



Sister Oonah A. Ryan RSCJ

June 16, 1932 - November 20, 2019

Religious of the Sacred Heart, Oonah Ryan died November 20, 2019. Oonah Ryan was born in Wilmington, Del., on September 16, 1932, to James Edward Ryan and Oonah Mary Lawlor Ryan. She grew up on a farm where her father, who had emigrated from Ireland, was a breeder of thoroughbred racehorses. After graduating from Manhattanville College in 1954 with a degree in English, Oonah entered the Society of the Sacred Heart at Kenwood in Albany. In 1957, Oonah pronounced her first vows and in February 1963, made her final profession in Rome. Sister Ryan's early years in the Society were devoted to teaching at Sacred Heart Schools in Grosse Pointe, Mich., Greenwich and Noroton, Conn., and Houston, Texas. She taught at Harlem Prep in New York from 1966 to 1968, before moving on to the Academy of the Sacred Heart at Bloomfield Hills, Mich., where she taught for six years. Beginning in 1974, while also teaching a couple of religion classes at Bloomfield, Sister Ryan became a member of the retreat team at Ephpheta (House of Prayer), conducting workshops and retreats. She also was an intern in Christian Pastoral Education (CPE) during this time until 1976. In 1977, Sister Ryan left Bloomfield for the inner city in Detroit, where she served as the assistant and acting pastor at St. Agnes Parish. When she arrived at St. Agnes, she found a depressed and struggling community with nearly half of the residents unemployed, most of them teens and single mothers. The lack of job skills, Sister Ryan believed, could be addressed through a job-training center. She found that there were opportunities for jobs in silk screening but few places that taught the craft. Sister Ryan shared her idea of a job-training center with her friend Sister Nancy Fearon, assistant principal of St. Martin de Porres High School, whom she met while teaching part time at the school. Together they started the job-training center, "Neighborhood Artisans," with 20 dollars to purchase materials to construct a simple silk screening machine and began teaching area residents. Once under way, they applied for and obtained a federal grant that provided for newer equipment and a professional staff. The government-funded program started in May 1978 with four staff persons and 26 applicants, with the auditorium of the former parish grade school converted into a studio. Because of the training, all of the applicants were offered jobs as silk screeners and some even chose to enroll in higher education. Once the grant expired after six months, Neighborhood Artisans incorporated as a non-profit organization,

seeking private funding and subcontract work. Besides silk-screening, the center also employed community residents for light industrial work, subcontracted from area companies. Sister Ryan served as co-director of the Neighborhood Artisans for eight years. The center is still in operation today and located in Highland Park, Mich. While it was hard for her to withdraw from her work at Neighborhood Artisans, Sister Ryan soon began a similar ministry, "Maine for Mainers," in Bangor, Maine. With a view to helping residents earn their livelihood, she opened a well located store downtown, where home made knitted goods, cards, hand woven rugs, jams, paper flowers - all manner of goods were sold. When she wasn't working there (sometimes 10 hours a day) she was at home working with people who needed help with their projects. In the midst of it all, she earned a B.F.A. at the University of Maine. Sister Ryan's creative spirit, and the opportunity to engage in her art and work with poor people were important to her, coupled with the desire to lead a contemplative life. In 2004 she was instrumental in the initiation of a triennial forum where the Society's spirituality is shared with anyone who wishes to participate. In 2015, as her health declined, Sister Ryan moved to Albany where, for a brief time, she lived at Abba House. In early 2016 as she needed more care she moved to Teresian House, something she found very difficult and confining for her free and creative spirit. Although she struggled mightily her friendly smile never faded and she endeared herself to the staff, volunteers and the other residents to such an extent that one of the security guards, expressing his sadness when she died, said "she was one of us." The last two days of Oonah's life there was a steady stream of staff, residents and her RSCJ sisters in and out of her room to pray beside her or simply to be with her as she, in deep sleep, waited. Finally, the afternoon of November 20 only the beloved aide who had spared nothing in her care of her, watched her slip away into the freedom of God's embrace. Oonah is survived by her brother, Owen in Kirkwood, Pa., and by his family. Her funeral will be on Tuesday, December 3, at 1 p.m. at the Teresian House with viewing at 12:30 p.m.

Cemetery

Kenwood Cemetery

Albany, NY,

Events

DEC **Visitation** 12:30PM

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Teresian House Chapel

Washington Ave, Albany, NY, US