

Sister Helena Fischer: Embracing change as an Ursuline calling

Adapting to change is ingrained in the Ursuline Sisters, from the words of Saint Angela Merici herself in her Last Legacy: “And if, according to times and circumstances, the need arises to make new rules or do something differently, do it prudently and with good advice.”

Perhaps that’s why Sister Helena Fischer is so at home in her ministry as registrar of Brescia University, where the one thing she can expect is change.

“We have to keep changing to provide what students expect,” said Sister Helena, now in her 23rd year in the registrar’s office, the past 20 as director. “We’ve gone to online report cards and transcripts.” The university has completed scanning every transcript in Brescia history, as well as those from the Mount Saint Joseph Junior College that began in 1925, so they can all be accessed via computer. She just instructed the faculty on an online program that will help chart a student’s progress toward a degree, which she hopes to offer to students soon.



Sister Helena and Carol Jackson have worked together in the registrar’s office since 1995. Other than a work study student, they make up the entire staff.

“It used to be, students expected to register and get their grades,” she said. “Now students expect the answer yesterday. They are so used to computers and cell phones giving them instant answers. (Brescia President) Father Larry (Hostetter) really stresses that we are here to serve the students’ needs.”

The students could not be in better hands than Sister Helena’s, said Carol Jackson, who has been the academic records assistant in the registrar’s office since 1995.

“She knows every bit of this job. Anything people need, they know to go to her,” Jackson said. “She’s really helpful if I need her. She’s a great boss.”



Sister Helena, center, is joined by Sister Marie Joseph Coomes, left, and Sister Rose Jean Powers in saying the Liturgy of the Hours near the tabernacle in the Brescia University Chapel. They say their morning prayers after the 7 a.m. Mass concludes.

The biggest change over the years is the advancement in computers, Jackson said. “When I started, we had a computer so slow that it would take 10 minutes to register the student,” Jackson said. “Sister Helena worked on getting it upgraded, because she knew what this office needed.”

Online courses have added a new wrinkle to the registrar’s role. Just in the social work program, Brescia has gone from nine online students two years ago to 91 now, said Keith Hudson, the new associate academic dean. There are two online students who are on active military duty in Afghanistan and Germany, Sister Helena said.

“Sister Helena is an absolute jewel to work with,” Hudson said.

“She works well under stress, and she just has a wonderful sense of humor.”

Hudson works with online classes in his new role at Brescia, and said Sister Helena’s vast knowledge as a registrar allows the university to handle multiple issues that arise.

“She absolutely promotes the team concept,” Hudson said. “She’s one of my favorite people on campus.”

The registrar is in charge of completing all the class schedules and getting them approved through the division chairs. Sister Helena also works with the coaches and athletic director because she must certify that the students have a high enough grade point average to compete. Working with the athletic department led to her enjoyment of attending Brescia athletic competitions, especially volleyball and basketball, she said.

She also works with Veterans Affairs students who are due money for school based on their military service, and she handles the documentation for teacher certification. The most fun part of her job is graduation, she said.

Sister Helena came to Brescia in 1987 as assistant registrar to Sister Alfreda Malone, and as director of institutional research. She became registrar in 1990 when Sister Alfreda retired.

“I consider it from day to day you do whatever needs to be done,” Sister Helena said. “Almost every student comes here to register, so it gives us the chance to meet the students.”

With an enrollment approaching 700 this year, Sister Helena is able to offer a personal touch that larger schools may not. “If a teacher says a student isn’t showing up for class, we call the student,” she said. “Some students will come by and say ‘hi.’”

Sister Helena will celebrate 50 years as an Ursuline Sister in 2011, and finds herself ministering at Brescia with one of her classmates, Sister Rose Marita O’Bryan.

“Sister Helena is one of the most steadfast and conscientious persons I know,” said Sister Rose Marita, who leads the Contemporary Woman program. “Sister Helena is insightful and has a heart of tenderness. She is a calming influence in the storms and stresses of living.”

For the past 21 years, Sister Helena has lived on the Brescia campus with Sister Rose Jean Powers.

“She’s a very dedicated person, very focused, and supportive of the community,” Sister Rose Jean said. “She’s a very detailed person. She’ll catch a lot of things that other people would miss. She’s very supportive of her family and mindful of the needs of other people.”

Sister Helena has ministered in big cities and tiny communities over her nearly 50 years as a sister, and said she has had a chance to grow in many ways.

“The gift I thought I was giving to be a religious has been a gift to me, in being in community and learning about faith and sharing,” she said.



