

Against all odds

Nun combines music, speech pathology in a 50-year career

By Mark Haney
The Catholic Weekly



Sisters of the Precious Blood

MOUNT PLEASANT — By being late, Marie Kopin was ahead of her time.

The Flint native earned a bachelor's degree in speech correction and vocal music education in 1959 from Central Michigan University and taught at the Michigan School for the Deaf in Flint for two years before becoming a nun.

That was pretty rare in the 1960s.

"They called me a 'delayed vocation,'" said Sr. Kopin, a member of the Sisters of the Precious Blood of Dayton, Ohio. "They did! They (other religious orders) told me I had to preserve this, which is why they told me to quit my job immediately and join them. To me that was so unethical."

The road to religious life was not easy for the nun, who celebrated her 50th year as a religious in a ceremony on Sunday, July 1, at the motherhouse in Dayton. She also was part of a celebration on Sunday, July 21, at St. Henry Parish in Leaton and will be part of one on Sunday, Oct. 14, at St. Cecilia Church in Clare.

She was born in Flint in 1937, when Michigan had turned 100, to Chester and Irene Kopin (Kopcinski). It was a very musical family.

"I had a grandfather who was a band master in the Crimean War," said Sr. Kopin. "Another grandfather was a church organist in Poland and had studied music in Austria. My uncle — my dad's brother — was a piano tuner and had a music store on the north end of Flint. My dad had once had a band — Chet and His International Aces — when he was going to General Mothers Institute. He met my mother because my dad and my mother had played in a band together. My mother graduated from the University of Michigan and was a concert violinist."

She was baptized at All Saints Church in Flint but then she and her parents moved to the Clio area, at Farrand and Center roads, and became members of Sacred Heart Parish and later joined Holy Rosary Parish. She attended public schools, graduating from Kearsley High School, where she played the clarinet in the band. During high school she also learned to play the organ,

which she did at church.

She intended to study just music at CMU, but that changed.

"While I was in college, I discovered speech correction, as we called, or speech pathology as it is known today," she said. "And I was very much attracted to that kind of work and all of the studies it involved."

She also saw how impossible it would be to get and keep a job as a music teacher in the public school system at the time, she said, "so I stayed on both curriculums."

Then, two years into her teaching career, she felt called, even though she'd had little or no exposure to sister or other religious, except for the priests of her parish.

"I had a calling, an attraction," she said. "I think it is the same answer someone would give if asked, 'why did you marry your spouse?' I felt a call to enter that kind of life. I just felt God was calling me."

That news was not well received at home.

"I had a struggle breaking away from my family," she said. "My father wanted me to get married and give him grandchildren. Because there was only my brother (David, now of Flint) and he was 10 years younger. And what happened? He (David) only had one daughter anyway."

First, however, she had to find a community to join. Her former pastor at Sacred Heart counseled her to find a community where she could continue to teach speech therapy. She met with and talked to leaders of at least a dozen different religious communities in her search.

"When I interviewed with so many communities they'd say, 'oh, you'd make a wonderful classroom teacher,'" she said. "And I thought, 'Not on your life. I don't want to be a classroom teacher.' When I interviewed with the mother general in Dayton, she indicated I would be continuing in speech therapy. No other congregation said anything like that."

The order also was the only one

that didn't insist that she quit her teaching job halfway through the school year in order to join.

She entered the Sisters of the Precious Blood as a pre-postulant in the summer of 1961 but didn't officially become a postulant until January 1962. Five years later she was a nun. During that time, however, she did some speech therapy in local parochial schools.

The nun running that school insisted she get her certification, which she did, then insisted she get a master's degree. She applied at Ohio State University — the order had sisters living in the area — and the University of Michigan, where she would get an apartment with a Mission-dell sister.

"Of course, I chose the University of Michigan," she said. "You couldn't beat the offer. You just couldn't." She got a full-ride scholarship. At OSU, she also would have had to take two more years of classes she didn't really want to take, such as statistics. In Ann Arbor, she had a 12-month program. By 1967 she had a master's degree master's in speech pathology and audiology.

Her next job was in Cleveland, working for the public schools and living with other Precious Blood sisters at Good Counsel Parish, which turned out to be in the neighborhood where her mother grew up. "I could see the grocery my grandmother used up on the hill," she said, "and I voted in the same grade school where my mother attended."

