

‘Sister Hildie’ was beloved presence at IND for more than six decades

When School Sister of Notre Dame Patricia McCarron was a student of East Baltimore’s Institute of Notre Dame in the late 1970s, Sister Hilda “Hildie” Sutherland was the school representative who had an uncanny knack for being ever-present.

As students stepped off the bus in the morning, it was Sister Hildie who wished them each a good day, Sister Patricia remembered.

When they were leaving after basketball practice or a club activity, it was the same diminutive School Sister of Notre Dame who offered them a friendly smile and a word of encouragement on their way home.

And when visitors approached the historic building, Sister Patricia said, Sister Hildie warmly welcomed them at the school’s entrance.

“She really set the tone for the whole day – whether washing pots and pans with parents at a Communion breakfast, cheering at a basketball game, checking the halls or running the bookstore,” remembered Sister Patricia, headmistress of Notre Dame Preparatory School in Towson and a 1980 graduate of IND. “She did the simple things in an extraordinary way.”

After giving more than six decades of her life to service at IND, Sister Hildie died March 14. The Baltimore native had fallen ill three days earlier at IND and was rushed to the University of Maryland Medical Center in Baltimore.

Just 10 days shy of her 87th birthday, Sister Hildie had still been an active volunteer at IND even though she officially retired in 2016.

Few figures have been as intertwined with an institution as Sister Hildie.

Born Marjorie Helen Sutherland in 1932, Sister Hildie was one of nine children. Her mother died while giving birth when Marjorie was in first grade, according to

information provided by the School Sisters of Notre Dame.

“All of us being still very young,” Sister Hildie wrote in an autobiography provided by the School Sisters, “we were then raised under the careful guidance of the good Sisters of Charity (Daughters of Charity) at St. Mary’s Villa in Baltimore.”

According to the School Sisters, Sister Hildie was inspired to become a School Sister after running errands for the teaching order and getting to know them while visiting School Sisters at St. Thomas Aquinas School in Hampden.

Sister Hildie, who attended public school, entered the religious community Aug. 28, 1949, taking the name of Sister Hilda Marie, the headmistress at St. Mary’s who cultivated her religious vocation.

During her candidacy, Sister Hildie lived at IND, which then housed the religious community’s motherhouse. After professing her first vows in 1953, she ministered in Pennsylvania and New Jersey before returning to IND in 1954, according to the School Sisters.

Sister Hildie initially provided upkeep of the convent and worked as an aide at Ss. James and John School in Baltimore. Over the next several decades, she became a fixture at IND – cleaning, cooking, managing the bookstore, serving as director of housekeeping, director of hospitality and director of plant operations and more.

“She knew every nook and cranny of IND,” Sister Patricia said. “She had a window into the heart of every single IND girl. She was the spirit of IND.”

Sister Patricia said students of all generations loved Sister Hildie, often referring to her simply as “Hildie.” Using an old Baltimore term of endearment, Sister Hildie would refer to each student as “hon.”

“The halls echoed – echoed – throughout the day with, ‘Hi Hildie!’” Sister Patricia said. “In my day, she sold pretzels at lunchtime. Everyone wanted to get a pretzel because you loved to get to talk to her.”

Kathy Hobart, who taught at IND for 14 years and coached badminton and junior varsity basketball while assisting with varsity basketball, said Sister Hildie had a

deep sense of compassion.

“She helped so many thousands of young women,” Hobart said. “She would sometimes give them money when they needed bus fare or food or extra uniforms. She was a giving and caring person.”

Hobart noted that Sister Hildie had a good sense of humor, recalling how students loved to record video interviews with her. One of those interviews shows students teasingly asking Sister Hildie if she ever had a boyfriend.

“Sister Hildie responded by saying she had very many,” Hobart recalled with a laugh. “Then she started naming them: ‘Matthew, Mark, Luke, John.’”

Hobart was part of a team of IND supporters called “Hildie’s Elves.” Every Thanksgiving break, the volunteers helped Sister Hildie put up Christmas trees and hang Christmas decorations throughout the massive IND campus.

“Hildie’s Helpers,” an IND outreach during Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter that provides tons of food, clothing and other items to those in need in the communities surrounding IND, was begun by Sister Hildie in 1959 – the same year she professed her final vows as a School Sister. It had its roots in service to the poor that Sister Hildie provided in 1949 as a 17-year-old aspiring nun who was charged with reaching out to those in need surrounding her motherhouse.

In a 2014 interview with the Catholic Review, Sister Hildie noted that 40 percent of the IND student body are involved in the outreach named in her honor.

“It makes me relax, rejoice and thank God that we helped somebody else put food on the table,” she said.

Michael Reeb, an English teacher at IND, knew Sister Hildie for nine years after transferring to the school following the closure of Cardinal Gibbons School in Baltimore. He noted that the nun was beloved not only by the school community, but by many in the surrounding neighborhoods.

During the Baltimore Riots of 1968 following the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a neighbor put a black band around IND’s front door emblazoned

with "Sister Soul," he said.

The school was spared harm.

"She was their neighbor and they treated each other as such," he said.

Reeb noted that in the wake of Sister Hildie's death, students are praying the Hail Mary in a special way. The traditional Catholic prayer was Sister Hildie's favorite, he said.

Abbey Neuberger, a 2012 graduate of IND who teaches kindergarten at St. Joseph School in Cockeysville, said Sister Hildie loved to "show IND off."

"She used to take us up to the fourth-floor balcony and you could see the whole city," Neuberger said. "It was so pretty."

Neuberger recalled how she especially loved eating Sister Hildie's tuna sandwiches.

"I always asked for it with pickles," she said, "and she would make it special for me with pickles because she knew I liked it so much. She was a beautiful soul."

Sister Patricia said her friend did everything for love of the students and love of the Lord.

"IND was holy ground for Hildie," Sister Patricia said, "and she helped all who walked those halls understand that it was holy ground."

Funeral arrangements

Wake Service - March 21, 7 p.m. at Villa Assumpta, Baltimore

Viewing/Visitation- March 22, 2-7 p.m., Institute of Notre Dame

Funeral Mass - March 23, 11:30 a.m., Cathedral of Mary our Queen, Homeland

Memorial contributions in memory of Sister Hilda Marie Sutherland, SSND may be directed to the Institute of Notre Dame (indofmd.org).

Emily Rosenthal contributed to this story.

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