

## ***History of the Blind and Sight Conservation Students at DePaul Institute, which began in 1948, and ended in 1970.***

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The mother of Ann Marie Gerard, who lived in Erie, PA, approached Bishop Dearden, who was then the bishop of the Diocese of Pittsburgh, and asked him if there was any school that he could recommend for her daughter to be educated. Ann Marie was six years old at that time, and she was blind. He told her that there was a school for the blind in Oakland. She said that she was aware of that school, but she preferred to have a Catholic school for the education of her daughter.

Later, Bishop Dearden approached Father Raymond Doherty, who was the Director of DePaul Institute and was currently supervising the construction of Our Lady of Victory Hall. The Bishop asked Father Doherty to have a classroom designated in the new building to provide for Ann Marie Gerard, and asked him to recommend a teacher who would assume the responsibility for the education of this child.

At that time, I was scheduled to teach in the Primary School, which had only four rooms. Ann Marie Gerard arrived at the school, and Agnes Stone, who was also blind, came to DePaul to introduce Ann Marie to the Braille system. I had the opportunity to observe the Braille lesson, and to direct Ann Marie in her first steps in the reading process.

In the summer of 1949, I was designated to go to Columbia University in New York to take a class for reading and writing Braille. When I went to Columbia with Sister Justina Dreistadt, who was also preparing to teach the Blind and Sight Conservation Classes at DePaul, the coordinator at Columbia met with me and asked me where I was from. I told him that I came from DePaul Institute, Pittsburgh, and was interested in taking a Braille class. He said, "You are the only one scheduled for Braille this summer. I don't think we can do that. You see, we usually have about eight or ten students for a given class. But, tell me again, where are you from?" I said, "I came from Pittsburgh." He said, "Pittsburgh? Who is the principal at your school?" I said, "Sister Teresa Vincent Mahoney." He said, "Oh, Yes! Yes! I think I've heard about her. She has written some wonderful articles. Well, I think I can provide a teacher for you." I thanked him and said that I was very grateful and would like to start the class.

The following Monday morning, I met Miss Madeline Loomis, who wrote a textbook for teaching Braille to blind students. I spent a week with her in class. At the end of the week, I was told that she was seriously ill, and she subsequently went to the hospital. The doctor thought that it was a case of

appendicitis, but in the end it turned out to be cancer. So the following week, I was provided with a substitute teacher. I didn't have a Braille writer, and there was no provision for me to use one. I had to study the alphabet and use the slate and stylus. It was very difficult to do because it was the inverted pattern of writing. The stylus pricked the dots on one side of the paper, and the person read the message on the other side of the paper.

After six weeks, I took a test, and came home to work with the blind children entrusted to me. There had been an epidemic of blindness during this time. It seems that premature babies had been put into incubators and too much oxygen had been given to them. This caused blindness. Later, the problem was discovered, and corrections were made at the hospitals. Years later, the situation was published in the newspapers, and thank God, the incidence of blindness was greatly decreased.

There were a number of blind children in the Pittsburgh area. Some, of course, had limited or usable vision and could be educated with the use of large printed materials.

Among the blind and partially sighted students at DePaul that I can recall were: Ann McGarry, who came shortly after Ann Marie Gerard, Tommy and William Burgunder, Terry McManus, Marita Mathews, Cindy Kudes, Kathy Weber, Denise McQuillan, the twins, Larry and Jimmy Wiseman, Mary Louise Geniviva, Daniel Loebig, Paul Ford, Timmy Jackson, Regis Sullivan, Larry Mahoney, Lana Crawshaw, Kathy Myers, Jeffrey Cogswell, Cathy Pasquale, Michael Sheeler, Denise Watton, Susan and Sheri Rodgers, Karen and Celeste Compomizzi, Betty Ann Staud, Marilyn Kennelly, Ann Miller, Earl Nixon and David Pruszyński. There were others who I can't presently recall.

We usually had two or three blind students in a class with the partially sighted and hard-of-hearing students. The classes were set up that way. We purchased Braille writers, large print readers, and other necessary equipment and materials.

Later, in 1951, Sister Angelica Little arrived. She was subsequently sent to the Catholic University in Washington, D.C. to take classes for the blind. She studied Braille, also.

In the Nursery Department, the young blind and partially sighted students, were taught by Sister Bridgetta Fitzpatrick and her assisting teachers. Other teachers throughout the school became familiar with the Braille system, and they used it whenever necessary. Sister Marie Estelle Copeland and Sister Justina Dreistadt, attended the Howard Rackam School, of Special Education, in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Miss Inez Hall taught a course for the deaf-blind. The

sisters were prepared for any student who might need this type of instruction. None was needed at that time.

