Sister Barbara Ann Hehr, OP
1933-2020

Almost from her earliest days, Barbara Hehr knew her goal was to be a teacher.

“Even when I was small, it was something I wanted to do,” she said in her 2016 “A Sister’s Story” video. And so, she would play school with her brothers, making cards to teach them to read and spell.

Barbara Ann Hehr was born on October 3, 1933, in Chicago to Fredrick and Anna (Simon) Hehr, both German immigrants. She was the seventh of ten children in the family, with seven brothers (Raymond, Maynard, William, Kenneth, Edward, Jerome, and Robert) and two sisters (Vivian and Teresa).

The Hehrs were a faith-filled family, with the Rosary and daily prayer at meals and bedtime a regular part of their lives and a special devotion to the Infant of Prague. A statue of the Infant was placed outside the home’s door when the family went out, to protect them all, and the last person inside would bring it back in for the night.

Frederick worked as an electrotyper, while Anna was the family tailor, cook, and baker. She always made special treats for the children before bed, and Barbara remembered her mother’s talents as “phenomenal.” “I never saw her sit,” she said in her “Sister’s Story.” Anna was also the family disciplinarian, especially when it came to lateness, which was never excused; Barbara remembered that a child might come in late and say, “I’m sorry,” and Anna would reply “Well, I’m sorry too,” and the child would promptly be grounded.

Barbara attended grade school at Our Lady of Lourdes School until seventh grade, when the family decided to move out of the city to Mundelein, Illinois, which at that time was “the country.” She and her siblings still in grade school continued their Catholic education, but when it was time for high school Barbara attended nearby Libertyville High School because there was no Catholic high school close to home.

She had begun to feel a call to religious life by then, and originally planned to enter the BVMs whose Sisters had taught her in Chicago. But Fredrick, while he was not opposed to the idea, insisted that she graduate from high school first, and she had a full school life, complete with dating and sports. She said in her “Sister’s Story” that she was always grateful to her father for making her finish high school, for she greatly enjoyed her experiences there.

The delay proved fateful, for in that time frame the Adrian Dominican Sisters staffed the new Santa Maria del Popolo School in the Hehrs’ neighborhood. Barbara’s best friend, Anne Beauvais, had originally planned to enter the Mercy Sisters, but changed her mind when she got to know the Adrian Dominican Sisters who taught at the school, and when she decided to enter the Congregation Barbara chose to come with her.

Barbara (and Anne) entered in June 1951. When Barbara became a novice that December, she was given the religious name Sister Fredrick Ann, after her parents.

After her canonical novitiate year, she embarked on what became an almost fifty-six-year ministry in education by being assigned to teach at St. Gabriel School in Detroit (1952-1954) and then to St. Ambrose School, also in Detroit (1954-1959). She earned her bachelor’s degree in history from Siena
Heights College (University) in 1959, followed several years later by a master’s in history from the University of San Francisco.

Sister Barbara spent the 1959-1960 school year at St. Mary Help of Christians School in Aiken, South Carolina. With one exception, all the rest of her time in education was spent in various places in the West, beginning with St. Brendan School, San Francisco (1960-1962). Then came St. Joseph School, Las Vegas (1962-1965); Loretto School, Douglas, Arizona (as a teacher from 1965 to 1968 and as principal for the 1968-1969 school year); St. Mary Star of the Sea School, Oceanside, California (1969-1970); St. Joseph in Las Vegas again (as a teacher from 1970 to 1972 and then as principal from 1972 to 1977), and St. Raphael School, Los Angeles (as a teacher from 1977 to 1978 and as principal from 1978 to 1982).

It was during her time in Douglas that the Congregation’s pivotal Chapter of 1968 opened, and she found herself in a role that would recur for every General Chapter for the rest of her life.

