

We of Nojoshing

Nojoshing – Indian word for the area where our pioneer members settled in 1849; it means “piece of land stretching into the water.” The name was changed later to St. Francis, Wisconsin.



Newsletter of The New Assisi Archives of the SISTERS of ST. FRANCIS of ASSISI, 3221 South Lake Drive, St. Francis, WI 53235-3799

We celebrate the memory of our beloved Sister Serena (Alvina) Halfmann September 14, 1924 – November 12, 2020

Alvina Halfmann was the youngest of nine children born on a family farm near Fond du Lac, Wis., to Joseph and Susanna (Schneider) Halfmann. It was a hard life during the depression, and, after eighth grade, Alvina followed the path of her older sisters, working for various members of her extended family. This included care of a cousin's four preschool children for two years after their mother died.

At age 20, war time enabled her to find good paying jobs and she worked to pay her tuition to St. Mary's Springs Academy in Fond du Lac, where she completed high school in three years. She received a scholarship and attended the College of St. Teresa, Winona, Minn., for three semesters. She entered our congregation on February 2, 1948, at the insistence of her close high school classmate friend, Sister Sheila Haskett (†2001). Alvina became a novice on August 11 that year, receiving the name Sister Mary Serena.

She professed vows in 1950, and taught elementary grades briefly in Stockbridge, Wis., before returning to the Motherhouse and continuing her education full time, from 1952 to 1953, at Cardinal Stritch University. During the next three years she continued her studies while teaching at Fleming, Colo.; St. Sebastian in Milwaukee; and Middleton, Wis. In 1956, she graduated from Stritch with a bachelor's degree in Latin and French. She then taught languages at St. Mary's Academy.

In February of 1959, she began graduate studies at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, and earned a master's degree in French and Spanish in 1960. As part of her doctoral studies that followed, Sister Serena received a Fulbright Scholarship to study at Rennes University, France, from 1961 to 1962. In 1965, she was awarded a doctorate degree in French and Spanish.

Sister Serena taught French and Spanish at Stritch from 1963-1969. She spent 1969 to 1970 doing research in Cleveland, where she also taught French in an inner-city school. She then returned to Stritch and taught for another 10 years.

To prepare for a transition in ministry, Sister Serena enrolled in the Pastoral Education Program at the Mexican American Culture Center in San Antonio, Texas. In 1982, she began a new ministry in Chicago, Ill., at the Archdiocesan Office for Religious Education, working with the evangelization of adult Hispanics and with other programs to prepare Hispanic catechetical teachers and directors.

Retiring in 1994, Sister Serena moved to St. Joseph House in Milwaukee and volunteered as a translator/interpreter. She moved to Clare Hall in 1995, where she maintained a full schedule, offering German and Spanish classes as enrichment for retired persons and in the Continuing Studies division at Stritch. As a child, Sister Serena grew up speaking a German dialect, and in retirement, realized a lifetime dream to study German more formally and audited classes at UW-Milwaukee. Sister's knowledge of German was vital in helping with translations of correspondence and documents relating to the celebration of our 150th anniversary of founding in 1999. She facilitated interaction between German guests and the English-speaking sisters.

Sister Serena celebrated her 70th jubilee of religious profession in 2020. “She is beloved by her many nieces and nephews and the generations of family who know her,” wrote her nephew John Furr.

In 2004, Sister Serena's health needs necessitated a move to St. Francis Convent; and in 2019, she moved to Clare Circle in the new convent. Sister JoAnn Schmitz became her ‘guardian angel’ the last few years, helping her at mealtime, accompanying her to visits to the sensory room, engaging her in conversation and taking her on wheelchair visits throughout the convent.

Sister's condition began to decline on November 7, and sisters began vigil on November 9. God called her to enter the fullness of everlasting life at 2:58 p.m. on November 12, 2020, at St. Francis Convent. Sisters Ruth Mary Costello, JoAnn Schmitz, Kathleen Denevan, and an aide were present when Sister Serena died peacefully.

