“We met over the dough.”

That was what Sister Andrea Broutin’s parents used to tell her about the way they met. “For a long time I thought we had a lot of money,” she said in her life story. As it turned out, the reference to “dough” was literal – her father met her mother at the Detroit bakery where he worked.

Andre Broutin had come to Detroit from Belgium, while Helena De Munter was born in Gladstone, in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. When Helena’s father died of throat cancer at an early age, her mother moved to Detroit with four of their twelve children and went into business for herself as a bar owner.

After Andre and Helena married, they made their home in St. Jude Parish on the east side of Detroit. Two children were born: Andrea, on March 1, 1932, and John, eight years later. Following Belgian custom, Andrea was named for her father. Her two middle names, Rose Marie, were in honor of her two grandmothers.

Andrea came into the family at the height of the Great Depression, and ironically enough considering her interpretation as a child of the word “dough,” her parents struggled to make ends meet. “But I never felt poor,” she said in her life story. “In my house we had a lot of love, a lot of plain, good food, and my mom was a delicious cook. My dad baked bread, cakes and pies, which he also did at work, so we were very fortunate.”

Andrea attended public schools throughout her elementary and secondary education. But her friends went to St. Jude School, and she made a habit of skipping school so she could go to morning Mass with them, after which they would go out for breakfast. “My Catholic friends had a lot of free days, like saints’ days, but I didn’t know all that stuff then,” she said. “I would just go with them to Mass and I loved it.”

Then, one day, the principal called her mother to tell her they were registering their students for high school and asked what classes Andrea wanted to take. When her mother said, “She’s there, isn’t she? Why don’t you ask her?” the truth came out. She had skipped so many classes that she had to come to school on Saturdays to make up the time.

When it was time for high school, her parents wanted her to go to Dominican, but she did not want to, so she enrolled at Denby High School. But she kept her connections to her Catholic-school friends, who had gone to Dominican, and through them she had gotten to know some of the Adrian Dominican Sisters who taught at St. Jude’s. And, one day, at the beginning of eleventh grade, she came home and announced to her parents that she wished to go to Dominican after all – and she thought she wanted to be a nun.

“My dad did not say no, but my mother said, ‘Absolutely not,’” she said.

She never did go to Dominican, but with her father’s help her mother finally came around to the idea of religious life, and Andrea entered the Congregation in June 1949 – with the stipulation from her parents that the minute she didn’t like it, she could call them and they would come to get her.
“It was a different kind of life than I expected, but I loved it,” she said. “Mass, daily prayers, and silence were very new to me. Never once did I think of going home but I knew how hard it was for my mother. She would cry all the way coming here and all the way back home. My brother liked it when I left because I gave him my tennis racket and my baseball glove and all that, and he got my room too.”

She was received as a novice in December 1949 and was given the religious name Sister Joseph Helen – Joseph for her father’s middle name and Helen after her mother’s name. After her canonical novitiate year, she was sent out in January 1951 to teach at St. Rita’s in Chicago, and stayed there until 1954, when she was changed to St. Joseph’s in Homewood, Illinois, and taught there until 1960.

By 1957, she had earned her bachelor’s degree from Siena Heights College (University), majoring in history. It was a field she loved, and she credited her father for stoking her interest in it. In her younger years, her father was not yet a U.S. citizen, and she would review with him the things he needed to know to pass his citizenship test. In turn, he would tell her about his early days in Europe.

“I am sure the things we talked about made me want to learn more about history,” Sister Andrea said. “Each week I would take my bike to the library and check out enough books to keep me reading for a week at a time. I became a history teacher because of my dad, I’m sure.”

Sister Andrea went on, in 1966, to earn her master’s degree in history from De Paul University.

After those years at St. Joseph’s, the rest of her teaching ministry was on the high school or college level: Hoban Dominican High School, Cleveland (1960-65); St. Ambrose High School, Detroit (1965-69); Siena Heights (1970-71); Dominican High School (1971-72); Aquinas High School, Southgate, Michigan (1972-89 and 1990-93); and St. Mary Catholic Central High School, Monroe, Michigan (1993-96).

For a year, from 1969 to 1970, she served as the Congregation’s Vocation Director, and for the 1989-90 school year she attended Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit to earn her certificate in pastoral ministry.

