Sisters mark 50 years of service in Alabama

Sisters of St. Joseph

Sister Mary Maloy, SSJ, helped found PEP — Parents Encouraging Parents — a group that attempts to reach families at risk for child abuse and neglect.

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Sister Francis David Backman may be the only Catholic religious to have ever paraded with the Ku Klux Klan.

The white-haired, soft-spoken sister was, by her own definition, a naive young woman when she stumbled across a Klan parade in Selma, Ala., in the 1950s. Sister Backman noted that she was driving up a back street in that city when she came to a main thoroughfare down which the white-robed upholders of racism, anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism were marching.

"I was just young and foolish," Sister Backman said with a smile. "I thought, 'Well, I might as well be part of (the parade),' but I got out as fast as I can."

Although she eventually turned down another side street to escape the Klansmen's massive promenade, the young sister and her colleagues never fled their fight against the poverty suffered by blacks in segregated Selma.

Sister Backman joined 500 other Sisters of St. Joseph and their guests at the order's East Avenue motherhouse on Saturday afternoon, March 17, for a celebration marking the 50th year of the order's mission in Alabama.

The festivities were highlighted by a Mass concelebrated by Bishop Matthew H. Clark and Detroit's Auxiliary Bishop Moses B. Anderson, one of the nation's 13 black bishops. Also present were Father Roger La charité, director of the Edmundite Mission Office which works closely with the sisters in Selma, and Father James Robinson who grew up at the Edmundite fathers' mission.

Photographs, pamphlets and slide shows presented in a room adjoining the motherhouse chapel told a story of the sisters and priests' work in Selma since the 1940s, when legal segregation still divided the white and black communities and the Catholic missionaries were viewed suspiciously.

Current pictures and press releases likewise depict present-day Selma, in which a racially mixed city school board plays hardball politics over the firing of a black superintendent. Sister Anne Urquhart, director of the Catholic Social Ministry Office in Selma, protested the superintendent's dismissal publicly.

That Sister Urquhart feels free to speak her mind about Selma's civic issues shows just how far her order has come in defining its role there. In the bad old days of segregation, the sisters had to watch their political steps, according to Sister Remigia McHenry, who taught at the Good Samaritan School of Nursing in Selma from 1949 to 1957, and who is currently doing research work on the aged at Auburn University.

When they first arrived in Selma, the sisters concentrated on serving the needs of the black community within the boundaries defined by segregation, Sister McHenry recalled. "We practiced the corporal and spiritual works of mercy," she said. "We weren't there to be rabble-rousers. We never violated segregation laws."

The sisters detested the segregation system, she emphasized, but instead of taking part in the civil disobedience that marked other aspects of the civil-rights movement, the order chose to sponsor workshops on legal challenges to segregation.

Sisters of St. Joseph

Sister Francis David Backman, SSJ, came to Selma, Ala., in the 1950s to teach at St. Elizabeth's School.

The sisters may have played a low-key role in moving Selma's blacks forward, but indirectly they provided great impetus to the civil-rights movement. The sisters' many subtle achievements were pointed out by one of Sister McHenry's former students, who joined her former mentor on Saturday.

"I was really trying to do something on my own," Etta Perkins said of her days as a nursing student in the first class at Good Samaritan, which was the only school for black nurses in the Selma region when it opened in 1950. Perkins remembered the sisters as doting instructors.

"The sisters were like mothers," she said. "They protected us from the outside world. They gave us a little food. They gave us clothes people sent us from the North."

And they gave the young black women a chance to make their mark in the medical world, Perkins said. When Good Samaritan alumnae reminisce, they agree that — even if they went on to higher-paying positions at other institutions — they never have felt the camaraderie and happiness they found working at the order's hospital, she noted.

Ironically, like the scriptural Good Samaritan who tended the wounds of the battered traveler who had been ignored by his fellow Judeans, the order's hospital was one of only two in Selma that accepted civil-rights marchers wounded on March 7, 1965, by Selma's police force during a demonstration at a bridge.

Perkins vividly recalled the day, noting she was at home during the demonstration looking after her new-born baby. "I was sitting in the kitchen," she said. "One of the teachers ran in and said, 'They're beating the marchers, and they're jumping in the river!'"

The young mother threw on her nursing uniform and went to Good Samaritan. "I don't think there was a nurse that worked there that didn't come in," Perkins asserted.

The hospital never quite recovered from that day, the nurse recalled, as white doctors opposed to the civil-rights movement began relocating their practices from the hospital. Financial problems helped close the institution for good in 1983.

"It broke my heart to see that school go, but it was the first thing that had to happen," Sister McHenry said, pointing out that the demise of Good Samaritan was related to the opening of Selma's other hospitals to the city's blacks.

Segregation may be gone, but the sisters still have their work cut out for them among Alabama's impoverished blacks, as Sister Nancy Clark attested. A rural education worker in Pine Apple, Ala., Sister Clark's efforts include persuading black parents to become actively involved with their children's education.

One of her projects consists of soliciting library volunteers from the black community. Explaining the program's importance, Sister Clark said one boy who had lacked any interest in school, has done a 180-degree turn since his mom started volunteering at the local library.

"He's just walking tall because his mom has volunteered," she said, adding that his teachers have noticed a marked improvement. "I'm just really pleased with that possibility for children."

Etta Perkins would agree.