



Reflections of a River Rat:

Farewell Sister Ironpants

By Jim Holleran

We formed a tight circle beneath an awning as the artificial green carpet shifted under our feet. The burial urn rested atop a small table. I found it striking that the sum of Sr. Joanne's 96 years, spanning the North Country to Rochester, had mustered six nuns from the Sisters of St. Joseph, myself and my wife, Mary, and a funeral director to Holy Sepulchre Cemetery. I thought this religious woman deserved a grand cathedral, organ music, pews filled with mourners and a small herd of priests. But here we gathered last Wednesday in a snowy landscape lacking tombstones and sculptures as cars and school buses whizzed past on Lake Avenue.

Sr. Joanne had taught and supervised thousands of children, directed elementary schools, mentored young sisters, and organized countless choirs. But her farewell mustered a mere nine people. It seemed there should have been more. To use an old basketball phrase, she hadn't hit double figures

That didn't matter now. Quality mattered over quantity. Though her obituary had appeared on the SSJ website and an inside page of the Democrat and Chronicle, it was as noticeable as a droplet of water careening over Niagara Falls. The time it took to relate some memories, pray, sing and bury her ashes took 25 minutes, but they represented a lifetime of service.

One sister recalled how Joanne would run a choir, veiled as a music appreciation class, at Mater Dei College so the postulants could accrue a music credit. Another nun recalled how Joanne kept her voice in tune at the motherhouse by retreating to a basement workout room and doing her best Ethel Merman on a variety of hymns. They chuckled over her disappointment when her wheelchair was confined to the memory care ward, fearing she would end up bewildered and afraid down the road at Nazareth College.

My association with Sr. Joanne had the deepest roots, extending to a four-classroom cinderblock schoolhouse that was St. John the Evangelist Elementary School in Morristown in the early 1960s.

When Sr. Joanne passed on Ash Wednesday, it seemed fitting that it was a holy day – she was somewhat of a saint in our home. With my brothers, Fran and Matt, and three sisters – Maureen, Mary Nora and Anne Marie -- we grew up in a modest home in Morristown and trudged daily up the hill to our parochial school. We laughed about choir rehearsals, her wooden paddle, delivering donuts and the legend of Sr. Ironpants.

My mother, Eileen, had two siblings that were Sisters of St. Joseph around the Amsterdam area, so she easily became pals with our principal, Sr. Joanne.

I remembered how my sister Maureen and her friend delivering a dozen donuts to the convent next to the school, and soon Sr. Joanne called the house. "Eileen, how wonderful. Ten of us, 10 donuts!" My mother's jaw looked like the map of Florida. Maureen wouldn't fess up, but when my father Fran arrived home from sports practice, he drove her to the convent, opened the passenger door and said, "The nuns will know." Maureen blubbered the truth. It was like Sr. Joanne had superpowers.

These were days when authority was never questioned. She kept a wooden paddle near her desk, but she rarely used it. She earned everyone's respect, but that paddle made her like a Wild West gunman. We feared her quick draw.

I felt it was a family duty to visit Sr. Joanne over the years. I enjoyed her company, she enjoyed being remembered, we kept alive our family connection alive, and I could hear my parents' words ringing in the corners of my brain – be thankful for your education.

During our visits at the SSJ Motherhouse in Pittsford, I grew to know her personal story. Her father was a woodcutter who moved the family from New England to Deferiet, NY, near Watertown. She was born Aug. 31, 1924, the youngest of 12 children. Her childhood nickname was Kitty. She first taught at Sacred Heart in Watertown.

As principal at St. John the Evangelist, she ran a Grade 1-8 school divided into four cinderblock classrooms. She led us through every holy day, holiday, choir rehearsal and class picnic. When May Crowning arrived, she encouraged us to comb the town for flowers. Some ripped off their parents' garden. We denuded every lilac tree in sight. She organized Christmas concerts in the gym, a field stone structure with a wooden stage at one end. Sr. Joanne alternated between playing the piano and imploring us to stay on pitch by climbing up and down the music scale with hand gestures.

After Morristown, I know she moved on to Penn Yan and later Mother of Sorrows in Greece. She was also a capable organ player and singer. I remember her giving me a tour of her residence at a convent on the north side. She played the organ in a little bunker high atop the chapel. It seemed she risked a nosebleed ascending her perch, but she was simply satisfied to contribute to her community.

She absolutely loved me to tell her colleagues at the motherhouse about the story of Ironpants. I was a first-grader reared on respect for adults. So the day I overheard the older boys calling her Ironpants, I tiptoed up to her to whisper that people were calling her names. She thanked me, then disappeared. Soon she marched into the sixth-grade classroom to confront the offenders.

"Boys, we treat everyone with respect, correct?"

Everyone, including the girls, nodded.

"Boys, we don't call people names, correct?"

More nods.

"So I hear you have been calling me Ironpants?"

Stunned silence.

"Since we treat people with respect, I will have you know it's Sister Ironpants!"

Stunned silence as jaws dropped. She spun on her heels and walked out of the room. Point made.

She didn't need the paddle. There was a great lesson in humility there. Surely, it was a personal triumph, but there was something bigger at play beyond her ego. She was an educator – she taught them to examine their conscience.

That story embodies the great Catholic educations that my generation was provided by Sr. Joanne and her colleagues. For that, millions from my generation remain unspokenly thankful for the Sr. Joannes.

Rest in peace, Sister Joanne.

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