



Sr. Rose Helene Wildenhaus

BORN: May 1935

ENTERED CONGREGATION: January 31, 1954

DIED: August 11, 2021

“**T**here is an appointed time for everything, and a time for every affair under the heavens.” Eccl. 3:1

This line from Ecclesiastes was one of Sister Rose’s favorite scripture passages and summarizes her approach to life. She embraced life as it was at any given moment, and sought to bring her best self — passion and energy — in order that others might benefit. Her vision, trust in God, and belief that everyone deserved opportunity was evident in all she did.

Born in Dayton to Linus and Leona Wildenhaus on May 13, 1935, she was baptized Mary Louise. Her six siblings all arrived in the following 10 years. They were a tight knit family grounded in life at St. Mary Parish, Dayton and in the neighborhood which was the space where a deeper and more inclusive sense of family and community took root. Mary Lou babysat for her siblings and others; was eager to get chores done so she could be with her friends or play softball which she loved; and she spent some summers at an aunt’s farm helping to take care of the cousins. The parish was also where Mary Lou came in contact with the Sisters of the Precious Blood. In 1954 she entered the congregation and was given the name Sister Mary Rose Helene.

In 1956, Sr. Rose Helene began what she called the initial phase of her mission work as an educator which lasted for 21 years. Her last 11 years in education was as a teaching principal at St. Mark in inner city Cincinnati where race riots broke out her first year there. In spite of never having been a principal and being told the school would likely close, Sr. Rose Helene successfully developed a non-graded school curriculum where the students thrived, not to prove others wrong but because she believed quality education was every person’s right. She was criticized for breaking racial barriers because she was tenacious in getting graduates into area Catholic High Schools.

A former student wrote on facebook after hearing of Sr. Rose’s death, “My very FIRST school principal. Her loving LEADERSHIP was soooooo ESSENTIAL in my classmates and I receiving an educational foundation that prepared us to GO into the World!”

I left St. Mark’s after elementary school. However, I carry it; and the EDUCATORS Who created an environment where I FELT empowered without knowing the word, “empower”.

In 1977, Sr. Rose Helene was elected to congregational leadership as Southern Region Director. For 6 years, she faithfully helped navigate the congregation through the evolution of religious life post Vatican II. Faithfulness to Jesus in prayer, in Eucharist, through fidelity to her vows continued to be the source and strength of her being.

Toward the end of her term in congregational leadership, Sr. Rose knew that God was forming her for another phase of His plan for her life. I lived with Rose at the time and remember Rose, Dick and Brian sitting around our breakfast nook trying to figure out how they could get St. Leonard’s Seminary in order to provide low-income housing for seniors when they had no money nor experience.

And thus began the next phase of Sr. Rose Helene’s mission in life. For 30 yrs. she dedicated her energy, faith and vision to providing housing for the poor and elderly.

At this point I could start elaborating how Sr. Rose Helene was instrumental in the founding of St. Leonard Center and St. Mary Development Corporation; how she served on boards and received numerous awards for her service and accomplishments; how she worked with city officials and advocated through Congress in Washington to revitalize neighborhoods and improve the quality of life of its residents.

But I’m afraid if I go down that path, Rose will come to haunt me because accolades and prestige are not how she would want to be remembered, nor is it who she was.

Rose lived by a quote from a Chinese philosopher Lau Tze that she often read at Board meetings. It says: “Go to the people. Live with them. Learn from them. Love them. Start with what they know. Build with what they have. But with the best leaders, when the work is done, the task accomplished, the people will say ‘We have done this ourselves.’”

In 1983, after Rose, Dick and Brian convinced the bishop and the Franciscans to give the Seminary to them for \$1, Sr. Rose Helene and a couple of our sisters moved into the abandoned building. They scrubbed toilets and floors, painted, cooked, cleaned, cut the grass and pulled the weeds. And they welcomed low-income seniors to live with them. Room by room, floor by floor, the building was reclaimed to provide community and a place to call home. Sr. Rose lived at St. Leonard’s for 6 years and in that time, at least, a dozen Sisters of the Precious Blood also took up residence there to assist in

the mission. She was very persuasive!

Over the years they added buildings to provide independent housing and long-term care for low-income and affluent seniors. When it was determined to be financially stable and in the capable hands of Brian, Rose and Dick found new ways to serve God.

In 1989, Rose and Dick took a leap of faith and started St. Mary Center at the parish where she grew up. It became a neighborhood magnet for service and programs to provide affordable housing and community development. This quickly became St. Mary Development Corporation which continues to help older people with low incomes live independent, high-quality lives and to thrive in mind, body, and spirit. Rose may have been a part of making it all happen but, more importantly, she lived in one of their buildings, knew most of the residents and their stories; found assistance for residents; made sure there were activities and that holidays were special; got churches to provide food and gifts for the residents. Rose was single minded in her service to others. Many of her family and our sisters either worked for or volunteered in the mission. She welcomed all and called forth the gifts of her family, our sisters and others. She was tenacious in advocacy and action, and it was hard to say no to her.

When Sr. Rose retired in 2013, she continued to volunteer, bringing activities and care to the residents of Huffman Place and Twin Towers, and at Corner Cupboard Thrift Store. When she moved to our retirement center in January 2021, she continued to be a life-giving presence to others.

Rose embraced dying in the same manner in which she lived. Gratitude filled her heart for the years she was granted to serve God and His people. In her quiet yet firm way, she chose to forego further treatment saying it wasn’t right to use so many medical resources on her when she was dying and there were so many without access to healthcare who could benefit. She chose to be at hospice where she could look out at nature; and she surrendered to the moment — to the Lord of her life.

Rose, our sister, our friend, God’s good and faithful servant has won her reward.

May her faithfulness to God and life of service live on in each of us.

Rose, we love you. We miss you.

— Sister Margo Young