Sister Helena and Sister Barbara Jean Head, left, use this window sill to raise violets to sell in the Mount picnic plant booth.

When in Rome



Sister Helena is pictured here on the day of her first Communion, with her first-grade teacher Sister Marita Greenwell and her parish priest, Father Joseph Saffer.

Sister Helena was born Helen Marie Fischer in the small farming community of Rome, on the outskirts of Owensboro, Ky., about 15 minutes from Maple Mount.

“My brother still lives on the home place. There were nine children growing up on the farm, we all had to help out,” she said. She’s right in the middle of seven girls and two boys. One of her brothers, Bernard Joseph, is deceased.

She gets a smile on her face when she hears the theme song to “The Andy Griffith Show,” because she thinks of her siblings all walking home together with their hoes over their shoulders. “We’d all go blackberry picking together,” she said.

Her father Robert was a farmer, and the family raised tobacco, corn, and wheat, along with small amounts of livestock. “When I was old enough, I helped with corn tasseling, where we’d pull the tops off the corn. It’s what they use for seed corn,” Sister Helena said.

Her mother Audrey raised the children. “The things we grew up with were the importance of prayer, our faith, and trust in God,” Sister Helena said. “We had the rosary together every night. I was taught that you honor your word, don’t say you’re going to do something unless you do it.”

All the Fischer children attended St. Martin Parish School in Rome. “In the lower grades, when we didn’t know how to read, our parents would ask us our Catechism questions at night,” she said.

The parish priest was Father Joseph Saffer, the principal was Ursuline Sister Ethel Sims, and her first grade teacher was Sister Marita Greenwell, now retired at the Motherhouse. In the middle grades she had the late Sister Leander Burch.

“Mom and Dad always had a bag of vegetables or some meat to send over to the priests and sisters,” she said.

After St. Martin, Sister Ethel arranged for Sister Helena to get a scholarship as a boarding student at Mount Saint Joseph Academy. “I was able to work in the chapel with Sister Louis Bertrand (Thompson). She was so sweet to work with,” Sister Helena said. “I’d dust all the kneelers and clean the floors. It was such a peaceful place.”

During her Academy days she learned some lessons that would last a lifetime. “We had crusades where we saved stamps and made rosaries to pass on,” she said. “What we do in community now is an extension of what we learned then -- save what you can, and help others.”

Hearing the call

Commitment to religious life was common in Sister Helena's extended family. She is a cousin to current Sister Fran Wilhelm, and to late Ursuline Sisters Mary Edgar Warren and Ancilla Marie Warren. Her cousin, Sister Marie Thompson, was a Sister of Mercy, and she is a cousin to Father Pat Warren and Father Jerry Calhoun.

Her thoughts about becoming a sister began in grade school, she said. "We were around the sisters so much, we knew the sisters," she said. "My cousins who were older were sisters, I knew what religious life was. I knew that Mom and Dad respected the religious life. We considered it a gift."

It was during her senior year that it became clear that she should enter religious life, she said. "I talked to the retreat master, and Sister Joseph Therese Thompson, the principal, set up an appointment with the superior. My family wasn't surprised."

She entered as a postulant with a large class in 1960, which included several of her Academy classmates, including Sisters Julia Head, Kathleen Kaelin, Nancy Murphy, and Rose Marita.

"It helped to enter with many of my classmates," Sister Helena said. "We were the second class to have a juniorate, to get our degrees before we began ministry. It was really a gift.

"Our days in the novitiate were busy, but because there were so many of us, we had lots of fun," Sister Helena said. "We played volleyball, and we had a couple who were great at coming up with a play to do."

When it was time to choose her religious name, there was already a Sister Mary Helen and a Sister Helen Marie. Although her mother went by her middle name of Audrey, her first name was Helena, so that is what Sister Helena chose.

She got her degree in French from Brescia. "They thought it was going to be instituted into elementary school, like Spanish is now," she said. She got her second degree in education from Morehead State University, with an emphasis in linguistics. Her classmate Sister Julia attended Morehead with her. "We were a curiosity," Sister Helena said. "That was an education to be around folks who didn't know Catholics.

"When I left home, the hardest thing was thinking I'd never be able to return," Sister Helena said. "The rules changed by the time I made my temporary profession, I could go home."



Sister Helena is joined at her silver jubilee celebration in 1986 by the members of her family who also committed to religious life. From left are Ursuline Sister Ancilla Marie Warren, Mercy Sister Marie Thompson, Father Jerry Calhoun, Ursuline Sister Mary Edgar Warren, Father Pat Warren, Sister Helena, and Ursuline Sister Fran Wilhelm.

