

Sister Marie Brenda Vowels still carries the spirit of the Southwest

MAY 29, 2013 –

If it weren't for a fire at Vine Grove (Ky.) High School in the early 1940s, it's possible Frances Marie Vowels may have never become Ursuline Sister Marie Brenda Vowels.

The fire caused her to attend Flaherty Public School her senior year, where Ursuline Sisters Agnita Sweeney and Ruth Agnes Conners were her teachers. They were the first Ursulines who taught her and they had a profound effect on her future vocation.



"I received a missal for getting the highest average in religion that year and also a scholarship to the Mount Saint Joseph Junior College, but I decided that summer to enter the novitiate," Sister Marie Brenda said. "Sister Agnita talked about the need for vocations. I thought I should help out."

Sister Marie Brenda has been helping out as an Ursuline Sister for 68 years, with 30 of those years spent as a teacher or parish minister in the Southwest, serving the needs of poor Native American or Spanish families.



Sister Marie Brenda is pictured in 1970 with her longtime friend and spiritual director, Father Meldon Hickey, in Grants, N.M. Father Hickey died in 2005.

Sister Marie Brenda was the second oldest of 14 children born to the late Steven Edward and Maude Elizabeth Vowels. (She has one brother and two sisters still living.) She was born in Louisville, but when she was 4, her father lost his job during the Depression and the family moved to her maternal grandfather's farm in Meade County, about an hour away.

"We had no electricity until I was 13," she said. "The day we got electricity I did seven loads of laundry."

The first Ursuline Sister she met was Sister Jamesina Spain, who prepared her for the sacrament of Confirmation when she was 10. "Her story telling about the saints stuck with me," Sister Marie Brenda said.

She had not given much thought to becoming a sister until the influence of Sisters Agnita and Ruth Agnes. "I was never sorry I became a sister," she said. "I've had a happy life and loved all my ministries."

“I had a huge crowd for my investment, relatives even came in a Flaherty school bus and on the back of my grandfather’s cattle truck,” she said. She is still not sure how the name Marie Brenda was chosen for her, but she’s never regretted it. “I’m the only Brenda in the community.”

When she entered in 1945, the Ursuline Sisters were predominantly teachers, and her first teaching ministry was in 1947 at St. Romuald School in Hardinsburg, Ky., teaching third, fourth and fifth grades all in the same room.

“It’s kind of hard preparing lessons for three levels,” she said. After stops in two more Kentucky elementary schools over the next seven years, she was asked to teach the first four grades at St. Anthony School in Axtel, Ky.

“That was hard to have them all in the same classroom,” she said. “I had to keep the older kids busy while tending to the first-graders.” When the superior asked her in the summer of 1958 if she would like to teach at Sacred Heart School in Farmington, N.M., she jumped at the chance.

The Land of Enchantment

“It was a big adventure for me,” she said. “It was a lot of fun to ride on the train.”



Sister Marie Brenda poses with the daughters of Edwin and Jane Leon outside their home at the San Estevan Indian Mission in Acoma, N.M., in the mid-1980s.

She was in Farmington, in northern New Mexico, for a year, then spent the next four years at St. Joseph School in San Fidel, about halfway between Albuquerque and Gallup. It was the beginning of a lifelong love for the Southwest.

“I liked (New Mexico) right away. I would have stayed longer if I could have,” she said. “We’d walk the foothills on the mesas and have a picnic. We had happiness on our missions. We’d pick nuts to make candy. We’d freeze apples so we could make pies in the winter.”

This is what she wrote about her time in New Mexico. “In the early days (1959-63) there were 27 Ursulines in New Mexico – 10 at Farmington, 10 at Waterflow and seven at San Fidel. We became close friends with the sisters in New Mexico and always got together for Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter. At Thanksgiving, after dinner we would go to Shiprock to skate. Brother Florence would fit us with skates and give us refreshments and what great fun we had. We usually gathered at San Fidel at Christmas and at Waterflow for Easter. When school was out there was a retreat for sisters at Waterflow, so I was the cook for four years. I would arise at 4 a.m. and make several pies or cakes or yeast bread for 30 people or more.”



