

Sr Helen Conway

As I stand here this morning, I feel very inadequate to speak about Helen. Helen was a gentle powerhouse who touched many people's life's, in the various ministries she had during her life and especially during her 63 years as a religious sister. Many of you here today have known her for longer than I have, some as a sibling, others as cousin or aunt, others as fellow DMJ or DMJ associate and others as friend. However, you remember her I'm sure she has blessed your life and that you have fond memories of her.

Helen was born on the 21st September 1936 in Limerick, Ireland. She was the third child in a family of six.

Helen grew up on a farm during a time of economic depression, but as she often said living on a farm meant that the family had plenty of good home-grown food. Helen enjoyed accompanying her mother (Bridie) with her flower gardening and her father (Thomas) in his workshop. I'm sure this is where Helen got her appreciation of nature., and practical skills!

In secondary school Helen felt called to be a sister, but her father was not happy about this and said she should have a profession first, so Helen left Ireland to come to England to train as a nurse it was here that she first encountered the DMJ when she met Sr Sylvia who was also training at the same time. After qualifying Helen was planning with a friend to do private nursing, and save for a trip to Australia, however one evening whilst watching the TV news, she was struck by the many needy people in the world and realised that she could not just take off to Australia and do what she liked, she needed to serve those in need. So, the next day she contacted Sylvia and asked if she could join the DMJ, she had visited them previously and was struck by the way they related to one another.

Helen was 23 when she joined the DMJ, initially she did her postulancy and first year novitiate in England before going to Belgium to complete her second year. She made her first vows on the 24th April 1962 in Brussels, and her final vows on 12th August 1967 in Castlecore, Ireland

Helen's desire had always been to work on the missions, and at that time Uganda was our English-speaking mission. As there was a shortage of doctors Helen was asked if she would like to study medicine, which she did for the following six years in Cork College. Qualifying in 1968, Helen became our first doctor!

Once qualified Helen had an internship in Portsmouth and then went to Uganda where she worked for some months voluntarily at the government hospital in Mbarara before moving to Ibanda where she joined others in the community who also worked there.

In 1976 Helen had a short sabbatical in Maynooth and on her return to Uganda worked with the Franciscan Sisters in their training hospital in Kampala, for two years all was smooth running as

she cared for children and did general medicine for men. Then came the war to oust Idi Amin, and Helen was called upon to care for injured civilians, this experience had a deep impact on her life and as she says in her memoir, war is ugly, and the wounds sustained in war are ugly.

In 1980 she returned to Ireland as her father was ill. Following his death Helen felt unable to return back to Uganda.

Remaining in England Helen became a GP in Herne Bay where she worked for eight and a half years, she loved this work as it allowed her to meet with a broad spectrum of people. She was an excellent GP who was totally dedicated to her patients.

In 1992 due to health issues, Helen moved to part time work in palliative care before laying down her medical mantle in 1997 and training for Spiritual accompaniment. Helen worked in our retreat centre for a number of years accompanying people on retreat and giving spiritual direction. And she was also very involved with our Associates and their formation.

In her later years Helen lived in St Joseph's community, and in the last years due to deteriorating health she has been cared for beautifully by the staff here, for which we thank them.

When clearing some of Helen's things recently I found 2 lists that I think sum up who Helen was, the first was:

The pleasures of life:

- Morning – to open my curtains and look out onto the farm, look at the sky, sense the weather
- Walking on grass, observing the hedgerows, what they display in the various seasons, the joy of trees in their various seasons
- Music, harmony
- Meeting my siblings and relatives and friends, receiving love from them

And the second was:

How I want to be remembered:

- Kindness and gentleness towards each one no matter who, or what condition
- Perseverance in difficult situations
- Interest in each sister's ministry
- Promoting growth in Christian living especially prayers and scriptures

- Openness to insights from others of whatever religious tradition or none
- Speaking good news stories to uplift and give joy
- Discreet and careful of the good name of others

I think it is true to say that Helen can be remembered for all of those things. Throughout her life she had a real interest in the people she served, her fellow DMJ and in each of us here today, and I would just like to end with some messages that we received on her death:

- She was such a peaceful presence in a tumultuous world and her faith was steadfast
- She was a truly compassionate, gracious lady who loved her Lord and the church she served him in.
- Sr Helen has been a loving and caring presence in my life and I will be ever thankful for the friendship shared.

Helen truly lived our charism of being an instrument of mercy to all she met.

May she rest in peace and rise in glory.

Sr. Paula Spark