

Sister Mary Timothy Bland: A life in teaching God's little ones

In 1969, two years after she began teaching the third and fourth grade at St. Teresa School in Glennonville, Mo., Sister Mary Timothy Bland was approached by the superior, Mother Joseph Marian Logsdon, and asked to teach the first grade on a temporary basis.

"Switching to first grade was difficult," Sister Mary Timothy said. "I'd done my student teaching in third and fourth grade, and all my full-time teaching there." Comforted by Mother Joseph Marian's words that the assignment was "just temporary," Sister Mary Timothy took over the first grade class at St. Teresa.

Next she took over the first grade class at St. Christopher School in Radcliff, Ky. She led the first grade at St. Angela Merici School in Florissant, Mo., St. Joseph School in Bowling Green, Ky., and Blessed Mother School in Owensboro, Ky. – all just temporarily.

"I taught first grade for 20 years, 1969-88, then moved to the second grade in 1988," she said. She has been teaching the second grade ever since in Owensboro, now at the Owensboro Catholic K-3 Campus, in this her 44th year in the classroom.



Sister Mary Timothy asks one of her students for his prayer intention at the start of religion class at the Owensboro Catholic K-3 Campus.



Sister Mary Timothy, left, meets with the other three second-grade teachers every Thursday afternoon to plan and compare notes. The teachers are, from left, Andra Montgomery, Theresa McCarty and Carolyn Taylor.

and our faith. Because she is a religious, she exudes that."

The two meet with the other second-grade teachers at K-3, Andra Montgomery and Theresa McCarty, every Thursday afternoon to plan activities for the week. "That continuity really helps," Taylor said. "If we're not all on the same page, at least we're in the same ballpark."

"We have a wonderful spirit at K-3, we're kind of bonded," Sister Mary Timothy said. There are more than 400 students in the school, with six kindergarten classes, five first grades, and four second and third grades.

"I like that age. This is the sacramental year, and they get to write in cursive," Sister Mary Timothy said. "They are still innocent enough, anything you do for them, they are appreciative."

The staff at the Owensboro Catholic K-3 Campus is glad Sister Mary Timothy has made a career of teaching the early grades.

"She's awesome," said Principal Lori Whitehouse. "She has been a teacher a long time, she has seen education come full circle. She's always willing to embrace whatever comes along," Whitehouse said. "She does her newsletter and lesson plans electronically, and runs the Smart Board in her classroom. She does such a beautiful job preparing children for the sacraments."

Carolyn Taylor also teaches second grade at the K-3 Campus, and has taught with Sister Mary Timothy for 25 years. "She brings so much. She's so dedicated to the children and her mission," Taylor said. "She talks about Saint Ursula and Saint Angela Merici with the children. She's very patient with the children, and they love her."

It's beneficial having a sister in the school, Taylor said. "It's just really good to see that part of our Catholic heritage

While the Ursuline Sisters were once predominantly educators, Sister Mary Timothy is among only a handful of sisters in active ministry who have spent their entire Ursuline years in the classroom. The reason is simple -- “the love of teaching.”

“The summer I don’t look forward to going back, I need to start looking for something else,” she said. “Having children that you can teach a skill, that ‘aha’ moment, that just makes it worthwhile.”

Another sister who has spent her entire career teaching is Sister Laurita Spalding, and she recognizes the excellence and dedication Sister Mary Timothy brings to the classroom.

“She is able to meet the students where they are and help them grow and mature in their own time frame,” Sister Laurita said. “She is patient, caring, and compassionate. She truly has a passion for teaching.”

Always wanted to be a sister

Sister Mary Timothy was born Wanda Joyce Bland to William Edgar and Mary Lelia Bland, in the little town of Greenbrier, Ky., outside Lebanon. It’s an area so Catholic the locals call it “the Kentucky Holy Land.”

“We had a church, a store, and that’s about it,” she said.

“Egg” Bland, as he was known, was a tenant farmer before Sister Mary Timothy was born, and ran the grocery called the Calvary Store while the children were growing up. “We had rooms in the back where we lived,” she said. Later, he got a job at General Electric in Louisville, where he worked until he became ill.

Lelia or “Lil” Bland gave birth to 14 children, six of whom died as infants. She raised the remaining eight, and “did a great job,” Sister Mary Timothy said. Wanda was the seventh child born, but is third oldest among those who reached adulthood. From oldest to the youngest, the Bland siblings stretch a little more than 20 years.

“We had a good life. We were poor, but everyone else around us was too, so we didn’t know it,” Sister Mary Timothy said. “You never locked your door, you didn’t need to.”