As she told the tale in her “Sister’s Story,” a letter had gone out from Adrian prior to the Chapter, asking for Sisters to help with the secretarial work. She was typing up her thesis at that time, and said she could not do anything to help until she had finished. Later, when Chapter opened, Sister John Joseph (Anne) O’Connor called her and asked, “Why are you there?” It turned out that Sister Barbara had been appointed Chapter secretary. Sister John Joseph told her she had better get to Adrian, so she got on a plane and her sister and brother-in-law drove her to the Motherhouse – and she went to see Mother Genevieve and told her, “You must have the wrong Fredrick Ann, because I don’t do that.”

Mother Genevieve told her that her records indicated she had secretarial skills, but those skills were actually years old. Sister Barbara stayed up all night brushing up on her shorthand with the help of another Sister, and the end result was that she served as Chapter secretary for the next forty years. It made her an eyewitness to all the changes that took place over the years. “It was absolutely marvelous, and I loved every minute of it,” she said in her “Sister's Story” video.

In 1982 she was asked to go to the Congregation's Dominican High School in Detroit to work in the athletic department. What she didn’t know was what else was in store for her there; as she said in her “Sister’s Story” video, “I was excited because it was sports. So I went. Little did I know that other things went with it. Like dean of students and six other things.”

She was at Dominican High from 1982 to 1984 and then returned to Las Vegas, where she embarked on a most unusual ministry: governess to singer Wayne Newton’s daughter Erin. Erin was going into third grade at St. Viator School at the time, and Sister Barbara taught there for years in addition to looking after Erin. She finally left Las Vegas for Grand Junction, Colorado, in 1998, and was at Holy Family School there as a teacher and consultant for the next ten years.

During her time at St. Raphael School, she met Sister Lorraine Brennan, who was on the school’s faculty and then succeeded her as principal. The two were reunited at Holy Family School, and both retired together to Eagle Pointe, Oregon, in 2008 when Sister Barbara’s health began to decline. They continued to be active volunteers in their community until 2016, when they returned to Adrian to live. Not long after their move to the Dominican Life Center, they began a ministry of prayer with the Sisters in Maria’s memory loss unit; Sister Barbara later wrote, “My greatest response to my own spiritual longings is the time I spend with the memory loss Sisters. The love they give me can never be matched.”
Sisters Barbara and Lorraine also took on the immense task of ensuring that materials from the St. Joseph Academy Heritage Room were preserved for the Congregation archive when the Heritage Room was shut down.

Sister Barbara died on May 10, 2020, aged eighty-six and in her sixty-eighth year as an Adrian Dominican Sister. She was “an Adrian Dominican Sister through and through,” said Sister Mary Jane Lubinski, Adrian Crossroads Mission Chapter Prioress, at the wake service. “Joy, community, generosity and dedication to education describe her well. A former student wrote ‘she was a powerhouse woman with a big heart.’ … Her generosity was boundless, her laugh infectious, her sense of humor ever present!”

Sister Mary Jane concluded her eulogy by noting that Sister Barbara herself had written “Being in Adrian has given me the opportunity to offer myself in such a way that I may be of service to others. This is the only place to be.”

“… and I would add, the only way Barbara knew how to be: of service,” Sister Mary Jane said.

Sister Marilyn Barnett’s homily for the funeral Mass centered on the Gospel reading Sister Barbara herself had chosen, John 15:12-17.

Jesus in today’s Gospel minces no words when he says: “This I command you: Love one another.” … The message of the gospel is all about love. Real life cannot happen without it. … and it is deeply rooted in one’s relationship with God.

Barbara understood this. She did this in her inviting, inclusive, initiating way. She didn’t underestimate that real life cannot happen apart from relationship and love of God and neighbor.

She was not afraid to take it on, to embrace it, even when there were times of uncertainty and fear of what the unknown would bring.

… I think Barbara realized that amid all the joys, sacrifices, and even in suffering and finally death, her love of God and people would bring her to a new life that would continue to grow in God’s presence. … This is the choice Barbara made and each one of us continues to make each and every moment.

Thank you, Barb, for your vivacious presence among us and for your resilient example of radical trust in a boundless life in God because you never underestimated the power of love.