

Lorette Schroth Piper, RSCJ

September 16, 1939-May 5, 1999

Lorette Schroth Piper (“Retsy”) was born on September 16, 1939 in Brooklyn, New York. She was the eldest of three children of William R. Piper and Margaret Schroth Piper. She is survived by her father who was eighty-six years old at the time of her death, and her brothers Rick of Philadelphia and David of New Haven, Connecticut.

In the summer after eighth grade Retsy was sent away to camp, unaware that her mother was dying of an aggressive form of leukemia. Her mother’s quick death was a great shock to her. Following her death, the Piper family moved to the West Trenton, New Jersey home of Mr. Piper’s sister, Alice Piper Kuser, a World War II widow with two young children. Five years later, Mr. Piper married Margaret Ragolia, a teacher, and the Piper family established their own home in West Trenton. Retsy often mentioned that she was blessed with two wonderful mothers.

Retsy spent her high school years as a boarding student at Eden Hall and attended Manhattanville College for three years before entering the Kenwood Novitiate. She made her first vows on February 22, 1968 and her final profession in Rome on July 22, 1968. She received her B.A. degree in English from Manhattanville College in 1965 and earned an M.A. in English from Catholic University in 1973.

Retsy was a well-loved, talented and versatile Humanities and Religion teacher when she was an aspirant at Elmhurst in Portsmouth, RI and following her profession at Carrollton in Miami. She then spent five years as Director of Religious Education at St. Barnabas Parish in Portsmouth, Rhode Island. In 1979, following the death of her stepmother, Retsy moved to Stuart Country Day School in Princeton, New Jersey to be closer to her aging father. While at Stuart Retsy taught English and Religion classes to high school and elementary school students and chaired the Religion department.

She spent several summers completing spiritual direction workshops and internships to respond to increasing requests for her services as a spiritual director and retreat director. These requests came from RSCJ as well as women and men of various denominations in the greater Princeton area. For many years, as one of her many “extra-curricular” activities, she led the Trenton Episcopal Diocese Deaconate spiritual formation program. Catholic and Episcopal parishes frequently invited her to lead days of prayer and to give series of talks on spirituality. As one of her colleagues said “she didn’t have a parochial bone in her body!” Retsy’s approach to prayer, readily shared with everyone she knew, was “show up, pay attention and tell God the truth.”

In 1983, responding to her own prayer and attention to the needs surrounding her and belief in the necessity of action, Retsy cut her responsibilities at Stuart to half-time so as to establish and coordinate the Martin House Learning Center at Martin House, an inner city ministry of the Diocese of Trenton. Her work at Martin House became full time in 1984. There, she developed learning programs for all ages and abilities: English as a Second Language, high school equivalency diplomas, individual and small group

tutoring and a preschool. She oversaw the recruitment and training of staff and volunteers, succeeded at significant fundraising and securing substantial donations in kind, and built a strong mutual link between the Martin House Community and its neighborhood and the entire Stuart school community--students, faculty and staff and parents.

By 1989 the Martin House Learning Center was well established and program leaders from the local neighborhood were in place. Retsy then joined with Fr. Patrick Connor, SVD who was the Stuart Chaplain and a popular speaker, spiritual director and peace and justice advocate, to co-found and co-direct the Duchesne Center. The Center was located at Stuart and provided opportunities for spiritual direction, reflection series, workshops and conferences to individuals and church and peace and justice related groups. In a newspaper article about the Center Retsy said its mission was to "assist a person to live a faith life. It is not enough to be sorry about social problems, we must be actively compassionate."

A friend wrote after her death "she was always pushing outward the boundaries of ministerial and pastoral possibilities. She could make a ministry out of just about nothing, a slight opening, a single need and turn it into something terrific. She would throw herself into it and it would grow and evolve, whether it was teaching at Stuart, running a pre-school at Martin House or founding the Duchesne Center."

Retsy's prayer, love of the Beatitudes, Gandhi, and Dorothy Day and her increasing involvement with peace and justice organizations and issues led her to yet another ministry as a jail chaplain. From the early 1990's until two weeks before her death in 1999, she served as Associate Chaplain at the Somerset County Jail and the Bordentown Juvenile Medium Security Facility. Taking on a challenging new ministry in a milieu that was foreign to her was totally in character. Someone wrote that she "had a unique combination of common sense and love of change, transformation and risk. She liked to see growth, change and redemption and courageous decisions—she wanted to see it in the jail, in the Church and in everyone she loved." In an interview Retsy described jail ministry as the passion in her life. "That may not be for everyone, but everyone can do their bit. Go for change, not for charity. Find where your passion for social action is and follow it." She wrote, "every time I go to jail, I discover the presence of God. It is a time of conversion for me. I'm learning that jail chaplains don't bring the Kingdom. Together with the inmates, we watch for its coming in our midst."

Retsy discovered she had serious cancer in the summer of 1997 for which she experienced various treatments. She continued her jail ministry, Duchesne Center activities, giving retreats, talks and spiritual direction. Her intense passion for these ministries and the people they involved never waned nor did her regular, passionate care and support of her father. Mr. Piper took a keen interest in her jail ministry and regularly corresponded with the jail warden, sending him clippings about innovative correctional programs. Shortly before her death, the warden presented Retsy and Mr. Piper with gold sheriff badges and sweatshirts emblazoned with the seal of the Somerset County Jail.

In a homily on the gospel of "shoulder my yoke..." delivered within the year of her death, she commented on her life with cancer. "If I think about my suffering as a person with cancer only as an obstacle to my real life, then I wear an unbearably heavy yoke. But if I plow the field I come closer to

putting on the easy yoke and I can accept the fact that cancer is part of my real life, one aspect of my evolving identity and of my authentic destiny.”

Retsy was anointed by Fr. Patrick Connor and died on May 5, 1999 in her Robin Dr. Community in Skillman, NJ surrounded by the two members of her community and two RSCJ friends.

The funeral at her parish St. Charles Borromeo was led by Fr. Patrick Connor and attended by her father, brothers, cousins and hundreds of friends and colleagues, including the warden and her favorite jail guard. (The warden offered to provide a uniformed honor guard for the funeral but this gesture was respectfully declined!) Retsy claimed to have written seven versions of her funeral and chose a unique cover for the program. Fr. Connor reported that Retsy made him swear he would not deliver a eulogy; therefore he called his words “a loving memoir.” His memoir affirmed what every person in attendance knew and had experienced of Retsy. He described her “as one of the most passionate life-enhancing human beings ever created—a passionate talker, a brilliant conversationalist, passionate about her father, brothers and friends. Passion for justice and ecumenism, totally given and committed to the mission to reflect the love of Jesus to others.” All these things along with a “wicked sense of humor and a passion for laughing at the absurd. She had a flair for the imaginative and could be creative and dramatic and side-splittingly funny.”

Retsy’s cremains were buried in her family’s plot at St. Mary’s cemetery in Trenton, New Jersey.