

Obituary

Sister Ann Stephen Stouffer

“Let the children come to me.”

December 9, 2021

As we gather this morning to celebrate the life of our dear Sister Ann Stephen, we just have to smile as we remember who well she took Jesus’ words as her own. She did indeed accept the kingdom as a child, never losing her childlike wonder at the beauties of creation and the joys of friendship, said Sister Maureen Abbott in her commentary for Sister Ann Stephen Stouffer, who passed away on Thursday, December 9, 2021, at Clinton Gardens in Clinton, Indiana. **She was 82 years old and had been a Sister of Providence for 61 years.**



Sister Ann Stephen Stouffer

Sister Maureen continued: Sister Ann Stephen, Judy, was born to Howard and Katherine Murnan Stouffer on February 26, 1939, in Wabash, Indiana. Her brothers Jim and John were delighted to greet their only sister. Judy was already 16 when their parents announced that the family was about to expand. She was so excited at the prospect of a baby brother that she was invited to name him and chose Stephen. According to John, “Between Judy and my dad, I don’t think they ever put him down.” He recalls they all had a lot of fun growing up. No TV in those days, so they played a lot of games, including a lot of card games. John describes her as “a ruthless euchre player,” and Steve recalls that he learned to play hearts from Ann when they visited her at St. Angela’s in Chicago.

While attending elementary school in Pierceton, Judy always had to be on her best behavior, because her father was the principal. In high

school, she participated in band, chorus, and the school paper, graduating in 1957. With the goal of becoming an educator herself, she enrolled at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College the following September, where she first met the Sisters of Providence. Having always felt that she was born under a lucky star, she reflected, **“I think I was captivated by the idea of Providence.” She came to realize that her vocation as an educator could only be completely fulfilled as a Sister of Providence.** On February 2, 1960, she “crossed over the bridge” to join the last SP February entrance band, taking the name Sister Ann Stephen, the same name she had given her brother. She professed first vows on August 15, 1962, and final vows on August 15, 1967.

After graduating with a bachelor’s degree in education in 1962, she remained at the Motherhouse to complete the Sister Formation Program. She also launched her teaching career with a bang, teaching third, fourth and fifth graders in a single classroom at St. Mary’s School in the Village. She later went on to Indiana University, where she received her master’s degree in education in 1972.

Ann definitely found her vocation as an SP educator. Over her first years of mission experience, she taught practically all the grades: First at St. Angela’s in Chicago, fourth and fifth at St. Jude in Fort Wayne, and seventh and eighth at St. Malachy in Brownsburg. With a location so close to the Indianapolis Speedway, she became an avid fan. The fact that the sisters were friends of parishioner Aldo Andretti, famed race driver Mario’s twin brother, didn’t hurt either.

Ann then moved to California, teaching for another 12 years before beginning a 19-year position as principal at St. Anthony’s. Over all these assignments, Mother Theodore’s maxim: “Love the children first, and then teach them,” was intuitive to her. She told an interviewer, “I can’t imagine myself not working with children. Maybe that is because today was the first day back to school and I got so many hugs.”

She expressed her philosophy this way: **“I’ve been so convinced for a long time that education is the way these children can find a future of hope, because a lot of families have lots of problems, and yet, year after year, I’ve watched our students go into high schools and into**

wonderful jobs and opportunities doing things I think they never believed they could do. If you give children confidence that they really can do something, I just think that the boundaries are all going to break. Life can be too tough without hope, so I will stick with education.”



Sisters (from left) Suzanne Buthod, Ann Stephen Stouffer and Teresa Costello enjoy their time at the Deming Park playground as one of the many trips the HOME Team has taken sisters and others recently.

The parents, former students and teachers who posted comments in the memorial section of our website are testimony to the validity of her outlook: “... a kind soul, always smiling.” “... very kind in mentoring me as a young teacher.” “... energetic, kind and supportive.”

Ann’s “born under a star” wide-eyed appreciation of life spilled over into the many sister friendships she formed and fostered over the years. She shared her interests in camping and exploring the great outdoors with her local community. I can testify from personal experience that when Ann joined us at St. Anthony’s, her adventurous spirit prompted camping trips with Sister Kay Manley and me to all the state parks in the area. A favorite campsite for us was on a bluff overlooking the ocean near Santa Barbara, with easy access to the beach and Ann’s favorite activity – watching the sun sink into the ocean. One summer the two of us camped our way northward among the coast redwoods all the way to Victoria, Canada. In later years when a parishioner friend offered his Yosemite cabin, it became an Easter vacation destination for another group. Later here at the Woods, she joyfully joined in with Sister Jenny Howard’s boundary waters expeditions.

The convent at St. Anthony’s was perfectly suited to become a veritable template for the Sisters of Providence practice of hospitality. A high brick fence ensured privacy for the patio and yard next to the spacious two-story brick building. Sisters tended to stay for a long time, and we got to know each other’s families. When my sister Kathy lived near us, she often joined us, commenting to me, “Ann just had a certain spark. She made me laugh.” Any school break became an invitation opportunity for our families to gain insight into SP life.