The gentle, peaceful presence of Sister Serena was supported by courage and determination. It is hard to imagine her having to teach behind locked doors to avoid intrusive interruptions in the Cleveland inner-city school classroom. Or to think she was once held up at gun point at a bus stop on her way home from school. While working in Chicago, her parish duties often meant travel into unsafe neighborhoods alone at night. Through all her challenges, she persevered.

Sister Serena lived the motto of her profession class: *Serve the Lord joyfully*. In her autobiography she wrote about also identifying “closely with (Isaiah 42:6) ‘I am the Lord. . . I have taken you by the hand and kept you.’ I can only praise the Lord for his goodness and faithfulness to me.”

~ Marie Colette Roy, OSF, and Marcia Lunz, OSF

Funeral for Sr. Serena Halfmann, OSF

Father Jim Schroeder, SCJ

November 18, 2020

INTRODUCTION: I want to welcome all those joining this Eucharist by streaming, especially Sister Serena's two nephews: Terry, and his wife Kathy, Kohlmann; and Mike, and his wife Karin, Kohlmann; and her three nieces: Nancy, and her husband John, Furr; Vicki Kohlmann; and Susie, and her husband Mark, Schmitt. Let all of us, near and far, pray this Eucharist together.

HOMILY: Is 65.17-22; Rom 8.31b-35, 37-39; John 14.1-4

Serena—a Latin-based Spanish word that means clear or serene. Sister Serena, who was baptized Alvina, was certainly a serene woman, gentle and polite, patient and long-suffering. And she was a woman who loved words and loved languages—perhaps because as the youngest of nine she never could get a word in, or because there were so many adults around her speaking two languages that she had to get into words to survive.

After 8th grade she had to drop school and go to work, caring for her cousin's four little motherless children—at 14. There she learned the true meaning of another word "love." She learned not to demand for herself but to give to others, and her labor WAS to love and help those little ones. She was true to her name "Halfmann" by being such a helpful person.

However, Serena was also very determined, and got back into her own education. Because she was near and dear to God, she accepted a call to religious life with the Franciscan Sisters. Again, she cared for, loved and educated many other children.

Although she was a simple Wisconsin farm girl, she was brilliant, and she pursued her love of words and languages. With that Fulbright scholarship, she spent a year in France, and she earned a doctorate in French and Spanish. She spent most of her life teaching at Stritch University and then transitioned to work with the Spanish-speaking, offering pastoral care and religious education.

In all this, Serena grew ever closer to THE Word, Jesus Christ, the Word spoken by God, incarnate and living among us. She learned to speak the love of Christ in ever new ways. Late in life she could pursue what she called her "lifetime dream, to study German." Nothing could separate Serena from Christ's love, not family duties, or studies, or travels, or labors, or retirement, or aging, or illness—or even death.

Serena learned the way of Jesus, and now she has entered the new heaven and the new earth God has created. She has entered the heavenly city Jerusalem, that God calls "Joy," and she has entered her Father's house with its many dwellings. You know that she is enjoying learning even more languages, and she is able to engage so many with her many languages.

She will especially be able to join THE Word Jesus, to speak his language of love. That is why God calls his blessed ones "Gladness." She joins Jesus and wants our hearts to be glad, not troubled. She wants no weeping or crying, for she has lived a long and fruitful life, and she has left behind so many who will enjoy the fruits of her labors for years.

As we move into Eucharist now to give thanks for Serena, in honor of her, we can say good bye in French and Spanish and especially German, and say:

Reposez vous dans l'amour du Seigneur.
Descanse en el amor del Señor.
Ruhe in der Liebe des Herrn.

Serena: May you rest in the love of the Lord. Amen.

Eternal rest grant unto Serena, O Lord
Rs. And let perpetual light shine upon her.

May she rest in peace.
Rs. Amen.

May she and all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.
Rs. Amen.