A life in the classroom

Sister Helena's first ministry in 1965 was teaching first grade at St. Ignatius School in Louisville. "It was my first time away from Owensboro, that's when homesickness really set in," she said. Sister Grace Simpson was her mentor that year, and Sister Germaine Osborne helped her with her lesson plans. "We were so fortunate in community to have people to help us," she said.

In 1967, she moved to St. Francis School in Loretto, Ky., a very rural area, where she taught first grade. "One year I was teaching for the public school, I had to watch what I could say and what I couldn't say," she said.

It was while she was at St. Francis that changes from the Second Vatican Council were being implemented. "We were having classes with a priest once a week on the changes," Sister Helena said. "I told the superior, 'Father wants me to be a Eucharistic minister,' and she replied, 'Aren't there any men who can do it?' I think about how times have changed and all the positions women fill today."

In the Ursuline community, sisters were experimenting with modified dress during those years. "We changed habits three times," she said.



This is the square Sister Helena made as part of a sisters' quilt in 1999 to commemorate the 125th anniversary of the Ursuline Sisters of Mount Saint Joseph. The quilt was raffled off, but the winner donated it back to the community. It hangs in St. Angela Hall.

St. Louis suburb of Affton, Mo.

"Seeing all the Catholic high schools there, when I got to Brescia, I said people paid as much to go to high school in St. Louis as they did to go to college here," Sister Helena said.

Switching from the classroom to the principal's office had its ups and down, but there are many things to take pride in as principal, Sister Helena said. "It was a happy time when something was accomplished to help the children and teachers," she said. "I had the support of

Sister Helena was assistant principal her final year at St. Francis. She had completed her master's degree to become a principal by the time she went to St. Paul School in Leitchfield, Ky., in 1971, as principal and teacher. She served with Sisters Rita Scott and Elaine Byrne, and a lay teacher, who decided they would approach teaching differently.

Rather than teach specific grades, they learned that they each enjoyed teaching specific subjects, so they taught the same subjects to different grade levels. "I taught English and language arts all the way up," Sister Helena said. "The people there were so good."

After two stints in rural areas following Louisville, Sister Helena again found herself in a big city in 1974, when she was named principal of Seven Holy Founders School in the

the parents in working out plans for the children. I had to direct accreditation in St. Louis and in New Mexico.”

A second home

In 1980, her former principal at St. Martin, Sister Ethel Sims, was close to retiring as principal of St. Charles Borromeo School in Albuquerque, N.M. Sister Helena was asked to go to St. Charles for a year as a teacher, then to take over as principal in 1981.

The Ursuline Sisters first went to New Mexico to teach in 1918, nine years after two young men from Daviess County, Ky., -- Joseph and Lorenzo Stallings -- and their friend from Georgia moved there and settled in an area they called “Kentucky Mesa.” Two years later some more men from Daviess County arrived, including Felix Warren.

“My relatives were among those who lived on Kentucky Mesa, the Stallings and Warrens,” Sister Helena said. “I’d never been there before I went to minister.

“I looked at it as an opportunity to learn about my relatives,” she said. “I got to see a place where there was a big rock, where the men crawled under to sleep or hide when they first got there. My mother was thrilled she had a chance to come out. My family got to come to St. Louis and New Mexico because of my ministries.”

Sister Helena decided to teach fourth grade during her first year. “Sister Ethel and Sister Rose Ann Boone made sure I knew all the rich history of New Mexico,” Sister Helena said. “I had to practice the names of my students with the sisters before school started,” she said. “We visited Indian pueblos and went to the Spanish fiestas. It was not uncommon for a hot air balloon to land on our playground.”

Sister Rosemary Keough was coordinator of religious education at the school during some of those years. “I had just come back from South America and some traumatic experiences. Sister Helena was a calm, serene presence; open and supportive of my continuing need for rehabilitation and desire to return to Chile,” Sister Rosemary said. “Her organizational skills and neatness were models for my never-ending trials to get organized.

“I was amazed at the after-school programs Sister Helena had going for students who needed to wait for rides,” Sister Rosemary said. “Everything seemed to run like clockwork, but with a calm atmosphere that made St. Charles one of the top schools.”

The two had plenty of fun together as well. “We got to see the musical, ‘Texas,’ in Palo



One of Sister Helena’s favorite spots on the Brescia campus is this swing in the courtyard outside the Administration Building.

Alto Canyon. A special feature was a man-made thunderstorm with lightning splitting a tree in half,” Sister Rosemary said. “As we left the canyon, it seemed as if God said, ‘You ain’t seen nothin’ yet!’ and proceeded to show the most fantastic lightning/thunderstorm I ever saw.”



