

Helen Kerrigan, BVM (Paulita)
Wake Stories/Reflections
Marian Hall Chapel, Nov. 21, 2017

Jane Vorhes, Cousin (Paraphrased by Sister Diane Forster, BVM)

Helen's only living cousin, Jane Vorhes, lives in West Des Moines, Iowa, and is with us in spirit. Jane always enjoyed visiting her dear cousin growing up. Helen's mother gave piano lessons and on top of the piano was a bowl of gumballs. When the students had practiced and did a fine job playing, they got a gumball. Jane and the cousins who visited also got a gumball treat when they left to go home. Jane said she will miss Helen and remembers that there is a painting of the gumballs.

Sister Dee Dee Keena, BVM. (Read by Sister Diane Forster, BVM)

(Written in reply to Sister Marguerite Murphy's reflection on Helen.)

The virtues you identified—loving, grateful, humble—truly reflected the person of Helen. I think of the prayer of Mother Clarke and how Helen lived that prayer—meek, humble, patient, chaste, obedient—a soul of meditation and of prayer.

I was blessed to have Helen, Sister Paulita then, as a teacher at Xavier HS. I had her for homeroom, theology and art. I remember how we, the students, saw something different in her. Her contemplative spirit was alive even then, although we didn't call it that. When she would come to basketball or volleyball games, she would sit in the bleachers with a little pennant and wave it back and forth. While some of the other BVMs were standing up and cheering, Helen would sit and wave the pennant.

In art and theology classes, Helen was so encouraging in her quiet ways. When answering in theology, the student's response might not be on target and Helen would say quietly, "Well, that is an interesting perception, but . . ." I find it interesting that she used the word "perception" instead of something more common like "point." I guess coming from a person who was always creating and viewing the daily experiences to the fullest, "perception" was the perfect word to use. As juniors in high school, we recognized this line and knew we were not on target. Helen always showed so much respect for the individual and their gifts.

In art classes, we had some very, very talented students. Then there was the group not so talented. However, when Helen would come to view the students' work of art, she would say, "Hmm, that is most interesting." She would make a suggestion and it was amazing how the picture began to look like something in the eyes of the student. One was always uplifted in spirit when you came from art class. When I would come to Mount Carmel, Helen was so gracious. I would tell her who I was and she would respond, "Well, how are all the Keena girls?" There were three of us.

During those visits at Mount Carmel, I recognized in Helen a very contemplative person. As I saw her in the chapel, I saw a person completely unaware of her surroundings, but totally keeping vigil with her God. Today, she sees that loving face of God. My prayer for Helen is

adapted from 1 Thessalonians. I give thanks to God for Helen, remember her in my prayers, unceasingly calling to mind her works of faith and labor of love.

Sister Diane Forster, BVM

There is one piece of community lore that I will share with you. The lore says that Helen played violin with the earliest gatherings of the Dubuque Symphony Orchestra when they were desperate for players. The symphony office does not have programs before 1967. They found Phyllis Kerrigan's name, but not Helen's. In the days in which they did not have programs, we are not sure, but Helen might have played with those early groups.

Sister Karen Conover, BVM

I served with Sister Maureen O'Brien, BVM at St. Paul HS in San Francisco where Paulita had taught many years before I arrived in 1980. We were here visiting while she was still at Clarke. We were looking at some large painting from when she was in her abstract phase. It was the color of these beautiful mums. Of course, you don't ask an artist, "What is it?" Therefore, Maureen said to Helen, "Well, tell me about this painting." She said, "Well, I was just enjoying yellow."

Sister Regina Qualls, BVM

Helen had a studio at Clarke. When her eyesight was failing and she had stopped painting, she arranged to have some of her paintings from her studio brought over here. They were delivered to the Office of the Secretary. One day I invited Helen to come over and look at the paintings. I came into my office and she was standing there. Some of them were much taller than she was. She was looking very closely because her eyesight was so poor. I said, "What do you think, Helen?" She said, "Well, I think this is interesting." "Do you recognize it?" She said, "No. Who painted it?" "Well, you did." She looked at it more closely and said, "You know, it's very good."

Louise Kames, Former BVM

I knew Helen for many years, first as a student and then as a colleague at Clarke University and just as a beloved BVM sister. Dee Dee Keena already spoke about her particular vocabulary in critiques and in everyday in conversation. When she called your work "interesting," you knew it was *really* bad. Better comments were "rare." "Rare" equaled "good." Other comments in Helen's vocabulary included "my stars" and "great Scott." There was a definite vocabulary so that you knew where you were on the continuum, but "interesting" was really at the bottom.

Helen also taught art history at Clarke when I was a student and for years after that. She is one of the people responsible for my love of travel. She would stand and gaze at a slide when it was on the screen. We would think, "*Are we ever going to change slides?*" Helen was so in love at looking; it was a meditative process of enjoying work. She would say often in class, "When you're in Rome . . ." And there would be a pause. "Well, you'll all go to Rome." So off to Rome I went and soon as I graduated from Clarke.

One of my favorite experiences of Helen, the most docile person I know, was when I was once walking up the stairs of Eliza Kelly Hall. Helen was kneeling on the floor outside of her office.

“What are you doing, Helen?” Well, she was catching a mouse. She loved all animals, even mice. She had the mouse cordoned off. She was using a piece of cardboard to urge the mouse into a paper bag so that she could take it outside. That really speaks to Helen’s ever so gentle soul.

One comment on the very large paintings. If you were lucky when you walked by her studio, you could see her standing on a chair or a stool either painting or looking at her painting.