Sister Marie Brenda, right, joins Sister Marie Montgomery with some Navajo children outside a hogan in Houck, Ariz., in the early 1990s.

many times didn't know any English," she said.

Sister Marie Montgomery served 41 years in the Southwest, some of those with Sister Marie Brenda. "She's a woman of prayer and very grateful. If you do anything for her, she just keeps thanking you," Sister Marie said. "She made friends wherever she went. She led RCIA for years in New Mexico. She loved those people and she loved to teach them."

For 18 of the next 20 years beginning in 1978, she was a parish minister teaching religious education at San Juan Pueblo, Acoma and Zuni in New Mexico and at Houck, Ariz. "I learned just a little of each native language, enough to converse a little with the older members of the tribes, who

Her 10 years in Acoma were her favorite, and one year she had 98 children receiving the sacrament of Confirmation. "The people were very friendly and cooperative," she said.

Sister To and Fro

Some of the sisters who ministered in New Mexico stayed there for many consecutive years, but Sister Marie Brenda came back to Kentucky several times to teach or be a principal before returning to the Southwest.

In 1970, she was asked to be principal and teacher at St. Andrew School in Harrodsburg, Ky., which required her to do three things she'd never done – be a principal, teach the seventh and eighth grades and learn to drive. "I had to get up to study eighth grade math every morning," she said.

She taught all grades in her years in the classroom, but she enjoyed fourth grade the best. "They were old enough to do things on their own but were not a discipline problem."

In 1975, Sister Marie Brenda was chosen to lead the community post office at Maple Mount, but after a few months on the job, the superior decided she was needed to take over as principal and teacher at St. Joseph School in



Sister Marie Brenda, center, joins other well-wishers at a farewell party with Father Dale Jamison, OFM, second from left, in the late 1990s.

San Fidel, N.M. After three years there, she began 18 years of parish ministry in the Southwest.

From 1995-97, she served in outreach in the far western Kentucky town of Benton, taking communion to people in hospitals and nursing homes. In 1997 she returned to New Mexico for a year, but she needed surgery in 1998, and knowing the conditions where she lived in New Mexico were not conducive to her recovery, she decided it was time to come home to the Mount for good.

“It was hard leaving New Mexico, most people think it is,” she said. “The people make the place.”

Sister Marie Brenda has a back ailment, and once she returned to Maple Mount, she found exercising in the pool at Owensboro’s HealthPark did wonders for her. It also helped her develop a friendship with the woman who drove her to the HealthPark for 12 years, Sister Ann Patrice Cecil.

“She loved exercising in the water,” Sister Ann Patrice said. “She’s a wonderful motivator, even if she didn’t feel good, she was very dedicated to exercise.”



Sister Marie Brenda plays progressive rummy with Father Valentine Young, OFM, who came for a visit to the Mount in January 2009. Sister Marie Brenda served with Father Valentine in Houck, Ariz. “Father Valentine taught us this game, now everyone at the Mount plays it,” Sister Marie Brenda said at the time.

Sister Marie Brenda is a very prayerful person, Sister Ann Patrice said. “She listens to the rosary on tape every day. She’s very disciplined in her prayer life,” she said. “We mark the full moon on our calendars. She likes to go outside each month and see the full moon. She’s a very loyal friend.”

Sister Marie Brenda worked the community switchboard for 11 years until retiring in 2009. Her room in Saint Joseph Villa previously belonged to Sister Joseph Adrian Russell, who was her friend and housemate for many years in New Mexico. She’s always enjoyed playing cards and used to crochet baby blankets in her free time, but these days she devotes most of her time to prayer. She considers herself blessed to be a sister.

“It’s been a good life. I wouldn’t have done anything else,” she said. “The Lord knew best.”

By Dan Heckel