberts and Audrey McClintock. Miss Roberts taught me in fifth grade. I saw her as a good teacher. She was my “idol” and it was that year I recall thinking that I might like to be a teacher like Miss Roberts. She was also pretty and it was fun when she would ride the horse with me.

Mrs. McClintock taught me in seventh and eighth grades. She was an excellent and demanding teacher. She was an “in-charge” kind of person who expected you to give at least 100% to your school work.

My family moved to North Platte, NE, and I enrolled at St. Patrick’s where I was taught by the Ursuline Sisters for the last three years of high school.

When I reflect on the sisters who taught me, I am convinced our God has a marvelous sense of humor when God calls us to our vocation in life. For example, our principal was a very down-to-earth person. She never seemed to get ruffled and had a gift of handling our different personalities. Another sister, who was a favorite teacher, was always so approachable and warm. One sister, also a native Westerner, was an excellent science teacher who tried (it seemed) to appear “tough as nails.” As students, we knew that her “bark” was worse than her bite and that she had a supply of straight pins in case our Prom dress did not pass her inspection on Prom night. Then, there was the music teacher who was afraid of mice. If a little creature cruised through the gym as we were having choir practice, sister would let out a muffled screech and hop up on the first step leading to the stage.

Relative to discernment of her vocation, sister says she is still on that path. She feels deeply that God tries hard to get us where God wants us. It is more God’s doing than ours. Made in God’s image and likeness, we all have that Divine DNA which is so powerful.

Hindsight is 20/20 vision: She says that some factors that played a significant role in her discernment include the following:

- a. “As a child it seemed to me that the Catholic faith was extremely important to my mother and she witnessed it faithfully and quietly. She always tried to answer my questions about being a Catholic.
- b. Met an Ursuline Sister for the first time when I was seven years old. One of my older brothers and I

stayed with an aunt and uncle for two weeks in preparation for receiving my First Eucharist.

- c. I had no desire to be a sister when in high school or my year at college here on our campus. Even though at that time, I wasn’t tuned into it, I think God’s hook (Divine DNA) was reeling me in as I saw postulants and novices in some of my college classes. I wondered what made them “tick” and “why.” The college was staffed mostly by our sisters.
- d. While working for the City of North Platte those three years, I frequently went to daily Mass before going to work. It seemed God nudged something in me as I observed the 13 or 14 sisters file into the front rows of the church. I think the idea of being a woman where prayer and community living were important was starting to get to me. Also, thoughts of being a teacher had haunted me in the fifth grade and in twelfth grade.
- e. One day when I stopped by the church after work and only “God and I” were there ... I remember being hit with the realization that I had to test a vocation as an Ursuline. However, it was a heavy challenge: so far away from my family; and the concern I had for them. Is this what God really wants?
- f. I entered the Ursuline novitiate in 1956.

Following our 2-year novitiate, we professed our temporary vows which culminated in Final Profession in 1963 to be a Louisville Ursuline for life.

My first teaching assignment was to be a seventh grade teacher, I had 54 students in my self-contained classroom. It seemed I had so many students that I had to go “sideways up and down the aisles.” After this assignment I was moved into high school in an all-girls school in Louisville and then I was assigned to St. Patrick’s High School in North Platte for three years.

This assignment was a double blessing: teaching both boys and girls, and being in my hometown where my birth family lived. It was great being closer to my family.

In addition to the high school teaching, another sister and I spent Saturdays teaching Catechism (as it was called then) in Hershey, Sutherland, and Paxton, NE.

I had the opportunity to do graduate studies at Creighton University one summer. One of my vivid memories is that one day at noon I was in the cafeteria to meet our sisters for a bag lunch. As I walked by a table where some of the professors were having lunch, I heard one professor say, “That’s an Ursuline Sister ... they are among the best

teachers in the Church.” I felt so proud of my Ursuline Community.

Sister Rosella expressed gratitude for opportunities to earn her BA degree at Ursuline College, Louisville, KY; a MA degree from St. John’s University in New York; and to pursue graduate studies at Notre Dame University, South Bend, IN; and at Washington Theological Union in Washington, DC.

In addition to teaching in grade and high school, Sister Rosella served as novice director and later as vocation director for her congregation. Other ministries included teaching at the college level. She was elected as president of her congregation. She also spent over 25 years as a parish pastoral associate.

Sister Rosella feels that life with her birth family and with her Ursuline family are truly blessings!

Sister (Concepta Marie) Mary Lee Hansen

ENTERED IN 1957

Grade school was a unique and varied experience for Sister Mary Lee Hansen, who attended Pickard Grade School, then a one-room country school. She attended the school while living with her aunt and uncle on a farm following her father’s recuperation after a serious fall. “We lived nearly an hour from Holy Cross Parish School. Once home, she attended Holy Cross Grade School from fifth through eighth grades. Before going to Holy Cross my older brother and I went to summer school at Holy Cross. The principal, Sister Mary Geraldine, RSM, a life-time friend, taught summer school, and planted the seed of my vocation. After grade school she returned to public high school.