Marion County is a hilly area, so on Saturday afternoons she would go hiking with the neighborhood children. “We lived in the center of town, so the neighbor kids would come over to play kick the can,” Sister Mary Timothy said. “We had nightly rosary, so sometimes the neighbor kids joined in until we were finished.”

Sister Mary Timothy went to Calvary Elementary School, and then St. Charles High School in St. Mary, Ky. They were public schools, but all the teachers were Ursuline Sisters.

“I always wanted to be a sister, as long as I could remember,” she said. “We’d go to confession on Saturdays, and the sisters would come in to pray. I was so impressed, they sat so still, and of course we were wiggling. I never wanted to be anything else,” Sister Mary Timothy said. “This is what I always wanted to do.”

The first Ursuline she met was Sister Mary Beatrice Donahue, who taught her first and second grade. “We lived in the store down the street from the school,” Sister Mary Timothy said. “I thought I was helping her, I’d come straighten up the pencils or other little jobs.” (Sister Mary Beatrice died in 2006.)

Other teachers she had were Sister Mary Francis Brumlow for third and fourth grade, Sister Jean Madeline Peake for fifth and part of sixth, Sister Joseph Ann Cissell for the rest of sixth, and Sister Miriam Medley for seventh and eighth. (Sister Jean Madeline and Sister Miriam are retired and live at the Motherhouse.) She had five Ursulines in high school, with Sister Jean Teresa Taylor the one who helped her the most. “When I was a senior, she found out I was going to enter the convent, and she helped me get all my things together.”



In 2004, Sister Mary Timothy and the remaining members of her novice class of 1964 celebrated their 40th jubilee as Ursuline Sisters of Mount Saint Joseph. In the first row, from left, are Sisters Karla Kaelin, Joan Riedley and Lisa Marie Cecil; in the second row are Sisters Diane Marie Payne, Laurita Spalding, Mary Timothy and Melissa Tipmore.



Sister Mary Timothy, center, is joined by Sister Mary Agnes VonderHaar, left, and Sister Rita Scott during the community election in December 2009. Sister Rita was the principal at Blessed Mother School in Owensboro when Sister Mary Timothy was a teacher there.

Hearing the call

During her senior year of high school, Sister Mary Timothy's class came to Maple Mount for a retreat. "Father Barry Rankin was the retreat leader. He said, 'If you think you have a vocation, go. If it turns out you don't, people will admire you for trying.' I came home and told my parents I was entering," Sister Mary Timothy said. "They were very happy. My first cousin was an Ursuline, she is three years older than me. She later decided to join the Poor Clare Sisters in Roswell, N.M. She is now Sister Mary Amata Thomas in Alexandria, Va."

The Ursuline Sisters were the only order Sister Mary Timothy considered. "They were the sisters I knew. I wanted to teach, and they are teachers."

Her postulant class had up to 21 members and her novice class had 20. Seven of those sisters remain – Sisters Lisa Marie Cecil, Melissa Tipmore, Diane Marie Payne, Karla Kaelin, Joan Riedley, Laurita Spalding and Mary Timothy.

"It was hard, but they were good years," Sister Mary Timothy said. "We'd go to Brescia (College for classes), had chores, and then studied. It built character as my mom said."

Sister Laurita met Sister Mary Timothy in 1963 and remains a dear friend. "I guess we struck up a friendship because we were both named Wanda and we came from the same part of Kentucky," said Sister Laurita, who is from neighboring Washington County. "It seemed that we were destined to be friends."

With no lay employees in those days, the young sisters had many hard jobs to do at the Mount. "One of the jobs that Sister and I were given was to clean the 'trunk room,'" Sister Laurita said. "One Saturday morning we came with vim and vigor to get the job done. After working all morning, we were so proud of the work we had done. We could hear the Lord saying, 'Well done, good and faithful servants.'

"Much to our dismay, we were met by the director and she gave the room the 'white glove' test," Sister Laurita said. "She ran her fingers over the window ledges, and needless to say, our job didn't pass the test. That was one part of the room we hadn't touched. I am sure, over the years, we have failed many a test, but, we are still going with vim and vigor and getting the job done."

Prior to entering, the only times Sister Mary Timothy had been out of her small town were a week she spent with her brother at Fort Knox, Ky., and the retreat to the Mount. "There was a lot of homesickness," she said. "Growing up, I was pretty shy. I was this little Calvary girl in this big place."

One of the people who helped her in her early days was Sister Pat Rhoten. "We had guardian angels, Sister Pat was mine. She took me under her wing, probably more than she thought she was going to," Sister Mary Timothy said. "She could answer my questions. If I was having a bad day, she was there to be a companion. It was like having a big sister to help you out."

