

Helen Carroll
1919-1998

Her own words written two years ago, convey much of Helen Carroll's unique spirit simple, direct, objective, faith filled:

"I was born (June 24, 1919) and raised in San Francisco, the youngest of six children. [Her father was killed in an accident when Helen was very little.] I lived in San Francisco my entire life until I came to Oakwood in November 1992. I was educated by the Sisters of the Presentation at St. Agnes Parish school and Presentation Academy. Since it was the depression I had no idea of attending college. A year and a half of secretarial school, I thought, would prepare me for the business world. After graduation I had a few months in an office replacing those on vacation. When that came to an end I realized how hard the business world was. By chance I learned of a government work-study program available at Lone Mountain. I was encouraged by my Jesuit brother and a Jesuit friend to try it for at least a year. I knew the Religious of the Sacred Heart only as the "Madames" and felt they catered to wealthy girls! Prior to this time a Jesuit priest friend asked me after graduation when I had last thought of my vocation. I told him I didn't have one. He said, "I think you do." He was impressed with the Madames and he suggested that it would be good to know them, but I said NEVER. That was all. When I arrived at Lone Mountain I found the Religious so gracious, friendly and ordinary, very easy to approach. One thing puzzled me. They seemed happy but they never spoke with one another in the corridors. I was very impressed with a statue of Mater in the corridor and found myself confiding in her as I passed. During these first weeks I felt the prick of vocation and it bothered me. Just before her feast I made a novena to Mater asking for her guidance. On the feast I was working with Mother de Leon when she suddenly asked me what I wanted to do. My standard answer was: a social worker. She replied, "Did you ever think of religious life? Somehow I knew that question was the answer to my prayer. She arranged a visit with Reverend Mother Rosalie Hill. This was October 1938 and by August 1939 I was en route to Kenwood."

Helen's Mistress of Novices was Mother Agnes Barry, whom she loved, and Helen was a faithful and happy novice. After her First Vows on March 19, 1942, she was sent to Broadway, San Francisco, where she taught the first grade and was Minim surveillant for five years. It was during these early years that Helen began to suffer the agony of crippling rheumatoid arthritis. On the advice of the convent doctor, Reverend Mother Eleanor Deming had her go to bed every day as soon as school was over. The young aspirant felt this sacrifice of community life very much. This continued until time for her Profession, when she was told that she would not be accepted for Probation unless she could live community life for six months. This she did with relief and a good deal of courage. In February 1947 Helen went to Rome for Probation under Reverend Mother Elizabeth Zurstrassen, a grace which she deeply appreciated, and made her Profession on July 30, 1947. On returning to San Francisco, the next four summers were spent studying at Stanford University for her Master degree in Education which she received in 1951.

Helen's own account continues:

"After my final Profession in Rome I returned to Broadway and the first grade. Then for a year and a half I taught the seventh grade. One afternoon after school the Vicar was visiting; she called to tell me that I was to replace the Treasurer the next morning. I kept that employment for eighteen years. In 1955 we had the opportunity to get the house to the west of Broadway. It was decided to open a school for boys beginning with grades 1 to 4. Under parent pressure we also took grade 5. The summer was spent in cleaning, ordering desks, chairs, books, and supplies. No principal had been named. One day the Superior told me it was I. I asked who would take the Treasury and she simply said, "You." We opened Stuart Hall for Boys in September 1956 with 45 little boys."

These were full and fruitful years, during which Helen was not only Principal of a rapidly growing school, but at the same time was Treasurer, Dépensière, Counselor, and for few years, surveillant of the First and Second Academic. Her influence over the children was profound and lasting, as testified so eloquently at the Vigil and Liturgy at Oakwood at the time of her death. One after another of her

former students stood up to witness how Sister Carroll had touched their lives, which followed them after they left school and began their own families. She had taught them what the love of the Sacred Heart was all about. More than one of the men, Stuart Hall Alumni, choked up with emotion when speaking and could not continue. During her long life, she truly lived St. Madeleine Sophie's ideal of being a mother to the children. But the school would not be the only apostolic field for Helen. Her account continues:

"In 1968, a Redemptorist priest, Father Don McKinnon, and a brother, had just reopened a small church, Our Lady of Lourdes, in a very poor, African American neighborhood of San Francisco. Father was looking for Sisters to prepare the children for the Sacraments and Reverend Mother asked about five others and me if we would go on Sundays, which we did. I continued to go to Hunter's Point every Sunday until 1972."

When Helen was replaced as Principal of Stuart Hall, she then worked full time at Our Lady of Lourdes for seventeen years, serving as bookkeeper, secretary, visiting and taking Communion to the sick and elderly. In November 1979 she earned a Doctor of Ministry degree from the Institute for Continuing Education through the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley. She wrote of her time at Hunter's Point:

"This was a wonderful experience for me. These were very loving, faith-filled people who taught me far more than they received from me. In 1987 the Pastor was changed and I no longer had transportation to the Parish. I then returned to Stuart Hall to volunteer in the office. I had had rheumatoid arthritis for many years but in spite of medication and treatments I was having increasing difficulty with steps and with my hands. Over the years from 1985 I had had several visits to Oakwood to recuperate from surgeries [and falls].

While I appreciated the care I received, I always tried to get back to San Francisco as soon as possible. But by 1992, I was coming to the conclusion that I would soon need to go to Oakwood as a resident. I dismissed the thought as quickly as it came. However, I missed a stair and fell and suffered a concussion. I came to Oakwood to convalesce but knew that I really should stay. So I joined the community in November 1992. After spending all of my religious life in San Francisco, this was not an easy change—it felt like I had a limb amputated. However, as always, Jesus has been good to me and I have been very happy and peace filled."

Happy and peace filled she was, but at what a cost! Not only did Helen have to struggle daily against constant crippling pain and increasing helplessness, she also had to struggle with the tensions in her strong personality with its deep capacity for tender, devoted love for so many, while on the other hand, what seemed at times almost an antipathy to some persons. This was a source of humiliation and pain for her and she found healing in her deep personal love of Our Lord.

One of the secrets of Helen's influence and her gift of making friends was the remarkable way she had of being able to enter into another's life—she truly listened and was always genuinely interested in everything and everyone. Her remarkable memory for names and details enhanced this gift. Up until a short time before her death she could recall the addresses and telephone numbers of students of forty years ago! Helen shared with her Jesuit brother, Joe, a great fidelity to relationships and over the years she kept in touch by letters, telephone, greeting cards and at the end, by e-mail, with hundred of friends, students and parents. Special joys for her were her Jubilee celebrations in 1990 at Broadway and again at Oakwood in 1997. She was able to attend, in a wheel chair, the Fortieth Anniversary of Stuart Hall in 1996 where she was surrounded by hundreds of her devoted Stuart Hall alumni.

The last months of her life were marked by major surgery, repeated transfusions, pain and increasing weakness. Her crippled hands could barely hold a spoon, pencil or the telephone and the resulting helplessness was a costly sacrifice that she gave daily to Jesus. "If this is what he wants ..." she would say with a smile and a little shrug. After the first of October she went down hill very fast and on her last day of consciousness she admitted that, "It's time for me to go." Early in the morning on the sixth of October, as Sister Kay Baxter and Mary Strong, Helen's devoted niece, prayed beside her, she went quietly and peacefully home to her God.