

Sister Paula Marie Phelan, a pioneer in pathology, dies at 105

Mercy Sister Paula Marie Phelan, a pioneer in pathology who devoted more than six decades to ministry at Mercy Medical Center in Baltimore, died Sept. 12. She was 105.

Sister Paula Marie began her service to Mercy – the same hospital where she was born – when she was assigned to build up its fledgling medical technology school in 1942.

Upon receiving the assignment, Sister Paula Marie sought advice from her older brother, Patrick, since she didn't even know what a medical technologist did. The future surgeon assured his sister that it was an up-and-coming field and that she would love it.

After completing two years of study, Sister Paula Marie became the director and supervisor of Mercy's School of Medical Technology and its clinical labs. The program ran in collaboration with Mount St. Agnes College in Baltimore, and Sister Paula Marie served as the liaison between the hospital and college.

Under her leadership, the medical technology program grew from a two-year to a four-year degree program. Sister Paula Marie retired from the pathology department in 1990 as laboratory administrator. She then volunteered as the convent coordinator for the sisters who lived at the medical center, a position she began in 1970. She left Mercy in 2006.

In a 2009 interview with the Catholic Review, Sister Paula Marie remembered that she always began the first day of class as director of the medical technology school by reminding students that if they wanted to make it through the program, they would have to work hard – very hard.

"I wanted to inspire them to reach their potential," she explained.

Tom Mullen, president and CEO of Mercy Medical Center, said in a written

statement that the best word to describe Sister Paula Marie is “remarkable.”

“Decades before I came to Mercy, Sister Paula Marie was setting the standard of care in clinical pathology,” he said. “She was raising the bar of excellence and expected others to follow her lead.”

Mercy Sister Helen Amos, executive chair of the Board of Trustees for Mercy Health Services, said those who knew Sister Paula Marie described her as “steadfast, compassionate, innovative and enduring.”

“Her dedication and impact extended beyond the walls of Mercy into other healthcare institutions where her students went on to practice, into the lives of her staff and co-workers and even to the patients she served,” Sister Helen said in a written statement.

Sister Paula Marie was born in 1914 as Margaret Mary Phelan, the second of 11 children. She went to elementary school at St. Ann School in Baltimore and Little Flower School in Woodstock, where she lived for a time with her grandmother. She attended Mount St. Agnes High School in Baltimore before entering the Sisters of Mercy in Mount Washington to begin her postulancy at age 16.

According to Mercy Medical Center, Margaret Mary asked her religious superiors if she could take a religious name in honor of her favorite saint, St. Paul. They obliged, giving her the name “Paula Marie.”

Before beginning medical ministry, Sister Paula Marie served as an elementary school educator, teaching at St. Bernard School in Baltimore and in Columbus, Ga. She recalled being able to manage classes of more than 50 students.

It was at Mercy, however, where Sister Paula Marie had her greatest impact.

In 2009, when Mercy honored Sister Paula Marie’s decades of service by naming a renovated conference room in the pathology department after her, Sister Paula Marie said she felt “supported by the warmth and love and kindness and hard work of all the people here at Mercy.”

She said she was inspired by a quote she chose to be engraved on her religious ring:

“I can do all things in him who strengthens me.”

Sister Paula Marie remained active well into her old age. At 100, she was the oldest participant in the 1K Walk for Marian House at the Villa, a retirement convent for Sisters of Mercy and the Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart.

Sister Paula Marie died at Mercy Springwell Senior Living Center in Baltimore. A funeral Mass was offered at Mercy Medical Center Sept. 14.