In the beginning, it was difficult to obtain appropriate textbooks. A friend of Sister Angelica Little, Mrs. Mary Moore, who worked for the Association for the Blind, the United Presbyterian Church, in Bethel Park, PA, offered to Braille the textbooks with the assistance of volunteers. That was a wonderful thing to do for us. It was a very laborious task. It took a long, long time to do this. In the fall, we prepared the books that needed to be Brailled for the students. Mostly, the books were not transcribed until the end of the year. The women Brailled the pages, shellacked the backs of the pages, and then bound the pages into books for us. We were very fortunate, indeed, to have such capable and generous volunteers to Braille all the books we needed for the students. I want to mention the fact that we received some religious books and stories from the Xavier Society for the Blind in New York. These came in hard, black, plastic cartons upon request, as a library service through the mail. We could use them for a period of three weeks. We also used the so called "*talking book*" records that we played on the "*talking book*" machines in our classrooms. Some of these were provided for us by the Carnegie Library in Pittsburgh.

After a couple of years, Dr. Peabody, the coordinator for the newly established Blind Department at the University of Pittsburgh, heard about us and came to visit and observe our school. He was accompanied by a small group of teachers who were in training to teach blind and partially sighted children in classes with normal children. These children would be attending the public schools in the Pittsburgh area. Afterwards, Dr. Peabody invited Sister Angelica Little and me to attend night classes at the University of Pittsburgh, where we offered our services and led discussions. We attended one night a week for a six weeks course and found it both rewarding and interesting.

I recall, one January, when a pupil, Evelyn Rearden, transferred from the School For the Blind, in Oakland. She moved to a home nearby that was within walking distance of DePaul Institute. We were totally unprepared for her because we didn't have the textbooks needed for her education. So Sister Angelica Little and I spent many hours Brailing the papers for each day's lessons, trying to meet her needs in Reading, Social Studies, Math and other studies. She would take the papers home, do her homework, and bring them back the next day for correction.

One question that comes to my mind is what people often ask, "How do you teach the blind students?" We usually explained that they were taught in practically the same as any other student. All we needed were the tools of Braille and large print materials. Of course, there was always a question of having the students "feeling things" with their fingers to learn sizes, shapes, and textures. They also needed to learn the true concept of distance within their

ranges, and the important concept of using proper direction in traveling to and from places they needed to go. They were cautioned about entering the stairs, and being alert for fire drills. At meal time, the teachers ate with the students in the diningroom. The foods on the plate were detailed for the students as they were served. For example, "The peas are at the right of your potatoes," etc. The meat was generally cut for the younger students. Proper handling of silverware and good eating habits were always taught and encouraged.

The vision of the students didn't impede their participation in the scouting program, the camping trips, and other activities with the sighted students. They enjoyed the singing and the craft work. They were always eager to do the work required, and to obtain their scout badges that would be presented to them at the yearly Court of Honor.

Each year the students participated in a Christmas Play. Some were dressed as characters on the stage, and others were in the verse choir. They enjoyed singing the Christmas carols and reciting passages from the Bible.

Over the weekend, once a year, Father Paul Lackner, Nora McGuire, and other dedicated women from the Guild for the Blind, in Pittsburgh, sponsored a mini retreat for any adult blind woman who wished to spend the time at DePaul Institute. Beds were provided for these women in the dormitories on the second floor of the main building at DePaul. Meals were prepared in the kitchen and the Sisters took care of serving them in the student diningroom. The blind women always found the retreat to be a wonderful experience and were eager to attend each year. After the retreat was over, the Sisters cleaned the rooms, and prepared them for the DePaul students who would be using them for the coming week.

We had special desks provided for the students who used large print textbooks. These desks were set on a slanting position, which elevated the books to the eye level of the student so that they could be read with ease. Some children had to use a hand magnifier for large or ordinary printed material, depending upon the acuity of vision in their eyes.

I recall in Lady of Victory Hall in the big classroom in which I taught, some children used Braille writers along with the children writing at the board or at their desks. The classes were coordinated that way. We would get the writing on the board and someone would ask, "Are we going to tell our experiences / news for today?" "Shall we write the date?" "Yes, we can do that, now," I would say. "Today is Monday, September 20, 1952," or whatever, using the calendar for all to see it. I would say, "Today, Capital To dot 5 d. space, is, i ,s, space, Monday, capital Mon dot 5 d comma space, September, Capital Septemb (er) contraction, space, number sign, 20, comma space, number sign, 1952. period,

and the children would Braille the sentence as it was dictated using the contractions in Braille.

In Braille, there are six dots and there are 185 possible combinations that can be used with these six dots including punctuation. There are a number of whole word contractions to be used. For instance, b is but, c is can, d is do, e is every, h is have, j is just, k is knowledge, l is like, m is more, n is not, t is that and z is as. And there are a number of dot 5 contractions. For the word mother, you would write dot 5 and the letter m, for father, it would be dot 5 f, for work it would be dot 5, and the letter w, etc. We also use contractions in words such as gh, sh, er, ou, ow, and many, many others that I can't mention here. All these contractions are used for Grade 2 Braille. The alphabet is Grade 1 Braille. The students at DePaul used Grade 2 Braille in their daily reading and writing experiences.

