

## Obituary

### Sister Elizabeth LaForest RSM

Sister of Mercy, Educator, Peace Activist



Declining enrollment in foreign languages led her to explore new perspectives for the department and in 1972, Sister Elizabeth was granted a two-year leave of absence from Mercy College to join the Peace Corps. Most of this time was spent in teaching at a government high school in Togo, West Africa. Meeting the people of Togo and seeing the poverty with which they contend on a daily basis changed her focus and her life. A motorcycle accident brought her back to the United States and Mercy College for a year. Invited back to Togo, she rejoined the Peace Corps in 1975 and taught for two years at the University of Benin.

Following her return to the U.S., Sister Elizabeth became director of communications for the Detroit Province of the Sisters of Mercy. In 1987, she began teaching English in the adult education program in Hamtramck. This work gave her more time to focus on peace and social justice issues.

Sister Elizabeth was active in the Michigan Farmworker Support Group, Focus: HOPE, Amnesty International, Bread for the World, Call to Action, Detroit/Windsor Refugee Coalition, Greenpeace, Network, Groundwork for a Just World, The Nuclear Resister, Paralyzed Veterans of America and Witness for peace. She traveled to Haiti with Pax Christi on a fact-finding mission, to Honduras with SHARE to accompany Salvadoran refugees from Mesa Grande to their homes in El Salvador, and made a pilgrimage to Mexico City for peace and reconciliation.

She participated in anti-nuclear demonstrations at Wurtsmith Air Force Base in Oscoda, Williams International in Commerce Township and the Nevada nuclear test site. Sister Elizabeth was arrested several times and served two jail terms, of 10 and 21 days. She was also arrested while supporting striking newspaper workers in

Detroit, and placed on five years probation following a protest at the School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia. She actively opposed the war in Iraq and joined a protest at the Detroit Federal Building in 2002 and again at the Detroit Federal Courthouse in 2003, this time in a wheelchair.

"I fondly remember Sister Elizabeth LaForest for her activism nationally and her peacemaking work internationally," said Congressman John Conyers, Jr.

Sister Gilmary Bauer, president of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, Regional Community of Detroit said, "There's a Togolese proverb that goes, 'The tears running down your face do not blind you.' This saying certainly describes the person and life of our Sister Elizabeth LaForest. She was one of those extraordinary persons who, moved to tears, was still able to see clearly the causes of those injustices that provoked such emotion. Her commitment to direct action for systemic change helped keep our congregation and our church honest and focused."

"Sister Elizabeth's life reached across all lines of division whether religious, political, racial, social, or economic to work for a world in which we share one God and one people," said Rev. Ed Rowe of Central United Methodist Church in Detroit. "Though Sister Elizabeth was small in physical stature, she was a giant in moral strength and vision of non-violent peacemaking for our world," said Rev. Peter Dougherty, founder and outreach coordinator of the Michigan Peace Team.

Human rights activist Rudy Simons described Sister Elizabeth as "the best kind of teacher there is - through the example of her own life - gentle, cheerful, and committed to justice and peace." Upon learning of Sister Elizabeth's death, Bishop Thomas Gumbleton said simply, "She's a saint."

Sister Elizabeth received a Distinguished Alumni Award from Mercy College of Detroit in 1987 and was named Woman of the Year by the college in 1990. Honors she received for her untiring work in peace and justice included the Discipleship Award from Groundwork for a Just World, a State of Michigan Senate resolution for her commitment to peace and justice, and the Jane Addams Peace Award from the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

As her health and mobility declined, Sister Elizabeth maintained an active involvement in justice circles, using her computer as a tool for information, political advocacy and correspondence with other activists. She helped keep the sisters at the retirement center informed about current affairs by posting articles on a social issues bulletin board. Sister Elizabeth is survived by her nieces and nephews, her many friends, and the members of her Mercy community.

A welcoming service was held on January 4, 2007, at 3 p.m. at McAuley Center, 28750 Eleven Mile Road, Farmington Hills, with a prayer service at 7 p.m. The Mass of Resurrection was celebrated in the McAuley Center Chapel on January 5, 2007, followed by burial at Holy Sepulchre Cemetery, Southfield.

McCabe Funeral Home, Farmington Hills, was in charge of arrangements.

(Farmington Hills, MI) - Sister Elizabeth LaForest, RSM, a Sister of Mercy for 74 years, died on January 2, 2007, at McAuley Retirement Center in Farmington Hills. She was 91.

She was born June 1, 1915, in Pinconning, Michigan, the sixth of seven children of Thomas and Elizabeth (Nadeau) LaForest. She was named Elizabeth Hazel at her baptism and educated in a one-room schoolhouse near the family farm before completing high school at St. Michael's in Pinconning. She joined the Sisters of Mercy in 1932, and was given the name, Sister Mary Austina. She professed final vows on August 16, 1938.

Sister Elizabeth recently said, "My life has been divided into two parts: the life of a professor and teacher, unconcerned about other things; and then, the life of a peace activist."

Her 40-year teaching career ranged from pre-school Montessori through the university level. Sister Elizabeth earned a bachelor's degree in English from Mercy College of Detroit, a master's from the University of Detroit, and a master's and Ph.D. in French from Laval University in Quebec. She taught elementary students for 12 years in Grand Rapids, Grand Haven, Cadillac, Muskegon, Lansing and Midland, followed by eight years as a high school teacher in Muskegon, Cheboygan and Detroit. Her more than 20 years in higher education were spent primarily at Mercy College of Detroit where she headed the foreign language department, taught French and English and served as advisor for the college newspaper.