

# **Sister Michelle Carroll, R.S.M., founding principal of Mercy High School, dies at 96**

Sister of Mercy Michelle Carroll, the founding principal of Mercy High School in Baltimore, died Aug. 23 in Savannah, Ga. She was 96 and had served as a Religious Sister of Mercy for 73 years.

"She was very much in control, but she was a very gentle woman," said Mercy Sister Carol Wheeler, who was an English, religion and Latin teacher at Mercy while Sister Michelle was principal. "I learned a great deal from her."

Sister Carol, who later led Mercy as the head of school for nearly four decades, remembered Sister Michelle as an excellent administrator.

Sister Michelle, never jumped to conclusions quickly, Sister Carol said. When Sister Carol wondered what punishment Sister Michelle would give students when they got into trouble, Sister Michelle would say, "It all depends."

The quote, Sister Carol said, sticks out in her memory, as Sister Michelle used it often to say that she needed more information.

"She was an extraordinary person," Sister Carol said. "The students respected her a great deal."

Sister Michelle was also greatly popular with her teachers - young Sisters of Mercy including Sister Augusta Reilly, who taught English and creative writing and advised the dramatics club.

Sister Augusta recalled Sister Michelle's southern charm and quiet elegance. Sister Michelle allowed the dramatics club to stray from the previously standard all-girls, Catholic high school plays such as Alice in Wonderland and Treasure Island, and move to more sophisticated readings from authors such as John Knowles and J. D. Salinger.

“Sister Michelle respected what we wanted to do enough to let us do it,” Sister Augusta said. “She had balance – respect for what was old, but also for what was new.”

A Florida native, Sister Michelle earned a bachelor’s degree in chemistry from Florida State University. During World War II, she was a research chemist and helped develop Vitamin C supplements for United States soldiers.

In 1944, Sister Michelle entered the Sisters of Mercy. She taught at Mount St. Agnes High School and College in Mount Washington and was a teacher and principal at St. Vincent’s Academy in Georgia. She earned a master’s degree in education with certifications in chemistry and biology from what is now Loyola University Maryland in Baltimore in 1958.

Two years later, she was appointed founding principal of Mercy High School by the Sisters of Mercy. The school opened its doors Sept. 26, 1960 to 315 freshmen. By 1963, the school was thriving with more than 1,000 students enrolled.

In “First & Forever: A People’s History,” an archdiocesan history by Rafael Alvarez, the author quotes Sister Michelle’s recollections of a 1964 visit to the school by Beatles guitarist George Harrison.

“I got a call from a manager or an agent, a very professional call,” Sister Michelle said in the book. “This person said the Beatles had a short period of time (in Baltimore) and really wanted to know what schools in the United States were like and could one of them come over.”

The book states that Mercy, then four years old, was considered state-of-the-art for female, secondary Catholic education. Sister Michelle was happy to welcome the musician for a visit, which lasted no more than a half-hour, but said that she did not know much about rock and roll.

“I was in my early 40s in 1964 and there were always crazes that girls (were susceptible to),” she said. “But I can’t recall any nearly as strong as this one. It was a different magnitude.”

Phyllis Herz Procheska saw Harrison walking the halls, and asked to be excused

from class to go to the office, where she was able to meet him and get an autograph.

“Sister Michelle was in the office with us and she told me to stay where I was until he left the building so I wouldn’t cause a riot in an all-girls school,” Procheska is quoted in the book. “She knew what I’d done and I saw her smile.”

Sister Michelle served as principal until 1966, when she transitioned to her role as assistant provincial of the Baltimore Province of the Sisters of Mercy. She returned to Mercy High School in 1971, serving two years as a guidance counselor, before becoming provincial of the Baltimore Province and vice president of sponsorship for St. Joseph’s Health System in Atlanta.

“Her focus on academic excellence and rigor are hallmarks of a Mercy education today,” Mary Beth Lennon, current president of Mercy High School and a 1985 graduate, wrote in a letter to the school’s community. “Throughout her life, Sister Michelle maintained a lively interest in Mercy High School Baltimore ... As a school community, we are deeply grateful to God for Sister Michelle’s life of visionary leadership and faithful service.”

A funeral Mass was offered for Sister Michelle Aug. 29 at St. Frances Cabrini Catholic Church in Savannah.