



**Sisters of  
St. Francis  
of Assisi**

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**Since 1849**

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Dear Friend,

There are no two ways about it – family ties are strong. So think about a young woman who is high school age and has entered religious life. Her chance to connect with her family will be a summer visit. But it is World War II and financial conditions are such for the community that all the young women are told home visits will be cancelled this year. Heart breaking news.

Fast forward to this Sister's 90th birthday when her family gave her a Tablet so she can stay in touch with everyone on Facebook and email. What a contrast is this piece of news. And how 'visiting' has evolved!

When Sister Helen Svancarek entered the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi at the age of 14, she had no idea what would lie ahead of her in the short term or the long term. Blessed with 'stick-to-it-tive-ness,' she has weathered much and celebrated much in her lifetime. Now at age 91, her reflections on life hold much gratitude and joy.

At the invitation of Sister Ephrem Kolbeck (†1994), Helen and some other girls from St. Ann School in Chicago Heights, Ill., visited St. Francis Convent. Helen had no intention of "joining," though she loved the sisters dearly. To her surprise, she returned home with an application form and a list of required clothes. She recounts that the list provided amusement on the ride home!

Photo of Sister Helen in 1947 with insets of her First Communion at age 7 and her graduation from St. Mary's Academy.

Sister Helen's parents, Ignace and Anna (Michaelec) Svancarek came from Czechoslovakia and met in the Midwest. They were married in Chicago Heights in 1908. Helen was the youngest of nine children, six boys and three girls.

Music was a big part of Helen's growing up. Her father played trumpet in a band, and her brothers, self-taught musicians, performed in the



(At left) Sister Helen with her parents, Anna and Ignace in August of 1945, when she received her veil and habit.

South Suburbs of Chicago as the Rhythm Aires. Helen began piano lessons in the third grade with Sister Cecile Wiemals (†1952). In the upper grades, she played for Benediction in church and accompaniments for the school music productions.

As an aspirant, Helen began studying the violin and this opened up a whole new world for her. Her love of the instrument would be threaded throughout all of her professional teaching career, along with piano and organ, and a few other instruments thrown in out of necessity.

Sister Helen shared that her introduction to music theory took place when Sr. Pudentiana Augustin (†1983) was her 5th and 6th grade teacher. She taught the students to read/sing music by syllable – do, re, mi, etc. For Helen, this was a most interesting technique to complement reading music by letters as she was doing on the piano – a, b, c, etc. Later in life she would earn a master's degree in music theory from the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago. Her minor was in violin.

When Helen was received as a novice, she was given the name Sister M. Grace Ann. After the Vatican II Council, she returned to her baptismal name, Helen. She professed first vows in 1947 and began teaching music at St. Sebastian School in Milwaukee, Wis., an assignment that would span 13 years.

At that time in our history, most sisters finished their first college degree part time and graduate degrees were earned in summer sessions. Sister Helen finished her Bachelor of Music at

(Front row) Brothers Iggie (left) and John (right) performing as the Rhythm Aire's



Cardinal Stritch College (now University) in 1951, and her Master in Music at the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago in 1959. A music teacher at a school/parish taught an average of 40 to 50 private students a week. Sister Helen primarily taught piano and violin, but also needed to teach trumpet and clarinet at one school. In some places she taught music in the classrooms.





(At left) Sister Helen (l) at Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish in 1974, and (below) as a music teacher at Christ the King.

In the parish, the music teacher was the organist for daily/Sunday Masses, funerals, and weddings, and rehearsed with the choirs. They ranged from a children's choir to adult mixed and women's choirs.

This was Sister Helen's life in four Milwaukee parishes, one parish in northern Wisconsin and five parishes in the northwestern suburbs of Chicago, Ill. For a five-year period at St. Mary's Academy in Milwaukee, she was the accompanist for the girls' chorus, taught music theory and violin lessons, and conducted the string ensemble.

At one point, Sister Helen took a few years off from teaching to pursue post-graduate violin studies at the American Conservatory of Music. A highlight of that time was the opportunity to play with the Chicago Heights Symphony in her home town. The rehearsals and concerts



provided a very unique 'home visit' that could not make up for the missed home visit during the war, but was definitely a special experience at the time.



Looking back it is easy to see that no two places were the same, so adaptation was essential. Now in retirement and living on the Motherhouse grounds, Sister Helen uses her musical talents as part of the music activities with our sisters who need memory support. Backed by her solid piano accompaniment, they enjoy singing all the favorite songs from their earlier days.

In her years in community, Sister Helen has seen a wide sweep of changes in religious life and the church. Life and decisions in community life are now made by consensus at the level at which they are lived out. Ministries for sisters expanded beyond schools and hospitals, and volunteer participation broadened. In her early retirement, Sister Helen visited sick and home-bound persons as part of her outreach. This was a new experience for her.

The changes in worship included moving to the vernacular, English in place of Latin, so that everyone could understand and engage actively during the celebration of Mass and the sacraments. Choir and congregation participation became much more integral and supportive of the prayers at the altar. Sister Helen did much

(At left) Sr. Helen teaching violin at St. Mary's Academy.



(Above) Sister Helen (standing, second from left) was one of a group of sister musicians who gathered at the Motherhouse in 2006.

(Below) Three of Helen's siblings are pictured with her holding the doll that will be raffled at the Christmas boutique.



to educate hundreds attending Mass on how to knowingly and comfortably participate in a post-Vatican II church.

Recently Sister Helen had a life-size doll returned to her from her niece. This doll had passed from Helen to her sister to her nieces and now has made its way back. She has offered to have the doll raffled at our Christmas Boutique, the proceeds of which go the Capital Campaign for our new convent. The doll will get a new wardrobe and go to a new home with the lucky winner. No one ever knew about this part of Sister Helen's life!

You can become a part of Sister Helen's life and the lives of all of our retired sisters with a gift that can be used to help defray their living expenses. Sister Helen, at age 91, is remarkably independent, but we have sisters younger than she who have serious medical needs along with mobility issues, and some sisters with memory loss.

Sister Helen earned very little in her active ministry so, as with our other retired sisters, she had no way to contribute to a retirement fund. Our donors, persons like you, help us to provide the basic, simple needs of our older sisters to help make up for that lack of funding. What our older sisters hold in common is their prayer of gratitude for you and our other donors.

You are a blessing for us. May God reward your generosity as only God can reward.

Peace and all good.

*Marcia Lunz, of*  
Sister Marcia Lunz

Sister Helen is grateful to God for her musical gifts and to the congregation for giving her the opportunity to study and develop it. As a religious, she has found her greatest challenge is "to live community, to find ways to bring this about in sharing, communicating, praying, day-to-day living in a loving, sensitive way."



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