
Sister White; loved learning, passed it along to students

By Talia Whyte

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Elizabeth Stuyvesant White, a longtime Boston College humanities professor, died after a brief illness on June 15 at Teresian House in Albany, N.Y. She was 90.

Sister White left a high standard for moral character and her love of the classics with her many students, said those who knew her.

"She moved like a ballerina in the classroom," said her sister Ann Buttrick of New York City. "She lived in the books she read and made the characters in them come to life for her students."

Buttrick said Sister White, of the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, was committed to becoming a nun and an educator. And she felt the two callings were completely compatible.

Born in New York City, Sister White graduated from the Noroton Convent of the Sacred Heart in Darien, Conn., in 1937. She earned a bachelor's degree in the classics from Manhattanville College in Purchase, N.Y., in 1941 and then entered the Society of the Sacred Heart at Kenwood in Albany in 1942. She made her final vows in 1950 at Via Nomentana in Rome. She later earned a master's degree in English at Radcliffe College in 1942 and a doctorate in English at Catholic University of America in Washington in 1962.

Following graduation, Sister White taught at many Sacred Heart schools across the Northeast before arriving at Newton College of the Sacred Heart in 1953 as the dean of students and English lecturer.

Newton College, a small women's liberal arts college in Newton Centre, merged with Boston College in 1974. Over the 60 years Sister White taught medieval and Renaissance English at both Newton and Boston colleges, and her former students say she left a lasting impression.

Sister Hilda Carey, RSCJ, said she took a Dante class with Sister White.

"I was so impressed by her that I would stay up all night after her class, translating old English into modern English," said Sister Carey. "In those days, lights went out in the dorms at 10 p.m., but I used my flashlight for my studying throughout the night, reading Paradiso."

Sister White was also an accomplished choral musician who shared her enthusiasm for music with her students. During the evenings at Newton College, Sister White ran the school's switchboard. She found a way to integrate answering the phones with her musical interests.

"She would have a gathering of girls at the switchboard to teach and sing choral music and answer the phones at the same time," continued Sister Carey. "She mastered multitasking."

Dr. Mary Jane Ferrier of Portland, Maine, met Sister White while she was a graduate student at Boston College more than 30 years ago.

"She was a creative teacher who knew how to meet her students at their level," said Ferrier. "She invited former female students who left school to get married to come back and partake in her English and composition classes."

Sister White was fluent in French and German and was active in many academic associations. She spent the summers of 1977 and 1979 in the Society of the Sacred Heart Archives in Rome, and she taught at a Sacred Heart School in Tokyo.

"But she was also an avid gardener," continued Ferrier. "She grew all kinds of flowers in her yard."

Sister White served as a writing coach for students in the honors program at Boston College and as a group leader at the Institute for Learning in Retirement in her later years.

She was awarded an honorary degree in 2006 from Boston College, where she continued to teach until 2007 when she retired.

In addition to her sister Ann, Sister White leaves three other sisters, all of New York: Alida Lessard of St. James; Cynthia Jay of Huntington; and Sarah White of the Bronx.

Services have been held.

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