Three and a half years later, she moved to Putnam County, a rural Ohio school district of Catholic families. She lived with other sisters there who also worked in the district. The nuns taught in the schools, she said, "because the communities were all Catholic. They set up a board of education and they hired the sisters."

During that time (1972-75), she spent her summers working at CMU. That turned into a full-time job as a clinical supervisor in the

Department of Communication Disorders. During her 25 years at the university, she earned an education specialist degree in educational leadership from CMU in 1991 and a doctorate in higher education administration from the University of Virginia in 1999.

She retired in 2000, but did not stop. Her mother moved to a foster care home in Mount Pleasant in 2001 and Sr. Kopin was in full-time elder care until her mother died in 2009 at the age of 97.

During her career, she never gave up music. While teaching in Flint, she played the organ at Sacred Heart and accompanied the Knights of Columbus choir. During her time in Dayton, she directed the high school choir and played the organ at the chapel at the motherhouse. While in Putnam County, she directed the choir and played the organ. at SS. Peter and Paul Church in Ottawa, Ohio.

She directed the choir and folk music group at Sacred Heart in Mount Pleasant for 13 years, writing music parts for them. She also trained the cantors.

"But I never had a Sunday off," she said, "so I am technically retired from that too."

Sr. Kopin, who can play guitar and keyboards, also does some drumming as a mentored dance leader for the International Dances of Universal Peace. She's been training since 1990, she has attended training sessions and retreats and is working on full certification.

She also is secretary for the Michigan Mushroom Hunters Club and leads many forays each year. She also teaches workshops and classes in mycology. She has been a member of the North American Mycological Association since 1972 and is a member of the education committee.

She also takes on environmental concerns, working with a group in her congregation to coordinate environmental work. And she makes a yearly trek to the School of the Americas for a prayer vigil for peace.

And, at 74, she's ready for more.

"What's next?" she said. "Well I pray every day and discern and ask God what is next. What am I being called to do and what will it mean?" †



Sr. Marie Kopin

Building dedicated

JEROME — St. Francis on the Lake is a wooded summer campground in southern Jackson County, dedicated to providing children with developmental disabilities with "the experience of a lifetime."

On Saturday, June 16, a new "Knights of Columbus Hall" was dedicated, with nearly 100 people in attendance. On hand for the ribbon-cutting ceremony were Archdiocese of Detroit Auxiliary Bishop Francis Reiss, K. of C. State Deputy Thomas Marcetti and K. of C. State Secretary Michael Malinowski.

"This new building provided us with a great opportunity to come together financially with our Catholic brothers in Alhambra," said Marcetti, "and to unify for the sake of a common cause; caring for our children with developmental disabilities who truly need our help. As state deputy, I am very proud of this new partnership." †



Cutting the ribbon on the new Knights of Columbus Hall at St. Francis on the Lake are (from left) Archdiocese of Detroit Auxiliary Bishop Francis Reiss, Fr. Paul Ballien, K. of C. State Deputy Thomas Marcetti, Alhambra Camp Treasurer Gerald Roux and Alhambra Camp President Russell Kreinbring. *Joe Yekulis/Catholic Times*

BRIEFLY

Golf for charity
JACKSON — Catholic Charities of Jackson, Lenawee and Hillsdale Counties is having a charity golf scramble on Friday, Aug. 17, at Lakeland Hills Golf Course, 5119 Page Ave. The shotgun start is at 12:30 p.m. Included will be a fund-raising golf ball drop. To sign up, become a sponsor or for more information, contact Lisa Gross at (517) 262-0466 or lisamgross@comcast.net.

Visit the Holy Land
WESTPHALIA — Fr. James Conlon, in conjunction with Steve and Janet Ray, will lead a pilgrimage to the Holy Land from Jan. 28-Feb. 6. The tour will visit many of the sites associated with the life and ministry of Christ including Mount Tabor where the Transfiguration took place, the Churches of the Annunciation (Nazareth) and Nativity (Bethlehem), Caesarea Philippi, the Sea of Galilee and the River Jordan, the church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Upper Room in Jerusalem, the Via Dolorosa and more. To sign up, or for more information, contact Fr. Conlon at (989) 587-4201 or father@stmmarychurch.net.

Ready to run
LANSING — The "Come to the River" five-kilometer run/walk and Kids Challenge is 9 a.m. Saturday, Aug. 4, at St. Casimir Church, 815 Sparrow Ave. The event is part of the annual Corn Roast Festival. To register, or for more information, call (517) 482-1346 or visit www.runningfoundation.com. †

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