

Sister Kate Bell, R.S.M., who served as principal and pastoral associate, dies at age 84

Sister of Mercy Katherine Marie Bell, whose witness to the fight for civil rights in her native Alabama formed her nearly five decades of service in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, died Feb. 21 in hospice care at Sinai Hospital.

Known by associates and friends as “Sister Kate,” she was 84, and had been a Sister of Mercy for 65 years.

She gave 15 years as the principal of Immaculate Heart of Mary School in Baynesville, and nearly 30 more as the pastoral associate of St. Francis of Assisi, in the Mayfield neighborhood of Baltimore City.

“I describe her as bigger than life,” said Sister Fran DeMarco, the director of mission services at Mercy Medical Center in Baltimore. “She was always there for other people, and not just in our community. She was creative, and a great storyteller.”

According to an obituary prepared by her order, she was born in Montgomery, Ala., baptized Nancy Elaine and raised in the state. She attended Little Flower Elementary School and Convent of Mercy High School, both in Mobile. She came to Baltimore in 1953 to enter the Sisters of Mercy at Mount Washington, did her undergraduate work at the former Mount St. Agnes College, then returned to Alabama to teach in Mercy schools.

The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 heightened violent protests over integration throughout the Deep South. That era’s landmark events include the 1965 March on Selma, where Sister Kate was teaching.

“She wanted to march, but her bishop would not allow her to take part,” Sister Fran said. “She asked her community, ‘What can we do?’ They made lunches, so that people could stop by the convent and take a break. That began her thirst for social

action, and addressing the causes of prejudice and social injustice.”

Sister Kate also took to attending Mass at all-black churches. According to the obituary prepared by her order, Sister Kate said “these experiences greatly influenced my way of thinking and my future ministry.”

In 1971, she came to the archdiocese to serve as principal at IHM School. It was overcrowded, to the extent that students attended in two different sessions, and there were co-principals for a time, Sister Kate for grades 1-6 and Sister Fran for grades 7-8.

Dan Connolly, of the IHM class of 1983, was among the former students who responded to a Facebook post that shared the news of her passing.

“She just had a presence about her,” Connolly, a senior baseball writer for The Athletic, told the Review. “Her voice could get stern, but even then it had a hint of a soft country twang. ... She was the first woman of authority I encountered outside of my home. She handled it well, to the point that I remember her 40 years later.”

During that time, Sister Kate earned a master’s degree in administration at St. Bonaventure University in Olean, N.Y., and then a master’s degree in theology from St. Mary’s Seminary in Roland Park.

At St. Francis of Assisi Parish, Sister Kate led a number of ministries, according to Monsignor William F. Burke, its longtime pastor. She coordinated religious education, vacation Bible School and marriage preparation sessions.

“Our Christmas dinner basket outreach took off, she was responsible for that,” Monsignor Burke said. “She was our contact for Our Daily Bread, and began our connection to the Franciscan Center.”

Sister Kate supported Marian House, and in the 1980s supplied emergency care for an infant.

“She was a foster pastor for a night or two, her and (Sister) Deborah Kennedy, another member of our community,” Sister Fran said. “They didn’t have a place for a baby in their residence, so they emptied a chest of drawers and swaddled it there.”

Sister Kate retired from active ministry in 2014. A viewing will be held Feb. 27, 7-9 p.m., at the Leonard J. Ruck Inc. Funeral Home at 5305 Harford Road, and Feb. 28, 9-10 a.m., at St. Francis of Assisi Church. A funeral Mass will follow Feb. 28, at 10 a.m., at St. Francis of Assisi.

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