



In Loving Memory

Sister M. Caroleen Hensgen, SSND

Dorothy Lillian Hensgen was born to Jules and Louise (Mayer) Hensgen on November 18, 1914, in St. Louis, Mo. She was baptized the next week. This strong yet simple woman, who through the end of her 99th year, guided and mentored many, was a blessing and a worry to her young mother. Caroleen wrote in an early biography, “three times by the age of four I lay at death’s door. A mother’s prayer brought me through double pneumonia and the 1918 flu siege.”

Mary Louise was born to this family when Dorothy was five; Jules Jr. came onto the scene a few years later. At home Dorothy frequently corralled Mary Lou and her friends to teach them in her play classroom. She was introduced to inclusiveness regardless of ethnicity or economic standing as her mother insisted on her socializing and serving refreshments to the Hensgen household help. This begins to explain her later concern for the less fortunate, the poor, and the immigrant.

Dorothy met the School Sisters of Notre Dame as she enrolled in Rosati-Kain High School. Here too she met Francis Thompson’s *The Hound of Heaven*. Dorothy said that she knew in high school that she wanted to work as a sister in education. Still, on reading Thompson’s lines, “I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind...”, during vacation in the Ozarks, after my senior year, I was stunned and blinded by the line, ‘Rise, clasp My hand and come.’ Within two weeks, in August, 1932, I was at the motherhouse of the School Sisters preparing to become a religious and an educator.” Dorothy chose this community because of its distinctive aim and purpose – to educate youth in order to better society.

Dorothy was received as a School Sisters of Notre Dame and professed her vows as Sister Mary Caroleen in 1935. She was sent to teach elementary and junior high school learners in Illinois and Missouri. She related, “teaching lessons to His little ones in the third grade, at St. Francis School, in Quincy, Illinois, taught me to love this work.” A scholar herself, she portrayed Jerome Bruner’s true educator, “one who can teach anything in an intellectually honest way, to anyone, at any level of learning.” In 1944, with a master’s degree in Latin and English, she taught these subjects to the young women at her Alma Mater, Rosati-Kain in St. Louis.

In 1948 she began her long tenure in educational leadership at the helm of secondary schools in Highland, Ill., Burlington, Iowa, Redemptorist High School in New Orleans, and Redemptorist High School in Baton Rouge. Believing that “It takes a village, to educate...,” she was a part of each community’s, ecumenical, business, civic and government organizations.

National notoriety and acclaim emerged with her 1967 appointment in Dallas, as the first woman superintendent of a diocesan education system. Those acclamations followed during the next 24 years that she served in this capacity. Yet at first, she was not well received among the “roman collared” superintendents. A colleague superintendent later expressed a changed perception, “Your name has become synonymous with quality Catholic

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Birth
November 18, 1914

Baptism
November 29, 1914

Profession
August 22, 1935

Death
October 15, 2013

Burial
Chatawa Cemetery
Chatawa, Mississippi

*Precious and blessed is
the death of the faithful
before God... for
they die in union with
their dear Jesus, in the
grace of God, in peace.*

Blessed Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger
Foundress of the School Sisters of Notre Dame
Letter 11, September 10, 1831

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Central Pacific Province

TRANSFORMING THE WORLD
THROUGH EDUCATION

education throughout the United States...Without your willingness to be the front runner, Catholic education would not be where it is today." This was said a century and a half earlier of her namesake, Mother Caroline Friess.

The Dallas Morning News headlined her career "groundbreaking." Fittingly, she was titled, Pioneer, Visionary, Trail Blazer in Catholic Education, for already in the fall of 1968, Sister Caroleen introduced, an innovation called REACH – Redesigning Education to Articulate Change – a method that had a class studying the basic subjects through drama, art, and music.

A real model for life-long learning, she was attuned to world interests and to the interest of her associates. She learned from her myriad experiences. Most travel involved exploring the education environment in the states and in the world. A broadly-read woman of strong opinions, she backed her opinions with facts and expected others to do so too.

Ever grateful for God's gifts to her, she shared them over her lifetime, particularly with her cherished congregation. She found time in her busy schedule to be with the community for prayer and meals and the Cowboys' games, before she slipped out to her room to face a briefcase of work.

Sister Caroleen got the nations's attention for her stand on integration by announcing unprecedented freeze on enrollment to block transfers from court-ordered integration of public schools in Texas. "She is her own variety of feminist." the publication *Vision* claimed. "You have furthered the cause of women in the Church and have brought honor to all of us." reads one acclamation. In her acceptance among the 1985 Dallas Women of the Year, she counseled women, "...be who you are, with the special gifts we women bring."

Headlined often, presented with marks of esteem and invitations to prestigious committees; she was honored by the President of the United States and awarded a degree of Doctor of Humane Letters by a university president. She was honored by principals, teachers, parents, and students from her early years. One letter to the editor of *The Dallas Morning News* furnished what "oft" was thought, but ne'er so well expressed." So appropriately titled, "Her wisdom made a difference" it includes: Several generations of children and young men and women were influenced, either directly or indirectly, by this outstanding and very human educator, Sister Caroleen's legacy lives long after her retirement and in the hearts of those who were fortunate to have worked with and been mentored by her.

In semi-retirement, Caroleen worked on family genealogy and the history of Catholic education in North Texas. Sister Caroleen retired to St. Mary of the Pines in Chatawa, Miss., just a few months before her death, responding in a new way to the *Hound of Heaven's*, "Rise, clasp my hand and come." Oh Lord, receive her well and grant her eternal rest.

Her parents, brother and sister preceded her in death. Several generations of nieces and nephews survive her. The family was represented by her nephew, Dan Merritt. Her Mass of Christian Burial was on October 21, 2013. Rev. Brian Kaskie was celebrant.

By Sister MarieClare Powell, SSND