



School Sisters of Notre Dame
Atlantic-Midwest Province

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Sister Irene Kelly, SSND
October 21, 1932 – May 23, 2018



Wilton, CONN – Sister Irene Kelly, 86, died peacefully on the afternoon of May 23 at Villa Notre Dame. She was a professed member of the School Sisters of Notre Dame for 62 years. Sister Irene was an educator in N.Y., Connecticut and Massachusetts for 24 years before ministering in Puerto Rico for 30 years.

Irene Kelly was born in Norwood, Mass. on October 21, 1932. She was the daughter and third child of John Kelly and Grace Welch; her father was a policeman. She had one sister, Rosita, and two brothers, John and William. When she enrolled as a sophomore in 1948 at Mission Church High School in Roxbury, Massachusetts, Irene Kelly met the School Sisters of Notre Dame for the first time.

Irene worked as a telephone operator for a year following high school before entering the Candidature in Baltimore on August 28, 1954. On July 15 the following year, she was received into the Novitiate with the religious name, M. Rosarita. Her final profession was at the Wilton Motherhouse on July 27, 1962.

During her years of temporary commitment, Sister Rosarita taught at St Anselm School, Brooklyn, New York, and St Raphael, East Meadow, and St. Patrick, Glen Cove, both on Long Island.

In 2001, an email arrived at Wilton from a former St. Anselm student who wanted very much to find and thank Rosarita. He wrote:

She made a tremendous contribution to my life that I can never

repay. I had been labeled as 'retarded' at the local public school and written off. Sister did an assessment and found that I had a very high IQ. I just couldn't focus or concentrate for very long periods. She worked with me, one on one, and in a short time I caught up with everything I missed in my first 4+ years of school. In 1976 I earned a Ph.D. and have had a very successful career. Lately, I realized how much I owe her.

Sister Irene earned a B.A. in Education with a minor in Psychology from Seton Hall University in 1964, and an M.A. in Physical Education from Boston University in 1972. From 1971 to 1981, she taught Phys Ed at Brighton High School in the Boston Public School System, while living at the Mission Grammar School Convent. "Kelly," as she came to be called, was an excellent teacher and coach to city kids at a challenging time. The 1970s were very difficult, even violent, in Boston. Busing that was meant to desegregate the public schools, caused enormous conflict.

She then moved to Puerto Rico where she ministered for three decades. In Caguas, she served at Notre Dame High School for many years, as a consultant in education and grant writer. She also taught physical education during this time. From 2001 to 2011, she was administrative assistant to Mr. José Grillo, a Notre Dame graduate and long-time principal of that high school. His aunt, Sister Monserrate Grillo, had been one of the first vocations in Puerto Rico after the Congregation went there in 1915. Kelly wrote, "I drank in the sun, the sea, the flowers, and the laid-back Latin culture. These were the happiest years of my religious life."

On April 14, 2000, the 131 School Sisters who had served in Puerto Rico were honored for carrying out Blessed Theresa's vision of education in a culture so very different from her own. A cast iron sculpture of Mother Theresa, with two children wearing the original uniform of the Colegio, was sheltered under a Caribbean palm and stood near a fountain. As each sister's name was read from a plaque, a student threw a yellow rose into the still waters. When all 131 names were read, the fountain sprang to life showering the flowers with gratitude. Mr. Grillo and Kelly had organized and carried out this well-deserved tribute. All the sisters on the island at that time were present.

Villa Notre Dame in Gurabo, built as the PR regional house around 1980, had always had problems with water. Kelly in her role as grant writer obtained a grant for water and emergency lighting from the Retirement Fund for Religious, initiated by the U.S. Catholic Bishops in 1988, and later administrated by the National Religious Retirement Office (NRRO). These funds made reliable and sufficient water available daily to the community, and electricity in an emergency.

In 2011, when she came to Villa Notre Dame Wilton, Kelly continued her enduring love for sports. She never missed a tennis or golf game on TV.

Kelly was known and loved for her Irish sense of humor. She could always be depended upon to liven up a gathering. When she learned that she was in the last stage of her life with leukemia about a month before her death, her good spirit did not desert her. She even invited sisters to her funeral. She chose to return to Villa Notre Dame in Wilton from the hospital and there prepared peacefully for her death, which came quietly on the afternoon of May 23. Her dearest friend, Sister Bernardine Fontanez, had come from Puerto Rico to be with her during those last weeks. VND and Hospice nurses, and the visits and prayer of community members, eased her passage into eternity.

Sister Kelly's wake was presided over by Sister Barbara Bowers, VND Assistant Community Leader, on the evening of May 25. It had been prepared by Kelly and Bernardine together. Bernardine reminisced about how Kelly had had to adapt to Puerto Rican cultural values; how she could make a mouse believe he was a lion; and how she could get money from a rock, as long as she signed the appeal. People had great confidence in what she would do with their donations.

Father Tom Elliott, VND chaplain, offered the Mass of Christian Burial for the VND community the following morning, with nieces and grand nieces and nephews also present. Burial was at St. Mary Cemetery, Bethel, Connecticut.

Memorial contributions may be made to the School Sisters of Notre Dame, Atlantic Midwest Province, c/o Development Office, 345 Belden Hill Road, Wilton, Conn. 06897 or online: www.amssnd.org