Thanks to a Fulbright Scholarship, Sister Andrea had the opportunity to travel as part of a group to India for six weeks in the summer of 1972, a trip which included a visit to the orphanage run by Mother Theresa and getting to see the famed nun long enough to exchange pleasantries with her. As part of the Fulbright program, Sister Andrea and her compatriots created a curriculum upon their return to teach Indian history to high school students.

In 1997, after leaving her teaching position at St. Mary Catholic Central and spending a year on sabbatical, Sister Andrea took on a completely different ministry when the position of coordinator of the Congregation’s Transportation Department came open and she was contacted about the position. It gave her the opportunity to be close to her mother, who had come to a nursing facility in Adrian. She spent a year in that job and then returned to the Detroit area for a few years, first to work at Bishop Borgess High School and then, after her mother’s passing, to manage the convent building at Dominican High School. Even after retiring in 2006, she stayed active in her parish, St. Alfred in Taylor, Michigan, as part of the office staff, and was a volunteer tutor at the Siena Literacy Center in Detroit.

Sister Andrea returned to Adrian in 2010 to live at the Dominican Life Center, and died there on November 30, 2018, aged eighty-six. In death, she was reunited not only with her parents but with her brother John, who died in 1983 at the age of just forty-two.
At the wake service, Sister Maria Goretti Browne, Vicaress for the Adrian Dominican Vicariate, remembered Sister Andrea as someone who loved studying and teaching history and as someone who loved her family. “She knew that her parents were the best parents in the world, and she loved that brother of hers and his family,” Sister Maria said. “More than any of that, she loved her vocation and knew that it was one of her greatest gifts.

“So, Andrea, you gave and gave of yourself. You were an excellent student and teacher and were willing to take on any task the Congregation asked of you. You were a fine Mission Group member: active, informed, loyal. … You never lost your respect and care for others and you never lost your sense of humor.”

Sister Andrea’s funeral homily was preached the next day by her long-time friend and community member Sister Helen Sohn.

How beautiful are the feet of those who bring the Good News! Those words from our first reading today\(^1\) conjure up for us Dominicans the image of St. Dominic carrying his sandals and walking with speed down the dusty roads of southern France to preach the Good News.

But I can hear Andrea saying to me, “Did you have to use the image of feet? How soon you’ve forgotten what my feet looked like!”

I haven’t forgotten! And I haven’t forgotten how much Andrea loved God; I haven’t forgotten how she hungered to know God better. As I searched through Andrea’s Dominican Praise book, I found only one passage which she highlighted – two lines from Isaiah that must have given voice to the longing in her heart. That passage was: “To know your name and your ways are my deepest desires.”

Sister Helen went on to recall how Sister Andrea’s thirst for spiritual learning led her to take many classes and retreats, in Adrian and elsewhere, and even to go with Sister Helen and others on retreat to Fanjeaux, France, Dominic’s home. “I don’t think Andrea stopped smiling the whole time,” Sister Helen said. “She so wanted to grow in her knowledge and love of God. She so wanted to make sure that her feet truly brought the Good News to her students.

… Andrea, we rejoice with you and for you! You finished the race well – in spite of those feet! Eternal peace and joy!”

\(^1\) Romans 10:9-18; the Gospel reading was Matthew 4:18-22.
Left: Sister Andrea in the arms of her mother. Right: Sister Andrea with her parents and her brother John.

From left: From left, Sisters Helen Sohn, Andrea Broutin, Mary Elizabeth Crimmins, and Iva Gregory enjoy the Mediterranean Sea. From left, Sisters Andrea Broutin, Florence Fouchey Zak, and Helen Sohn

Left: From left, Sisters Carol Bollin, Helen Sohn, and Andrea Broutin
Members of the 2009 Diamond Jubilee class are: back row, from left, Sisters Andrea Broutin, Mary Ann Konieski, Jeanette Jabour, Joan Delaplane, Jean Denomme, and Elizabeth Flaherty; middle row, from left, Sisters Joyce LaVoy, Catherine McKillop, Eleanor Stech, Nelda Ann Klein, Barbara Mary Saynay, and Marie Houle; and front row, from left, Sisters Mae Tack, Mary Sharon Moran, Betty Jenkins, and Donna Markham (Prioress).