The nine Fischer children and their mother are pictured here in 2003. In the first row, from left, is Janie Howard, Rose Hodgkins, the late Audrey Fischer, Martha Long, and Jean Blandford; in the second row, from left, is Barbara Ann Stallings, Pauline Wink, the late Bernard Joseph Fischer, Sister Helena, and Sylvester Fischer.

things I’d never been associated with. I could relate to the different nationalities here at Brescia better.”

In 2009, the parish celebrated its 75th anniversary, and Sister Helena was sent an airplane ticket to come to the celebration. “It was good to see so many things actually completed.” A picture that hangs in her office called “After the Storm” was painted by the mother of one of her students.

“I started the Christmas Eve Mass with the children. They did the readings and the little children were invited to ring the bells,” Sister Helena said. “They are still having that children’s Christmas Eve service, it overflows the church.”

It was while she was ministering in New Mexico in 1982 that her father died. “They called to tell me they’d taken him to the hospital. I got on a plane, but I got fogged in, in St. Louis,” she said. Sister Helena was able to spend the night there with Sister Mary McDermott’s family, but her father died before she got home.

Coming home

In 1987, Brescia President Sister Ruth Gehres kept asking Sister Helena when she was coming back to Kentucky. “After seven years, I knew Mom was getting older, and I should come home,” Sister Helena said. “I knew Sister Alfreda was close to retiring as registrar. I told Sister Ruth I knew once I got out of elementary education, I’d never come back, because things change too much.”

On that same trip when Sister Helena was driving, she was pulled over by a police officer, Sister Rosemary said. “The officer asked for Sister’s license, and was gone for a long time at the back of the car. When he reappeared, he handed Sister a warning that only had a Scripture verse on it,” Sister Rosemary said. “We could hardly wait to find a Bible to see that verse. As I recall, it simply said, ‘We should obey the law!’”

Sister Helena said the seven years she spent in New Mexico was her favorite ministry. “There is something different about the way the people there express their faith,” she said. “Hispanics and Indians both use music and dance. I was not accustomed to any of that. The variety, the multicultural, there were so many

Once she was back at Brescia, she spent the 1990s as chairwoman of the annual Mount Saint Joseph Picnic, which benefits the retired Ursuline Sisters. "Someone asked me to be in charge and I said yes," she said. She asked her brother Sylvester to bring the burgoo cooking team from St. Martin Parish to help, and they've been cooking the burgoo ever since.

"My brother said he thought it was going to be just for one year," she said. She has siblings who continue to work in different booths at the picnic. "It helped that I had a brother or sister in almost every parish. I always look back at all the people who help and who made suggestions," she said. These days she runs the Information booth and oversees the raffle drawing.

Sister Rose Marita said she was "deeply inspired" by Sister Helena's leadership of the picnic, and called her "marvelously dependable" in however she is asked to serve. "The months of August and September are critical to (both registrar and the picnic) and Sister Helena gave her mind, body, and heart to both," Sister Rose Marita said. "Her commitment to wherever she brings her 'yes' is firm."

In June 2004, Sister Helena's mother died at age 93 -- 17 years after Sister Helena came home to be closer to her. "My mom taught us all to embroider, it's where I got my love of crafts," she said. "Mom was very strong, she worked hard all her life. She knew how to endure everything day to day. Toward the end of her life I'd say, 'How are you doing?' and she'd say 'The best that I can.'"

Sister Helena and her sisters visited their mother at the nursing home on Sundays and played cards with her. "We got in such a habit, my sisters and I still play cards on Sunday afternoon," she said.

Her favorite things to do in her spare time are play cards, such as Pedro or Hand and Foot, and to read novels by Tony Hillerman, who writes about New Mexico. She still does needlepoint, and is one of the sisters who contributed a block to the 125th anniversary quilt of the Ursuline Sisters of Mount Saint Joseph in 1999.

Sister Rose Jean said Sister Helena is a "whiz at Sudoku puzzles," enjoys going boating and swimming, and visiting the Derby Dinner Playhouse in Louisville as an activity with her family.

Sister Helena said she doesn't know what will be next for her, she just knows change will continue to come, and as an Ursuline Sister, she must adapt.

"That's our challenge no matter what our ministry is."



Sister Helena is joined by Sister Emma Anne Munsterman as they go through raffle tickets in the Information booth at the 40th Mount Saint Joseph Picnic on Sept.12.

By Dan Heckel