I would like to relate to you some success stories of several of the students who attended DePaul years ago. I remember Tommy Burgunder as a little boy. He always had a wonderful sense of direction, no matter where he wanted to go. Tommy was a very good student and was always eager to learn. Every day, Tommy walked up the hills in Brookline with his cane tapping on the streets on his way to school. He always enjoyed the winter season when he went sledriding down a big hill on the DePaul property. His brother, William, his friends and he would come to a sudden stop near McNeilly Road. It always amazed me how he was able to do that, given the fact that he was blind. He attended Seton LeSalle High School, went on to Duquesne University and became a lawyer who is now working for a notable firm in Pittsburgh. His brother, William Burgunder, also attended DePaul. He is also now quite successful, running his own insurance agency and serving on DePaul's Board of Directors.

Marita Matthews attended Elizabeth Seton High School in Brookline, went to college, and has a wonderful job in Pittsburgh. She travels by bus everyday to work. Several years ago she got a "seeing eye" dog to be her companion. I remember she had a wonderful talent for playing the piano even at a young age. At DePaul, Sister Angelica Little transcribed the music into Braille for the students to play on the piano. We had a piano recital each year for parents, teachers, and friends. The parents were always very proud of their children's accomplishments and so were their teachers.

Cindy Kudes, after graduating from Thiel College, went to Kane Hospital to offer her services playing the piano for the residents there. It always was a pleasure for her to have them sing their favorite songs and to enjoy the people as well. I believe she is now living in Arizona and I'm sure that she is still generous with her time and talents in some line of music.

David Pruszynski was another wonderful student at DePaul. He was always eager to try new things that were of interest to him. He attended Duquesne University and other colleges and recently received his PH.D. While at Duquesne, he joined a choral group and traveled with them. Now, he is very successful in his career and we are very proud of him.

Sister Angelica Little was a marvelous person who worked with the blind students here. In addition to teaching the students and preparing them for piano recitals, she got permission from KDKA to dub the records that were being discarded. These records were dubbed from the St. Francis Hour Radio Program with stories of the Saints and religious talks, etc. They sent the large records, 33rpm, and Sister Angelica purchased a machine that would cut new records smaller in size, 78rpm. After she made the new records, they were boxed and sent through the mail to any blind person who wanted to hear them, using their own record player or "talking book" machine.

After teaching some years, I decided that I should become a certified Braille Transcriber from the Library of Congress. So one day, while looking at some of the books in the DePaul library, I came across a book titled, Black Beauty. I thought to myself, "Now this would be a nice, interesting book for children to read." So I decided to Braille the book! I sent it to the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. for approval and certification as a certified volunteer Braille Transcriber. When I finished, I sent the copy to be proofread. My certificate came in the mail several weeks later. Of course, the book was retained for blind students to read from the Library of Congress.

Some mothers wanted to learn the Braille system so that they could help their children at home with their homework. They came one day a week in the evening to practice their skills in reading and writing Braille. They were always grateful for the opportunity to do that.

I'm still finding uses for writing Braille. There is a pupil whom I taught years ago. His name is Robert Walker. He came to DePaul at a very young age and had to be carried to school on a pillow. His mother brought him up the steps of Our Lady of Victory Hall and she wasn't sure we would keep him because he needed a lot of care at that time. But he got along very well. He had a severe hearing loss, but was gradually able to speak as clearly as any person, using the oral method of communicating taught at the DePaul Institute. He became a very good student and graduated from our school. After graduation, he got a nice job as a proof reader in Boston. His eyes always had a weakness, and doctors followed his case closely. When he became older, he gradually lost his eye sight. In the end, in spite of the doctors care and several operations, he became totally blind. But before that happened, his mother, who was deeply concerned about his future, asked Sister Philomena Mannion if someone could teach Robert the Braille system. It became my privilege to take Robert after school

hours to begin teaching him. At first, he was very confused and apprehensive and asked, "Can't you make these dots bigger? They all feel the same to me. I can't do this." Well, I couldn't make the dots bigger, but I encouraged him to try harder. With much repetition, he felt only his first name. He was 32 years old at that time and his fingers were not as sensitive to the dots as younger children's are when they first learn to use Braille. However, before the course was completed, his parents decided to move to Richmond, VA. There they would be near their younger daughter, who could take care of Robert in time of need, since the father was already retired from work. With some continuation at the Guild For the Blind in Richmond, VA, an instructor came to his home to encourage the use of Braille. Now he is able to use a Braille writer and we correspond regularly. He waits for my letters to inform him about DePaul and his former friends.

It's great to Braille letters. Just put them in an envelope and write the words, "*Reading Matter for the Blind*," in the place where the stamp should be. You don't need a stamp. Braille goes free. I'm glad that I am still able to use the Braille that I learned years ago.

In the year 1970, DePaul closed the Braille and Sight Conservation classes because there were no more students. So Sister Angelica Little and I sent all the Braille books and other materials to schools that could make use of them, and to any person who requested them.

*Written and edited by Sister Francis Louise Honeychuck*

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