

Sister Lillian Silkowski

Always a smile . . . Always a story

Anyone who has ever been blessed to meet Sister Lillian Silkowski will agree that there is no such thing as an abrupt, impersonal encounter with Sister Lillian. Throughout her many years as a Sister of Charity, Sister Lillian has always taken the time to listen and to share a smile and a story. Especially in her ministry with children and youth, she built relationships based on trust, affirmation, and the assurance of God's presence and goodness.

Lillian Silkowski grew up in Belleville, New Jersey. She was the middle daughter in a closely knit family. Her father, who was born in Poland, "loved being greasy under a car hood, deep sea fishing, and sports." Her mother, whose family was English, was an accomplished musician who had played the piano at silent movie theatres and who loved to spend Sunday afternoons at the piano playing hymns. Home was a place where it was natural to talk about God. Sister Lillian remembers, "God was always in our home. When you were in a procession or made your First Communion, it was an exciting thing for us."



As a young girl, Lillian was a tomboy who loved all sports and who could hold her own against the neighborhood boys. She recalls, "If there was a tree to be climbed, I climbed it. I could kick a football half the length of the football field and not blink an eye." Lillian especially enjoyed basketball. "When the ball was bouncing, I couldn't stay away." Lillian always seemed to be a magnet for the younger children in the neighborhood. "I would sit out on my front steps, and the little kids would come over. The parents would look out the window, and if they saw their children were with me, they'd know it was OK."

An even more defining influence in Lillian's childhood was the Church and the example provided by Sisters of Charity. When Lillian was six years old, she became captivated by Sister Michael Marie Harvey, who was her older sister's First Communion teacher. "I was young and impressionable, and I got hooked on her. She was full of life." As Lillian progressed through St. Peter's School in Belleville, she remained close with Sister Michael Marie and Sister Marie Veronica Finnegan, her first grade teacher. She enjoyed spending time after school helping in Sister Veronica's classroom. "Looking back on it, I realize she was training me to be a teacher."

As a student at St. Cecilia High School in Kearny, Lillian maintained her close relationships with the Sisters of Charity and continued to be devoted to the Church. Every morning before school, she rode her bike to attend 6:30 a.m. Mass, wearing jeans for the bike ride and changing into her uniform skirt for school. Lillian also spent many hours at the church rectory, doing whatever jobs needed to be done. As a thank you to Fr. Francis for paying the portion of Lillian's high school tuition that her family could not afford, Lillian washed Fr. Francis's car every week.

In March of Lillian's senior year of high school, she petitioned to join the Sisters of Charity. Sister Michael Marie was her sponsor. With this petition, Lillian confirmed the call to join the sisters who had served as models of faith and ministry since she was very young. She entered the Sisters of Charity on September 24, 1952, and was sent out to begin her ministry as a teacher at Star of the Sea School in Long Branch only days later.

Following the example of the Sisters of Charity who were so full of life when they taught her, Sister Lillian brought a lively and compassionate presence to students in the classroom for more than 50 years. She says that though preparing for teaching was work, “teaching itself was never work for me.”

Sister Lillian served in seven different grammar schools, with her longest tenure at St. Mary School in Jersey City. Through the years she taught almost every grade from 1st through 8th. She especially enjoyed the junior high students, who would gravitate to her classroom after school and who knew they could count on Sister Lillian to be understanding and available to them. “The classroom after school was a safe place. Some students didn’t want to go home because the parents were working and the house was empty. I always had a lot of chess boards. Sometimes it was a case of one kid showing another kid how to do homework. I did my thing and they did theirs. If we got into a conversation, fine. I tried to give them what they needed.”

Sports were always an important part of the way that Sister Lillian related to young people. She coached and refereed for girls’ basketball and worked extensively with CYO basketball and baseball teams. An incident that happened shortly after she began teaching at Holy Cross School in Harrison reveals her love of sports and her gift of connecting with youth. “I was in my classroom after school and trying to work on my lesson plan when I heard the rhythmic bouncing of a basketball in the gym, and it was driving me crazy.” She couldn’t resist checking in on the activity in the gym, where some older boys were having difficulty trying to teach the grammar school boys how to execute a give-and-go. She tells the story, “I watch for a while, and finally I say, ‘George, can I help you?’ I hang my veil on a peg so it won’t get in the way and I jog onto the court. George numbly moves into position and I dribble the ball, pass it off to George, and George gives it back to me. In one motion, up I go and the ball goes into the basket. After that, I walk off the court, put my veil back on, and say, ‘See, fellows, that’s how you’re supposed to do it.’”

Sister Lillian’s love of youth and her ability to connect with them through sports was perhaps most evident in her special ministry to the youth of Jersey City. For 15 years, she opened the St. Mary School gym to youth on Wednesday nights from 7:30 to 10:00 p.m. from October through May. “It was a safe place for them to hang out. They could play basketball, relax and socialize. They each paid a dollar to get in. They knew that I’d look into their eyes and smell their breath. If they were using or drinking, they couldn’t come in.” For some of the youth, the security offered by Sister Lillian was truly a lifesaver.

Now retired from the classroom, Sister Lillian lives in the Motherhouse. Although she faces some health challenges, she remains active with two volunteer ministries to the sisters living in the Motherhouse, coordinating the sisters’ nonprescription drug orders and handling a community check book to allow sisters to pay bills without having to go out and purchase money orders. She also is a ready volunteer to help with any needs that may arise and often greets visitors to the Motherhouse. In chatting with other sisters, lay staff, or visitors, Sister Lillian is always ready with a smile and a story. She makes time to listen and talk with people and she gets tremendous satisfaction from doing things for others.

At the core of Sister Lillian’s life now, as always, is a deep and very personal relationship with God. Her prayer life is characterized by frequent conversations with God throughout the day. She is continually amazed by the little coincidences that God brings to bless her life, knowing what she needs before she recognizes it herself. “Something will happen, and I’ll give a word of thanks and ask, ‘How’d you know I wanted that?’” Sister Lillian trusts in God as her ever present guide, companion, and friend as she continues her journey of more than 60 years as a Sister of Charity.