Sister Pat, who now ministers part-time in the community archives, said, "I always felt very blessed to be asked to be her big sister."

"She is very devoted to her family," Sister Pat said. "She's certain that every second grade class she's taught is the best one ever. In fact, the two topics she'll always discuss are her family and her students."

When it was time to make her initial vows, Wanda Joyce Bland took the name Sister Mary Timothy in part to have something her sisters at home had. “My four sisters all have a Mary or form of Mary in their names, but I didn’t,” she said. “When I became a sister, I got my Mary. My sister had a son named Timothy Allen, and Timothy was one of my choices.”

A mission in the bootheel

Sister Mary Timothy left Kentucky for the first time in 1967 when she was assigned to teach third and fourth grade at St. Teresa School in Glennonville, Mo. “It was an adjustment. Marion County is so hilly and the bootheel is so flat.” Sister Mary Renee Monaghan was the principal.

After two years, she made her “temporary” switch to first grade. “Sister Mary Renee helped me, but I always credited Sister Mary Mercy Hayden, who took my spot when I left,” Sister Mary Timothy said. “They say you leave a piece of your heart in your first mission, and that is true. It’s the first place you go that you’re responsible for these children.”

Her next stop was at St. Christopher School in Radcliff, Ky., near the Fort Knox military base. “We were right at Fort Knox, so we had lots of children to come in and leave. We didn’t have stable numbers,” she said. The last remaining sisters who ministered with her at St. Christopher are Sister Jamesetta Knott and Sister Eva Boone.

It was while she was serving in Radcliff in 1973 that her father died of cancer, at age 59. “He was a hard worker,” Sister Mary Timothy said. “I think his dream was to be a farmer, but that was never realized. He had a garden at home and he took such pride in that garden. He worked all day, then came home and worked in the garden until supper time.”

After her father died, Sister Mary Timothy’s mother moved to Lebanon, a larger nearby city. She also started an idea that continues to mean so much to the Bland siblings.

“My brother had moved away, he was in the service. Mom wanted to keep us together, so she started a family letter,” Sister Mary Timothy said. Each member of the family would write one page and send it on to the next member. When it came back around, the sibling removed his or her old page and wrote a new one. “It got lost one time, so Mom started it over,” she said. The family letter began in 1973 and continues today among the siblings. “If there’s a new baby, there’s usually a picture included,” Sister Mary Timothy said.



One of Sister Mary Timothy’s students shows the class the candle that was used during her baptism.



Sister Mary Timothy shows the class pictures from one of her student’s baptism.

Small town sister in a big city

In 1975, Sister Mary Timothy was in culture shock when her next mission took her to St. Angela Merici School in Florissant, Mo., a suburb of St. Louis. “When I was little, my sister and I would play and we’d say, ‘Let’s talk citified,’” Sister Mary Timothy said. When she arrived in Florissant, the air conditioning was broken and she overheard the maintenance man, to which she thought, “Even the maintenance men talk citified here.”

The Florissant years turned out to be good ones, and the proximity to the big city offered many new experiences for Sister Mary Timothy. “We saw the Arch, the botanical gardens, and visited Old Town,” she said. “I would have never dreamed I would end up in St. Louis. The Lord has been holding my hand and leading me.”

In 1979, she came to Bowling Green, Ky., to teach first grade at St. Joseph School. “Mom was very happy I was back,” Sister Mary Timothy said. “She came to Bowling Green to take me home for visits, I didn’t drive then. I learned to drive when I got to Owensboro. I’d watch people drive and think, ‘I could never do that.’”

She called St. Joseph “a very affirming place. The teachers bonded, we had more time to be with each other.” Her average class size was 17.

In 1986 she moved to Owensboro to Blessed Mother School, still as a first-grade teacher. With her mother in advancing years, Owensboro was even closer to Nazareth Village, a retirement home run by the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, where her mom lived the last 15 years of her life.

It was at Blessed Mother that she was asked to take on the second grade. “I wanted to do the sacraments,” she said. Sister Rita Scott was the principal, and Sister Marie Carol Cecil taught with her.

In 1988, Sister Mary Timothy experienced the first of two school consolidations. With the number of students in parish-run schools declining, the Owensboro Catholic School System was created, closing some of the parish schools.

Blessed Mother kept its school, but the name was changed to St. Angela Merici – the second time Sister Mary Timothy got to teach at a school named for the Ursuline founder.

