

1989-1995 California Director of Schools

1995 Oakwood

MARGARET MAY BROWN
1927 - 1995

Margaret May Brown, rscj, was born on February 15, 1927 in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Throughout her life, Peggy recalled her early childhood recounting loving and joyful memories, speaking with great pride each time she talked about her father, Jacob Hay Brown, Jr. and her mother, Marie Antoinette Birney. Always faithful to her roots, Peggy brought to her whole life the strong common sense and direct communication in style which had so characterized her early years. She spoke freely of her determination and even stubborn nature and how her mother channeled her energetic spirit even at the age of four. Her brother, Hay, remembers her being asked to postpone something and go to bed early (after she had thrown a tantrum!). Everyone knew that next morning the task Peggy had set her mind to accomplish the night before would be fully executed before anyone arose. This strong determination to be undaunted by any obstacle was what made Peggy a champion for truth and integrity and excellence. Those who lived with her, found this characteristic of Peggy's personality both a joy and a challenge.

Peggy's grades in early childhood and teenage years were very strong. She graduated from high school as the salutatorian. After graduating from Manhattanville College, where she was a leader in Catholic action as well as many other areas, she told her parents that she was going to enter the Society of the Sacred Heart. Their response was one of shock and dismay. Her brother recalls that "they asked her to wait for a year - to work in Lancaster away from the influence of the Society, and then to decide." So she did, and after that year, in early August, she told her sister Tony and Hay for the first time that she was going to join the Religious of the Sacred Heart.

Hay remembers, "The trip to Albany was not a happy one. But when we left Kenwood that day leaving Peggy in the tender care of Mother Schroen, the atmosphere in the car was funereal. Then the letters began to arrive, we began to visit her, and we saw each time a Peggy Brown that was so full of energy, vitality, enthusiasm and love of God, that we had to be happy. I remember mother and dad talking to their friends about Peggy; then they were so proud of their daughter, a Religious of the Sacred Heart. A few years ago there was a baseball movie called "The Natural" about a player whose every baseball move was fluid, graceful and almost perfect. To my mind that title epitomized Peggy. As an RSCJ she was truly a natural. She was first and foremost an educator. She really knew how to teach, but perhaps her real forte was her uncanny ability to handle people."

After her religious profession in Rome, July 29, 1957, Peggy Brown was Surveillante and teacher in the Upper School at Lawrence Avenue in Detroit. In 1958, she was named Mistress General at Convent of the Sacred Heart at Greenwich, Connecticut. From then on she was to take on the challenge, with all its joys and difficulties, of the role of Headmistress of six different Network Schools: 91st Street in New York, Kenwood, Doane Stuart, Stone Ridge, The Rosary and Sacred Heart Schools, Atherton, California. During 1968-69, she served as Director of Education for the New York Province.

Peggy was never without an idea. She knew how to use the institutional base of a school as a springboard into the wider community. After Vatican II, when the barriers of cloister were lowered, Peggy was among the first to recognize that there were legions of children beyond our walls who would never have an opportunity to enjoy a Sacred Heart school and that somehow we had to reach those students too. It was Peggy's strongly held conviction that Jesus came for all that sparked her creativity in the programs she initiated for public school teachers, for public and parochial school children. One only had to be an opponent at the bridge table to realize that her mind was ever active, ever keen in finding new ways around or through what might seem to be formidable obstacles to others. Peggy loved to win.

In April, 1995 Peggy was not feeling well and for the first time, she missed the annual Membership Meeting of the Network Heads, Board Chairs and Provincial Team. She had not been feeling like herself since the sudden death of her sister, Tony, in February. She went to the doctor when she had some dizzy spells and found that she was beginning to have difficulty walking. Nine days before the Feast of St. Madeleine Sophie last Spring, Peggy received the information from her doctors that she had a brain tumor. She personally called those she loved best, her family, friends and colleagues. She shared her news with courage, tremendous hope, reality and a determination to live out the promises that she had made to God and to herself throughout her life. She moved to Oakwood where she was cared for and accompanied daily by the members of her community Ursula McAgdon, Mary Driscoll and Chigusa Hayashi.

She presided at graduation ceremonies having signed all the diplomas and made sure that all the ending ceremonies for the year were well taken care of. Susan Maxwell, who gave the graduation address, assisted Peggy in the presentation of the diplomas.

One of Peggy's last outings was in response to an invitation to one of Carol Channing's last performances of "Hello Dolly." Accompanied by Mary McMahon and Rich Dioli, Principal of the High School, and Annie Miller, a special little friend, Peggy enjoyed every moment of the performance. How often her friends had welcomed her singing this same song! The following quote in one of the notes she received, says everything: "They tell me you are preparing to 'Go home' so I am sending the enclosed to help you along the way. The modern version of 'Well done thou good and faithful servant enter now into the kingdom etc...' For you it will be, Oh Well Hello Dolly, It's so nice to see you back where you belong."

In the following two weeks, Peggy found that she no longer had the use of her left side. Her thinking and her ability to correspond and speak with others was not affected in any way. After some radiation treatment and consulting with the Provincial, her brother and her doctors, she characteristically made a decision full of faith and realism to stop the treatments. Peggy wished to live the days that God had given her with the highest quality of life. She decided to stay in California as she said, "Because God called me here for my ministry and now has called me to Himself, I want to stay where I received this call."