Ann’s brother Steve recalls, “It was always exciting to fly out to LAX to meet her on Christmas and spend time with her and the sisters located there. The first time, Sister Ann showed up at the airport with a limo to take us to the convent!” In later years, when Steve planned a trip for his own family, his wife Sue was a bit apprehensive about staying at a convent, but she soon caught the spirit when Ann, “drove us all over Los Angeles, showing us places in California she had previously discovered with her friends. They treated us so well and put up with the kids and their antics.” Ann’s niece Kim recalls her excitement at staying in the convent when her dad Jim took the three kids from Michigan to California for a visit. “The sisters gave us the warmest welcome. Aunt Judy was such a joyful person and a kid at heart, squealing with delight as she rode the roller coaster with us at Disneyland.”

Ann had a talent for finding her way out of the small crises of life. Her cousins Mary Ellen lived in nearby Riverside while her husband was stationed overseas, and on one of their get-togethers, she invited Ann to join her and the kids for an outing to Palm Springs. On the way home, they were hit by a sandstorm so furious that it knocked out all the cars on a stretch of the road, including theirs. Of course, there were no cell phones in those days, so they just had to sit there while the sand whipped around them until someone knocked at the car door and offered a tow. When the driver prepared to drop them off by a dark gas station in a small desert town, Mary Ellen panicked. She recalls: “Judy saved the day. She *calmly* mentioned that we could have him tow us to Riverside. I hadn’t even thought of that, but it sure sounded like a good idea and the driver agreed to it. Before we knew it, we were tumbling downward as he lifted the rear of the car way up. Judy and I and two children had a wild trip riding backwards for more than 50 miles, having many laughs and fun.”



Sister Ann Stephen Stouffer and Sister Regina Shaughnessy

Ann's pluck and energy served her well when she received a cancer diagnosis. She was able to keep up with her duties as principal and, although she was still in recovery at the time of Mother Theodore's beatification in 1998, she donned a pink-flowered hat and enjoyed the pilgrimage and sightseeing. There is even a photo of her right next to Pope John Paul II's open vehicle, cheering with the crowd. Later, determined to regain full health, she joined Sister Barbara Reder in taking fitness classes at the local community college.

Ann was so devoted to the St. Anthony parish community that when only two would be living in the large convent and it was time to turn it over to another women's congregation serving the parish, she remained four more years as principal. She then accepted the position of Director of Residential Life and Services and Administrator of Providence Hall just as it reopened after the renovation. This was a position dear to her heart as she ministered to the needs of the sisters. Providentially, she also had the opportunity to accompany her longtime friends Sisters Agnes Farrell and Regina Shaughnessy through their final illnesses. When early signs of Alzheimer's forced her to retire in 2016, she was heartbroken. Gradually, she was able to take solace by gardening, swimming in St. Joseph's Lake, and side trips with her good friend Sister Kay Kelly. A high point of this time was her 80th birthday, when a huge contingent of family arranged to celebrate the occasion with a party in the community room.

We were saddened to watch her gradual decline, even more so when she required full-time care and

moved to Providence Health Care and then on to Clinton Gardens. It was comforting to know that Sisters Ann Matilda Holloran and Mary Ann McCauley took advantage of their nearby location to visit her often, but as time went, she was less able to respond. As Ann's Health Care Representative, Sister Barbara Reder's frequent visits and reports kept us up to date about the loving caregivers there who monitored her gradual peaceful decline. Nonetheless, it came as a shock when she left us so quickly and unexpectedly.

Yes, dear Ann, it is hard to say this final goodbye. Perhaps that lucky star you were born under was the Star of Bethlehem luring you to the crib where Jesus himself came as a child. Now you are indeed "home for Christmas" with the God you loved so well and served so long.

Funeral services for Sister Ann Stephen took place on Tuesday, December 21, 2021, in the Church of the Immaculate Conception at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods. A Wake took place at 10 a.m., followed by Mass of Christian Burial at 11 a.m. Memorial contributions may be made in honor of Sister Ann Stephen to **the Sisters of Providence of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods.**

Sister Ann Stephen Stouffer - Complete Ministry

In Indiana: Teacher, St. Mary-of-the-Woods Village School, Saint Mary-of-the-Woods (1963-64); Teacher, St. Jude, Fort Wayne (1966-69); Teacher, St. Malachy, Brownsburg (1969-75); Director of Residential Life/Administration of Providence Hall, Saint Mary-of-the-Woods (2008-2015); Volunteer, Providence Spirituality & Conference Center and Providence Health Care, Saint Mary-of-the-Woods (2016-17); Residential Service Ministry, Saint Mary-of-the-Woods (2017-19); Prayer, Saint Mary-of-the-Woods (2019-21).

In Illinois: Teacher, St. Angela, Chicago (1964-66).

In California: Teacher, **St. Anthony, Gardena (1975-85)**; Teacher, St. Ambrose, Hollywood (1987-88); **Principal, St. Anthony, Gardena (1988-2007).**

[Sister Ann Stephen Stouffer \(spsmw.org\)](http://spsmw.org)