

We of Nojoshing

Nojoshing – Indian word for the area where our pioneer members settled in 1849; it means “piece of land stretching into the water.”
The name was changed later to Saint Francis, Wisconsin.



Newsletter of The New Assisi Archives of the
SISTERS of ST. FRANCIS of ASSISI, 3221 South Lake Drive, Saint Francis, WI 53235-3799

We celebrate the memory of our beloved
Sister Bernice Mertens
formerly Sister Mary Carmel
September 9, 1930 – April 10, 2024

Sister Bernice was born in Houghton, Iowa, to Henry and Eleanor (Holtkamp) Mertens, the third child in a family of five girls and two boys. She was baptized at St. John’s Church. In the parish school, she was taught by our Sisters until her family moved to Mount Pleasant, Iowa, when she was a junior in high school. After high school, Bernice did office work for 6½ years before entering our congregation on February 6, 1955. When she became a novice on August 11, she received the name Sister Mary Carmel; she resumed her baptismal name after Vatican Council II.

Sister Bernice taught second grade at Sacred Heart School while she was a second-year novice. On August 12, 1957, she professed vows and continued to teach at Sacred Heart School until 1959. With a new assignment, she taught first grade at St. Veronica School for one year and then at St. Gerard in Milwaukee.

From 1961-1964, Sister Bernice attended Alverno College, Milwaukee, and earned a bachelor’s degree in business education. For the next 27 years, she taught business education classes at St. Mary’s Academy (SMA). As a part-time student, she pursued further studies and in 1972 obtained a master’s degree in business education at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Sister Bernice continued to teach business education classes at SMA until the school closed in 1991.

During a sabbatical from 1991–1993, Sister Bernice participated in a program in Little Falls, Minn., which focused on holistic growth and resources. At the end of the program, she took a position as the provincial team administrative secretary for the Salvatorian Priests and Brothers in Milwaukee. In 2009, Sister Bernice retired and moved to Clare Hall. In 2019, along with 70 retired Sisters, she moved to the new St. Francis Convent (now Franciscan Shore).

Those who knew her describe Sister Bernice as a “jokester” and storyteller, but these were often made-up tales from her imagination. Anyone not acquainted with her fiction had to be advised to not take what they heard as fact. She loved to play cards and games on the computer.

As a teacher Sister Bernice was acclaimed by her students. On Facebook posts, SMA alumnae who had taken her classes in typing and shorthand shared that their fast typing skills were a result of Sister Bernice's classes. Graduates had no trouble finding employment because they came highly qualified. Employers asked Sister Bernice to recommend more qualified students.

Sister Bernice set high standards in her classes and demanded perfection. Joann Felden, a SMA graduate and who is approaching 40 years as an employee at St. Francis Convent, remembers an incident in Sister Bernice's class. "She was a good teacher – she had high expectations – she was a perfectionist and expected that of her students. One of my classes was business machines. I still remember that she used to time us to enter a list of numbers on the calculator and then she'd check the printed tape of our work. Even if I got the correct end result, she docked points if I corrected something I entered incorrectly on the tape. For example, if I caught myself entering 510 instead of 501 and subtracted the 510 and added the 501 so that I'd get the correct result, that was still an error."

Sister Bernice coached a spelling team and in 1980 she entered a five-member team in a contest sponsored by the Administrative Management Society. Out of a list of 500 words, the team scored 491 and emerged the winner.

In the course of the last year, Sister Bernice's health began to fail more significantly and she enrolled in hospice. Her condition became more acute two days before her death. Father Byron Haaland, SCJ, anointed her. God called her home to the fullness of eternal life on April 10, 2024, at 6:20 p.m. Sisters Richelle Ranallo and Eleanor Smith were present at the time of her peaceful death.

Sister Bernice wrote that among the things that energized her were the first snowflake of the season, beautiful sunsets, the first sign of spring, and the gorgeous autumn color. We can pray with her,

"O God, how great your name throughout the earth."

Psalm 8 paraphrased

~ Sisters †Marie Colette Roy and Marcia Lunz