After an illness she enrolled at Creighton University and worked part-time at Mutual Benefit. Creighton University is Jesuit staffed and Father James Kramper taught and guided her to the Ursuline Community. “He introduced me to his cousin, Sister Michaeline Kramper, and Sister Mary Brendan Conlon. He believed this community suited me best because the Ursuline Community’s charism ‘A contemplative love of God and openness and eagerness to serve the needs of others’ then and now is the bases of religious life in the Ursuline Community.”

Sister (Loyola) Clara Fehringer

ENTERED IN 1954

Sister Clara Fehringer’s hometown in Colorado did not have a Catholic High School. Her parents made every effort to have each of their 13 children receive at least one year of Catholic education. Thus, she spent her last two years of high school at Saint Patrick’s Academy in Sidney, NE. “It was here that I got to know the Ursuline Sisters.”

When Sister Clara was three, her oldest sister, Esther, left home to become an Ursuline. “All I knew of her was that she was far away and the role model for the rest of us six girls.”

Memories of daily life as a boarder show the care of the Ursulines. “It was the dedication of the Sisters who taught us all day, supervised our after-school activities, cooked our meals, and made certain we were safely tucked in at night that influenced my decision to dedicate my life to God as a vowed religious Ursuline.”

Physical distance has separated her from family, friends and “the open plains of Colorado.” “I have always treasured the nudge I received during my senior year at the academy to live the Ursuline Call.”

Sister (Dorcas) Shannon Maguire

ENTERED IN 1967

When it was time for Sister Shannon Maguire to begin school, Blessed Sacrament School no longer had a kindergarten. “I remember my siblings coming home each day with tales about the crowded conditions in the old school building. My sisters were distressed because the construction site was taking up much of the school playground and Sister Marcian (Sister Pat Lowman) got to take the boys across the street to Miller Park where she played baseball with them during recess.”

When the “new” school was completed in March of 1952, they re-instated the kindergarten. “I was in the first kindergarten class to graduate from the new school. We even wore caps and gowns and graduated with the eighth graders—I was glad to share the stage with my big brother, Ed.”

“After I entered the convent, some of the sisters told me that they had been asked for their input when the new school plans were being drawn up. They were so pleased that many of the suggestions they had made were incorporated into each classroom—sinks, built-in bookcases, and coat closets.”

Sister Isabel Lehmenkuler (who now lives at the Motherhouse) was her first grade teacher. “We were thrilled when she moved on to second grade with us and prepared us for First Communion. It had taken us awhile to get accustomed to her southern accent.”

Sister Shannon remembers the school Christmas plays, parish fish fries, and May processions. “All of us students looked forward to the eighth-grade class trips. Our class traveled to Lincoln, the state capital.”

In addition to teaching, and serving as sacristans, training servers, and conducting CCD classes, the sisters were taking summer, Saturday, and evening classes for their Masters’ degrees at Creighton University. “Talk about wearing many hats or veils!” Sister Shannon shared. The Ursulines teaching elsewhere in Nebraska stayed at the Blessed Sacrament convent while attending the summer sessions at Creighton. The sisters told students that the convent was very crowded and that some had to sleep in the attic— at the time they did not have air conditioning.

Sister Shannon was the only Ursuline attending Creighton in the 1970s when she received her master’s degree. Sister Jovita Hatem, who had been teaching in the grade school when I was a student, was then teaching graduate courses at Creighton.

As she reflected on her time in Nebraska she realizes, “Indeed, we were fortunate to have the Ursuline Sisters staffing our parish school.” It was at Blessed Sacrament Parish and School in Omaha where she had her first contact with the Ursuline Sisters of Louisville. “Little did I realize what a lifetime influence it would be for me.”

Sister Loretta Krajewski

ENTERED IN 1976

Sister Loretta Krajewski's education began in a country school less than two miles from her family's farm. In fourth grade there were just 3 in the school, including a younger sister, Louise, and a neighbor girl. In fifth grade she and her younger sister joined two other sisters at Saint Luke's School in Ogallala, NE. "So then there were 4 out of us 6 girls going to Saint Luke's. The two oldest sisters were already at St. Patrick's High School in Sidney."

The Dominican Sisters from St. Catherine's, KY, were her teachers, along with one lay teacher. She graduated from St. Luke's and from there went to Saint Patrick's High School in Sidney, NE, where she encountered the Ursuline Sisters. The Ursulines that affected her life in high school were Sisters Rene Fehringer, Marilyn Portz and Alberta Nepl. "They were very kind and caring to me as someone living away from home. I just remember their love of teaching and helping me when I was struggling in my classes."

Her path to religious life began at home always hearing her mom say, "Out of six girls, dad and I ought to have at least one of you go to the convent."

