

Sister Alberta Keuhlen

Still Surprised by God

Sister Alberta Keuhlen has resided at Saint Anne Villa for the past five years and positively raves about her lovely home. From the comforts of her apartment, to the many activities, to the staff and her many friends among the Sisters, “it’s all absolutely wonderful.” Sister Alberta makes clear, however, that the underlying source of joy in her life at the Villa is the presence of God. “When I moved here,” she says, “it was the biggest surprise to me that I could walk through this place and almost bump into God anywhere I went.”



Sister Alberta’s story begins in 1927, when she was born Josephine Keuhlen, the third child and first daughter in a family in Hillside, NJ. She was educated by the Sisters of Charity, first at Our Lady of Lourdes School in West Orange, then at Sacred Heart School in Bloomfield, and then at Immaculate Conception High School. She remembers that her 8th grade teacher, Sr. Dorothy Clare, made a big impression on her and suggested that she enroll in the Sisters of Charity Juniorate for her high school years. Although her father said “absolutely not” to that suggestion, Alberta never completely forgot about religious life as she continued through high school. Following graduation from high school, she enrolled in Newark State Teacher’s College and planned to become a kindergarten or primary school teacher.

Alberta’s godfather, her Uncle Phil, was a powerful influence on Alberta’s early life. “He was a Jesuit who went to China before he was ordained. He was actually ordained in a prison camp there.” Uncle Phil always believed that his niece was called to a religious vocation. “He saw something in me that I didn’t see and he knew that I was going to be a Sister. Uncle Phil came home from China early in my sophomore year of college, and he said to me in essence, ‘Now quit fooling around and get down to what you should be doing!’” Alberta came to realize that her uncle was right; she did have a religious vocation. She withdrew from college in order to earn money to buy what she needed to enter the convent.

As one in a band of 25, Sister Alberta entered the Sisters of Charity on March 25, 1947. She found fulfillment in religious life. Sister Alberta’s father, who was named Albert, came to support her decision and was very proud of her. “My mother told me once that when my dad talked about me, he would always pull out his wallet and show off the picture of me as a Sister.”

Using her two years of education from Teacher’s College, Sister Alberta was sent out to teach while still a novice. She was first assigned to teach combined grades 5 and 6 at Marylawn-of-the-Oranges Elementary School and then was moved to grades 1 and 2. During the summers, she completed her education degree at the College of Saint Elizabeth.

Having completed her education degree, Sister Alberta was encouraged to continue her studies by concentrating on a subject area. The choice of a subject area was made for her by Mother Ellen McCauley, the General Superior at the time. Sister Alberta recalls, “I remember she told me to wait after dinner to talk with her and she asked me, ‘What would you like to study?’ I started with Latin, and I kept listing all the things I might like to do, and the very last subject I said was math. She said, ‘Yes, that’s it, math!’ She was probably waiting for me to say that!”

Sister Alberta pursued her math studies at Boston College, and upon graduation was assigned to teach math at St. Aloysius High School in Jersey City. “Even though I was not very happy about the mathematics, I loved teaching there. Those were the happiest years of my life. I loved those students – they were absolutely wonderful.” She loved the classroom and also loved engaging with the students as St. Al’s school choir director. “We had over 100 students in the choir. The students would tell me that choir was their favorite part of school.”

Sister Alberta taught at St. Al’s for about fifteen years before moving on to teach at St. Mary School in Jersey City and later serve as principal of that school. She found that she much preferred the role of classroom teacher to the role of principal, and returned to the classroom to teach math at St. Aloysius Academy.

After many happy years of teaching, Sister Alberta took on a new challenge to serve as Facilities Director at Xavier Center on the campus of the College of Saint Elizabeth. She enjoyed the work at Xavier Center for over fourteen years, until she found that she needed to take a break from the physical demands of that job. Sister Alberta then worked at the College of Saint Elizabeth Library before moving on to the Financial Services Office of the Sisters of Charity.

In 2009, Sister Alberta moved to an assisted living apartment at Saint Anne Villa. During her first three years at the Villa, she continued inputting data and doing other work for the Finance Office from her own computer. She now considers herself “retired,” while maintaining a schedule which keeps her almost as busy as having a full time job. She explains, “I do lots of odds and ends here, like I deliver mail on the second floor. I’m a Eucharistic minister on Friday for the third floor, on Saturday for the second floor. Twice a month, two different weekends, I’m a receptionist at the front desk. That’s real hard work, you know,” she laughs. “You sit there for an hour!” She continues, “I’m a lector at Mass one day a week. I chair the Family Circle, which is where we meet to discuss the Villa. I’m in the choir, too. We practice two mornings a week after the 11:00 mass.” She pauses and reflects, “I guess you can say that when people ask me to do something, I do it.”

Sister Alberta takes great joy in maintaining friendships with her former students. Many former students stay in touch, taking Sister Alberta out to lunch, sending cards, calling, or chatting by e-mail. An even greater source of joy comes from Sister Alberta’s large, devoted family. Her apartment is full of family photographs and handmade cards from her grand nieces and grand nephews, as well as pictures of the next generation, the “great-grands.” The many celebrations that come with a large, close-knit family keep Sister Alberta busy crocheting one-of-a-kind gifts and keepsakes. If crocheting helps Sister Alberta’s fingers stay nimble, her mind stays sharp by working on Sudoku puzzles and the daily crossword. “I have a friend who does the crossword also, and she’ll call me and ask, ‘Did you get tonight’s puzzle?’ I’ll say, ‘All except for the bottom left corner,’ and then we’ll talk it out.”

Sister Alberta considers it a real blessing to live at Saint Anne Villa. With a sense of wonder in her voice, Sister Alberta says that Saint Anne Villa “is just filled with God.” Since coming to the Villa, Sister Alberta says her love for God has grown as she continues to encounter God anew. She reflects, “I have felt such growth, such knowledge of myself, too, and thanksgiving for so many loves and the gifts that I have been given.” She concludes, “I just know that I am God’s, and I’m so glad I’m here.”