Sister Catherine Dunn, BVM

I used to walk the Clarke campus quite often. One of my destinations always was Helen’s office, her studio. She had two easels in her office and always had more than one painting going. You never knew which one she would be working on or whether she would just be contemplating it. She would smile when you came in and was so glad that you came. I would carry on some kind of conversation with her, not always about art. Sometimes it was about her family. One of the blessings we have at Clarke is that a good deal of her art is all over the library and down the corridor in the administration building. It is beautiful. Helen will be with us for a long time. The beauty of her work will sustain our own hearts.

Sister Eileen Powell, BVM

Paulita, Helen, came to our grade school early on in her career. She taught my sister and when I told her that Helen had passed away, she said, “I have one memory of Sister Paulita. I was struggling with the task we had in our third grade class. She came over and asked me what was the problem. I said, ‘I just can’t do this.’” Helen took her pencil and made a little squiggle on the paper. The paper jumped right off the desk; the picture was so beautiful just with her little squiggle and my attempts to do the task.

Maureen Frommelt, Former Student

I was fortunate enough to be at Clarke in the early 1960s and knew Helen as an art teacher. It was a wonderful experience to just have her around, see her painting, and learn from that. I was going to comment about her critique of a famous commercial artist’s piece. I dare not say that she commented, “Very interesting.” However, I have another little vocabulary word to share. This was her expression when she was frustrated, hurried or angry—“O murder!”

Sister Irene Lukefahr, BVM

When we were newly professed and living at Clarke, the Set of 1961 had the privilege of having Helen teach us art appreciation. It was there that we were told that if you don’t know what to say about a painting, say, “How interesting.” I remember that on the final exam, the last question was “When you move to Chicago and go to the Scholasticate, do you intend to visit the Chicago Art Museum?” I thought, *If we didn’t know any of the other answers, we know what to answer for that question.*

Sister Bertha Fox, BVM

When Paulita went to Europe on a sabbatical, she was going to visit many art museums. She didn't go to as many as she had hoped because she went to one and spent a couple of days looking at one painting.

Sister Regina Qualls, BVM

I have another story about Helen. Many people have spoken about Helen as teacher. Helen's teacher when she was growing up in Davenport was another BVM, Sister Blanche Fosselman. Several years ago, a woman contacted us and told us that she had a painting which was signed by Blanche Fosselman. It was a painting of Mary Frances Clarke. She offered the painting to us. Of course, we wanted to see it and I invited Helen to join us because I knew Blanche had been her teacher.

When she saw the painting, which now hangs in the main corridor of the Motherhouse, she just came alive. She looked so closely at that painting and said, "Oh, yes, this is Blanche's work." She pointed out several things, which I am sorry I do not remember. She was looking at the brush strokes. She was just so excited to see it.

There is a second part to this. At some point, when Helen was in high school, Blanche must have assigned them to paint a copy of a painting already in existence. Helen painted a Madonna called "Madonna of the Veils." It hangs in St. Joseph's Hall in the Motherhouse. If you look at that painting, you will be absolutely astonished at the detail. She was 16 or 17 when she painted it. To know she was that young, it is just lovely. She was amazing.

Sister Catherine Jean Hayen, BVM

I knew the Kerrigans in Davenport. When I came to minister with low vision needs here at Mount Carmel, I came to know Helen. I always marvel at how gracious she was with the acceptance of not being able to see her own artwork. She was grateful for any assistance that could be given to her and so grateful to the many sisters who read to her. I never heard her complain once about her lack of sight. Thank you, Helen.

Sister Carol Marie Baum, BVM

As things got progressively more difficult in terms of sight, Helen would often have one of the staff person walking with her. It just so happened that they were in the lower corridor of Caritas Center when one of the staff members said to her, "Helen, could you tell me about this painting of yours?" It was a delight to watch how animated Helen became sharing the artwork with this young staff person. It was so much fun to stand in the corner and listen as she described what it took to put this piece of art together. Thanks, Helen, for sharing again your wonderful talents.

Kathy Becker

I knew Helen for a very short time. There was an ever-present teacher in her. Of all the things I've done in my life, having served her, I know I learned more, got more from her, than I gave to her. She was a wonderful example in my life. I am concerned about my choice of books that I read to her. She was always quite interested in it. Every time I thought she might have fallen asleep, she would say, "Oh, keep reading. That's very interesting." So now I'm wondering!

Apparently, I was one of the last people with her. It was such a beautiful moment. It was very hard for me to speak. It was a very gloomy day, but then the sun burst out of the clouds. It was brilliant, even through the shades. I talked about the colors that she would soon be able to see. I said that soon she would be able to look into the face of God. I spoke of how lucky she was. It's possible that those were the last words she heard. That, along with this prayer service, renews my faith that she went immediately to see the face of God. How she must have stood there for a few minutes and just contemplated the beauty of it.

Sister Anne Marie McKenna, BVM

This is not my experience, but someone shared it with me this week. It is an image of Helen I've been chuckling over ever since. They said that when she would move one of her large paintings at Clarke, it was moved via the street because it was easier to get from building to building. Helen would be holding the painting, which completely obscured her. What you would see was a large abstract painting walking down the street in sandaled feet.

Sister Deanna Carr, BVM

When I was working in the Archives, a New York gallery would call frequently. They had a buyer for a painting and they were sure that we had it. I tried to do research and finally discovered that it was a painting at Mundelein College in Chicago. Helen had been at Mundelein. I went to her in the dining room not once, but several times, and told her that we had a mystery and that the mystery needed to be solved and perhaps she could help.

I gave her the story and, this is another Helen Kerrigan word, "Very intriguing," she says. I would go to her periodically, she would give me another clue and then she would say, "Very intriguing." The name of the painting was, "The Beheading of John the Baptist." I decided that I didn't want to see it, but I eventually gave in to my curiosity. It was a gorgeous painting. We never found it, but if I get another clue, I'll know it's Helen Kerrigan saying to me, "Very intriguing."