“We talked about her feast day” with the students, she said. The consolidation was difficult, like a grieving period. “The St. Stephen (Cathedral) students came to Blessed Mother, they lost their school,” she said. “We got through it, we’re better people for doing it.”

After Sister Marie Carol left in 1997, Sister Mary Timothy was the lone sister in the school, which she continues to be today. In 2004, she experienced another consolidation due to shrinking enrollment, when it was decided to create four school sites – the Owensboro Catholic K-3 Campus, 4-6 Campus, Middle School, and High School. Sister Mary Timothy continued to teach the second grade, but it meant moving to the campus on the grounds of Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church.

“I’d been at Blessed Mother 18 years, I’d only been to Our Lady of Lourdes once,” she said. “We felt like what St. Stephen and other schools went through the first time. You have to make the best of it. The faculty just accepts you, it’s great,” she said.

“This past year, we started Old Testament study on video after school,” Sister Mary Timothy said. “That was so neat, learning with each other. We’re hoping to get church history this year.”

With the economy improving and the Owensboro Catholic School students testing higher than the local public schools and the state averages, an increasing number of students are joining the Catholic schools, offering steady enrollment. “Over the years, the development office has gotten the word out more about Catholic schools,” she said.

She continues to be a parishioner at Blessed Mother, and she and Taylor, along with other former teachers from St. Angela Merici, go to breakfast monthly at Cracker Barrel. “She’s a great person,” Taylor said. “My husband has been very ill, she’s always been there for me, no matter what time of the day or night.”

Another of Sister Mary Timothy’s ministries is co-coordinator of Hurricane Hills, a cabin in a rural area near Boston, Ky., that was deeded to the sisters for them to use for recreation. She keeps the calendar and gets the keys to those who want to use it, and shares coordinator duties with Sister Laurita. “You just go and forget there’s an outside world,” she said. “It’s a neat place.”



Sister Mary Timothy stands in the back of the room as her second-graders recite the rosary to begin religion class at the Owensboro Catholic K-3 Campus.

Another transition

In 1995, the transition Sister Mary Timothy had to make was internal -- her mother died at age 82. While her youngest sister took her mother groceries and looked after her, Sister Mary Timothy talked to her mother every week.

“At 10 after 10 every Sunday, she would call me or I would call her,” she said. “If Father’s homily lasted longer than usual and I wasn’t home at 10 after 10, she’d say, ‘What happened?’”

Her mother taught her a love of family. “She was there for us. When things happened, you always ran to Mom.”

Her mother was very happy living at Nazareth Village, where she could attend Mass daily. “It was home to her, we’d go visit with her. She became a sacristan at Nazareth Village, that job became sacred to her,” Sister Mary Timothy said. “She’d shine up those candlesticks. The last trip she took was to my 50th birthday party. That was in October, she died in December.”

Last stop



Sister Mary Timothy welcomes her students back to class after a restroom and water fountain break.

cook and keeps our home feeling like a place of warmth and hospitality by her presence as well as her daily touches,” Sister Martha said. “Our desire to be community allows us to both be nurtured by time for morning prayer together and great meals and prayer in the evening when our schedules allow.”

Sister Mary Timothy is also a lot of fun, Sister Laurita said. “Tim has a great sense of humor, a hearty laugh, and some very wise sayings that she throws at you when there is a need.”

For the young girl from Greenbrier who always wanted to be a sister, the past 47 years have worked out well. “Becoming a sister is the best decision I ever made,” Sister Mary Timothy said. “It’s been a real learning experience.”

Sister Mary Timothy has no plans to go elsewhere to minister. “I plan on teaching until God tells me it’s time for something else,” she said. “Years ago, I said when I retired I wanted to rock babies, but I’m not really sure that will work out.”

In her free time she reads mystery novels by Jeffery Deaver, and crochets baby afghans and prayer shawls.

She lives in Owensboro, and for the third time, shares a home with Sister Martha Keller, who returned from ministering in Paducah, Ky., earlier this year to be full-time director of vocation ministry.

“I enjoy and appreciate the gift of Mary Timothy as my sister,” Sister Martha said. “She is always supportive, always interested in my day and ministry. She knows my personal friends and family and we enjoy teasing and laughing together. I can count on her to lift my spirit and carry me in prayer. Her saying, ‘I am very sorrowful,’ instead of ‘I am sorry’ is a favorite line I love, it always brings a smile to my face.

“Mary Timothy is kind and organized. She is a great cook and keeps our home feeling like a place of warmth and hospitality by her presence as well as her daily touches,” Sister Martha said. “Our desire to be community allows us to both be nurtured by time for morning prayer together and great meals and prayer in the evening when our schedules allow.”

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By Dan Heckel