Peggy had deep gratitude to many friends, including the Board chairs who provided some of her friends with as many frequent flyers as they could accumulate, so that she could be surrounded with love and constant care of those with whom she had shared the living out of her mission in education. In the space of four months, Peggy received hundreds of letters telling her of the respect, love and admiration of her students, faculty and friends. All expressed a special relationship and gratitude for her love and her life. Members of the faculty, the new Director of Schools at Atherton, Milton Werner, and the Head of the Upper School, Richard Dioli, as well as Lorraine Horne and Carol Spieker, the Board Chairs with whom she had worked, visited Peggy often and kept her aware of all that was happening on the campus. Mary McMahon, Director of Oakwood, and the staff there, were dear to her as they provided for every need. Exactly two weeks before she died, her brother, his wife, their children, and one grandchild, came to visit Peggy. Although the first day of their visit she was unable to respond to them in any cohesive way, she woke the next morning with energy and awareness. She was able to make sure they enjoyed their stay and made sure Jimmy, her grand-nephew, had playthings, ice cream and some time in the sun with her.

After her family left, she began her final passage to her new life. Peggy lapsed into semi-consciousness in silence and deep peace. Esperanza Jasso, a dear friend who was in the Noviceship with Peggy and spent the summer with her, came from Mecca during this final week, as well as Ann Conroy from Greenwich. Nancy Salisbury from 91st Street, Meg Canty from Bloomfield, and Marge Seitz from Houston, were all encouraged by their schools to be with Peggy at this greatest moment of her life. Barbara Dawson, Provincial, was making her visit to the Atherton Area and was with Peggy during the days before her death. On Sunday, November 12, in the presence of her brother, Hay, the community renewed her vows concluding with these words, "And I promise to persevere therein unto death." Peggy went to God calmly, without pain and in peace.

The funeral liturgy was held in a packed St. Raymond's Church. Father Ken Doyle, from Albany, New York, who was Chaplain at Kenwood while Peggy was Headmistress, and who had shared so much with her when she helped to found the Doane Stuart School, celebrated the liturgy. The tributes of love given in word and song by her sisters, her family, her colleagues and students, filled the church. The following morning after the community Mass, the Oakwood community and guests proceeded to the Oakwood cemetery. As everyone sang, "This Is Holy Ground," the following prayer was said:

God bless the new space in this holy ground made sacred long ago by all those who rest here in the hope of resurrection. may the breath of creation that surrounds this place, trees and flowers, grass and bird song -- touch our prayer. Holy is this earth that holds in gentle embrace those buried here, that receives our sister Peggy this day. Welcome our sister Peggy to paradise and help us to comfort each other with the assurance of our faith until we all meet in Christ to be with you and with our sister forever. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

ADDENDA

The life of Peggy Brown was a vibrant page in the history of education and of the Society of the Sacred Heart. The mark she made on her friends and her colleagues can only be matched by the indelible signs of love etched in the hearts of her family and her friends. Perhaps, someday, someone will write a book on the accomplishments and challenges which Peggy faced. In writing her notes now it seems only right to quote some of the hundreds of letters which she received throughout her five and one half months of illness.

Each of us made a difference in the lives of others. Peggy Brown could never fathom nor realize the difference she made in other people's lives. Now we know through the words of students, alumnae, parents, board members, faculty, business acquaintances and most of all her family and her sisters in the Society, what an impact Peggy's life had on others. In these quotes we hope you will find, as we did, a broader and deeper picture of who Peggy Brown was.

The following quotes are a sampling of cards and letters received by Peggy in the last few months.

"Thank you for sharing with me about Jesus Christ. You made him a real person for me."

"The smiles come at the memory of your sailing down the hallway like a large ship under full steam commanding the awe of students and the affection of the faculty. We couldn't help but love you."

"How well I remember you - where you are now demands such courage. Along the way, you have left a trail of so many good deeds, kindnesses and cheerfulness. Rest easy in your heart. You will be remembered long by former students. Do you remember the students offering the name for the merger of Sacred Heart with St. Agnes as the Little Brown School House..."

"I greatly admired your intellect and energy...Fine intellect and great energy can always make this world a better place. But your light and energy kindled many a candle and so, in a way, even on earth, you will never be extinguished so long as your teachings are passed on..."

"A life spent in loving, learning, teaching and leading should not be challenged and shaken from its very roots. I feel privileged that you came into my life. You have shown me what the word Valiant means."

"I count on your influence, mentoring, and friendship as one of the greatest gifts of my life. Long ago you taught me to continue to model for me what it means to be an RSCJ."

"Although I remember the stern and pretty foreboding side of you, I also remember your laugh and your kindness. I don't know how you knew what was going on but you did. It is not an exaggeration to say that you saved my life. You made a second chance possible for me. I was able to begin again with no lies. In fact, after that time I decided never to lie again and I don't."

"It made me think about you and all the places you carried us when you were here even when we did not want to go with you. Thank you for your courage and vision..."

"You made such a difference in my life, Peggy, then and now. Your faith in me, your strength, your always positive attitude, your vitality and joy and, of course, your deep Faith in God inspired me to believe in myself and to believe in God more steadfastly."

"Always moderate and thoughtful and open and loving..."

"Your vision and courage have inspired and continue to inspire many of us."

"You taught us most by your example in your treatment of each other and of us. I admit it took me some years after school to realize that."

"I do remember how vigorously you embraced a challenge. You are such a gifted motivator of people and such a woman of ideas."