

Joan Huck: Memories (1974–2001)

I'm Joan Huck, an Oblate of the House of Bread Monastery. I have known the Benedictine Sisters for the last 50 years and want to tell you a little of their early history as I experienced it.

In 1974, three Benedictine Sisters – Sisters Augusta Marie Raabe, Jean Anne Berning and Ann Ryan – from Mt. Angel, Oregon, with the consent of their Mother House – Queen of Angels Monastery – answered the call from Bishop Remi De Roo to come to Canada and work in the Victoria Diocese.

Eventually they settled into Nanaimo and lived in an old house at the south end of the city on property that was connected to St. Peter's Parish. The old house on the property was called Rockridge. When the coal mines were operating it was the home of the Canadian Collieries manager, and it was to be the residence of the Sisters for some time.

Those were very hard year for the Sisters because there wasn't much money, but they made their presence known at daily mass at St. Peter's and ministered to the people wherever they were needed, making many friends with their warm hearts and willingness to be available at a moment's notice.

It was at St. Peter's that I first met Sr. Jean Ann, and we became fast friends. I would often go to their Monastery and have meals with the Sisters. Jean Ann's mom and my mom got to know each other and shared a lot over the years.

Jean Ann was a great gardener, and I recall that one day she said she wanted fertilizer for her garden and asked me if I knew where she could get some. I said I did. I told her I would pick her up and for her to bring a shovel, a bucket and gumboots. We went to a place that had Shetland ponies near the highway. When no one was going by on the highway, we'd shovel the fertilizer into our buckets and when a car would come along, we would pretend we were busy admiring wildflowers in the field!

Another time we were driving along and had a flat tire. I asked Jean Anne if she knew how to change a tire, and she said she did. Between us, we jacked up the car and removed the lug nuts from the wheel. But we couldn't get the wheel off and even if we had, we weren't sure we would be able to get the spare on. Thankfully, a young man came along at that time and asked if we needed help. We were happy to take him up on his offer.

As time passed, I recall that two other Sisters came from Mt. Angel, including Srs. Claudia May and Roberta Dyer. Sister Roberta had already served many years at Kakawis in the north end of Vancouver Island, so knew something of the area.

With more Sisters coming from Mt. Angel, a new house was needed to accommodate them, and they wanted to begin a retreat ministry. With the help of Queen of Angels Monastery and benefactors, they were able to purchase a place in a little cul-de-sac on Killarney Street, Judy Parker, their real estate agent, advised and guided them through the transition and became a special friend.

Only one neighbour was unhappy with their choice to have a retreat and workshop ministry, fearing the parking of cars and people coming and going would disturb their quiet neighbourhood. But eventually the wife found that the thoughtfulness shown by the Sister and friends compensated for the added traffic.

I recall that there was a lot of work to do to organize appropriate spaces for the Sisters, as well as the overnight retreats. Jean Ann and others planted a vegetable garden, raspberry canes, fruit trees, and raised enough chickens to supply themselves with eggs. Over time, Jean Ann and Claudia were able to make a path to the creek which added a peaceful place to go for retreat and workshop participants.

Augusta's workshops were attended by many of the parishioners and her special counselling expertise was very appreciated, including by me. The Sisters began spreading out into the Faith Community of Nanaimo.

Dr. Paul Gawthrop was instrumental in getting Jean Ann a job at the hospital working with Roger – the Chaplain at the time. Jean Anne eventually earned her degree in Counselling at Seattle University, followed by receiving her chaplaincy certificate at UBC. She was in demand as a counsellor, being a great listener, and she had the gift of making people feel very special.

But their lives were about to change once again when Bishop Remi asked Sister Jill Aigner, who also came from Mt. Angel and was now an active member of the Monastery and retreat ministry, if she would take charge of the planned Bethlehem Retreat Centre. The Sisters leased the Retreat Centre from the diocese and the Sisters of the House of Bread appointed Sister Jill the first director, It was decided that the house on Killarney would be sold and the Sisters bough property at their present location so they could be close to their major ministry, the Bethlehem Retreat Centre.

It was a difficult time again for Jean Ann to consider leaving the home she helped establish with Augusta Marie and others, but the Sisters knew it was the best decision for all of them and for the people they wanted to serve and they answered the call with Courage and Faith as they had done in the past.

I'm grateful for the friendship I experienced with Sister Jean Ann and the Sisters in those early years, and I carry memories with me that will last a lifetime.