"At that time, I always thought it would be my sister that was a year older than me. As a young girl, I didn't think of myself being 'the one.'"

Her family's experience of having the Dominican Sisters out to their farm on Sundays aided Sister Loretta's discernment. "They would spend the afternoon with us ending the day having Sunday dinner. It was not until I went to high school and met the Ursulines that I began to think about being one like them."

She put that idea in the back of her mind while she finished high school and went on to Kearney State College, earning her degree in elementary education. "It was in my senior year while attending Mass at the Newman Center, that I heard someone challenge us young people to think about our vocation, especially as a priest or sister. For whatever reason, I decided to really discern that call that I knew I had experienced years before but knew it was very important to my parents and me to first get my education."

In years past, she tried to put the thought of a religious vocation out of her mind as a life choice. "With graduation in sight, I went to see the priest at the Newman Center. He suggested I look at those communities that I was familiar with."

She wrote letters to both the Dominicans and Ursulines. "It was then that I told my mom and dad that I had something I wanted to talk to them about. They were not

surprised of what I was thinking about. They fully supported my decision."

Her father told her to try it and that she would always be welcomed home if it did not work out. She was invited to visit the sisters. With her father and sister Louise, she flew to Louisville and visited both communities. After returning home, the Ursuline Sisters' vocation director, Sister Rosella McCormick, came to visit. After talking with her parents and Louise, she decided to ask to enter the Ursulines. "I was accepted, and on August 16th, 1975, I flew to Louisville accompanied by one of my older sisters and her husband and baby nephew. That was the beginning of my year of postulancy."

Sister Martha Buser was her formation director and she lived with 11 other sisters on the third floor of Marian Hall. "That first year I taught second grade at Saint Elizabeth's School with Sister Alberta as my principal. I can remember my first year of teaching like it was yesterday and I can still remember the names of some of my students."

Due to the fire at the Motherhouse, she moved to the convent at St. Joseph's. In 1976, she began her novitiate, attending the Inter Community Novitiate program in Cincinnati. That year, she also helped Sister Martha Jacob working the template machine that was in the basement of the AB building. "I would sit downstairs all alone making tin templates of alumni names and addresses. It was a very loud machine."

In 1977, she made first vows in the Motherhouse Chapel and then began teaching second grade at St. Joseph's School. In 1980, she made final vows. That celebration took place at St. Joseph's Church. Her 40 years in education took her to St. Elizabeth's School, St. Joseph's School, St. Jerome's School in Fairdale, KY, St. Therese School, St. John Vianey School, St. Patrick's High School in North Platte, NE, and St. Simon and Jude School. In 2005, she moved back to my hometown of Ogallala, NE, to begin my position of teacher/principal at St. Luke's School. "I was also looking after my dad. He had been living alone since 2000 when my mom died and in 2002 my youngest sister Louise died. He needed someone to help out. It was my privilege to be able to accompany him until his death in 2011."

In Ogallala, she lived with Sister Shirley Ann Simmons until her return to the Motherhouse in Louisville after many years of service at St. Luke's.

Sister Loretta met Bill McGahan while at St. Patrick's High School in North Platte, where he was the super-

intendent. “He is truly indebted to the Ursuline Sisters who taught him and were with him during his years at St. Patrick’s School. Every year during Catholic Schools Week, he would have the grade school children write to the Ursulines who had taught there. “I wrote many a letter back to those children. It was very important to him that the students know of the sacrifices made and the value of the Sisters at St. Patrick’s.”

Sister (Francis Marie) Georgia Jean Kruml

ENTERED IN 1953

Sister Georgia Jean Kruml attended a country school in rural Nebraska until a conversation between her father and a priest in her hometown of Ord, NE, prompted the placement of Sister Georgia Jean and other siblings over the years at St. Patrick’s High School in North Platte, NE. Because of distance, the children remained at the boarding school during the week. Memories of these days included saying nightly prayers with the sisters close by and the discovery that poor eyesight had hindered her learning. Finally, she would have glasses.

She caught the eye of Sister Vincentia Yarnell. “She took an interest in me,” Sister Georgia Jean remembered. Sister Vincentia suggested that she join the band, which she did in her sophomore year and by her junior year she was playing the drums and having a grand time. (This year, Sister Georgia Jean received her 25-year pin for her committed to the Holy Name Band.) Coming in contact with the Ursuline Sisters prompted the Nebraska native to contemplate a religious vocation, and soon she was an aspirant studying at Sacred Heart Academy in Louisville, KY. She was invested in 1953.

For a number of years Sister Georgia Jean provided domestic help and was a house mother at St. Joseph Children’s Home. Eventually, she went back to school and discovered her knack for computers. For years she taught at Blessed Sacrament School in Omaha, as well as other schools in Kentucky. Today, she uses her computer skills to help sisters at the Motherhouse and at Sacred Heart Home.