

Sister Anita Richard Hielenday, SC
Entered eternal life on April 2, 2024

A few months ago, Sister Beverly Ornes called me saying she had a message for me from Sister Anita. It was that Anita asked me to say a few words at her Funeral Mass – but “just talk about the holy stuff, not about me”. While composing this reflection, I often moved between saying “Sister Anita”, “Anita”, “you” and this morning heard about “SAR” (from colleagues).

Well, Anita, we have heard many holy words today, especially in Father’s homily, but I want to share some thoughts and memories about you and your “holy” presence with us over these last 72 years. Today we are here to celebrate you and your life as a Sister of Charity. We welcome you back home here – you lived in this house for over 65 years and ministered in the College of St. Elizabeth for over 50 years. I somehow expect to see you sitting in the back of the chapel near the back pillar with your walker carefully tucked away – one could often see you quietly sitting and observing what was happening – and praying of course.

After graduating from the College with a degree in Home Economics, Sister Anita began teaching here in 1953 as an instructor in the department of Home Economics. This was followed by promotions to Associate and Assistant Professor and ultimately as Department Chairperson of what by then was known as the Foods and Nutrition Department. In April 2004, the College honored her many achievements and years of service to the College by granting her the most distinguished status of Associate Professor Emeritus in the Department of Foods and Nutrition. Her leadership and vision for this department is evidenced by its continual growth and prominence over the years to best meet the needs of the students in a constantly changing environment. Just to cite a few accomplishments: Anita was responsible for moving Nevin House to campus to provide students with a successful Home Management residential experience and served as its residential director from 1980–1985. In 1981, she designed and supervised the 1 million dollar renovation which relocated the department to its current place in Henderson Hall. Under her guidance as Chairperson, the Department established the Dietetic Internship in 1991, the first post baccalaureate program offered by the College and a Graduate Program in Nutrition in 1995. From 1976 to 2002 Anita served as Founder and Director of CILAH – the Center for Independent Living: Aging/Handicapped, one of the earliest centers of its kind in the country which had a mission of empowering senior citizens to remain independent in their communities. I am certain that there may be so many more areas of accomplishment within the College which support the advancement and celebration of the Foods and Nutrition program as it is operative in the University today, Sister Anita received numerous awards from the College as well as from the State of New Jersey, e.g., New Jersey Home Economist of the year in 1983 and the New Jersey Dietetic Association Distinguished Service Award in 1992. She was also elected to many Boards of Trustees within the State, and at this point, let me say that I know she made many trips to meetings in Trenton, and she was a fierce advocate for her “girls” as she called them early on – she would argue for the needs and recognition of women in higher education, especially in the areas of foods and nutrition. In recent years whenever she was visited by any graduates of the programs or any of the present members of the faculty and staff, she was always so interested in



“what was going on” or “what’s happening” in the program – and in the University. Her questions always came from concern about and not wanting to critique.

And on a more personal note, in 1961, I was a student in the College and I joined the CCD – Confraternity of Christian Doctrine - wanting to help in some way in teaching children. I was living on campus so I would be around every weekend. Sister Winifred Marie, who was in charge, suggested that I work with Sister Anita Richard – now I was French major, so I had no idea who Sister Anita was. This began a journey of four years of teaching 1st and 2nd graders at St. Catherine’s Church in Mountain Lakes. I point this out because I ask you to imagine Anita – a college professor who was with adult women most of the week – and at St. Catherine’s, you would see her sitting down – almost on the level of these first graders – her broad smile and laughter just lighting up the small classroom as well as engaging the children who just responded to her so easily. Upon graduation I asked Sister Anita to be my sponsor as I entered the Sisters of Charity – that has been our connection for the last 58 years.

She was a Jersey City girl and didn’t let too much time go by before letting you know that. Her family was very important to her – her brother Dick, his children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren – Anita always interested in knowing what was happening with them. Her sister Myra – to know Anita was to know about Myra - and the Garden State Parkway was often used between Convent and Spring Lake. Anita held in her heart many losses – her parents, Lillian and Richard, Dick and Myra, her nephew Rev. Benet Amato and very recently her niece Carolyn Hunter and her grandnephew Colin Schabel. If you looked around in her room at Complete Care at St. Vincent’s where she has been since 2018, you would see a testimony of pictures of her family. With her vision limited, she loved having others read her mail to her, and walking down the hallway at St. Vincent’s you always knew where her room was – the Mass on the television was loud enough for all to hear. She was very faithful in listening to the Mass.

Anita also held pain in her body for most of her life. She rarely if at all complained and she never let the pain hold her back from ministering to others. Observing her smile, which was contagious, one would not know what, sometimes, the pain of taking a few steps would cost her. When I heard she had passed away, my first thought was that she is no longer in pain.

She loved the College – as has been noted – and she loved our congregation as well. Her faithfulness, her presence, her dedication, and unreserved commitment to the mission of charity was so evident. In my visits to St. Joseph’s in Cedar Grove, she would always be asking how my ministry was, what was I doing in the community – it was not only about me – she was always interested in what was going on in the lives of others. I often reminded her of her courage – to say “yes” to leaving this Motherhouse and moving to St. Joseph’s because of needing more care. She was so kind, generous, and gracious.

Perhaps just to come full circle – some comments which so clearly speak to who she was and who she is today in our hearts – “a great woman who worked tirelessly for others”, “a dynamic leader, a great inspiration to her students”, “a pillar of the college for decades”.

Anita, the “holy stuff” which you wanted me to talk about – it is how you have been a Holy presence in our lives as a Sister of Charity – and a holy presence in the lives of all those whom you have touched.

I know you are at peace, Anita.

Sister Peggy Conlon, SC

Sister Anita Richard Heilenday could be described as a “*Force or Nature*” in the complementary sense. A “person with a strong personality or character or full of energy.”

She was all of that and more.

SAR, as her faculty and staff affectionately called her in the department, could have had various careers if that had been her path.

She chose God and her religious community, the Sisters of Charity, as her core directions in life.

Through her leadership and energy, she helped to foster the work of the University of Saint Elizabeth and carry forward the charism of the Sisters of Charity. This determination became the “compass” guiding her through a 5-decade career in higher education and earning her many awards, including the distinction of Associate Professor of Emeritus in Foods and Nutrition and the Elizabethan Award for her 50 years of service to the university.

A force of nature, SAR was gifted with many talents, and she used these talents wisely. In many ways, she was the “entrepreneurial nun of the 20th century!”

SAR could have been an 1) Architect or an Engineer – she designed an award-winning foods lab and a state-of-the-art Fashion Lab

She moved a house! Having secured Nevin House from its Park Ave residence, it was moved to the college campus and moved to the location where the Annunciation Center now stands. It served as a training center for the home economics program. Later, it became the President’s residence, and it would become the site for another initiative – CILAH, or the Center for Independent Living and Aging/Handicapped, would be among the first of its kind of an adult day care center and speak out to the needs of those with disabilities. She was an intelligent businesswoman raising nearly \$400,000 thousand (1990s) through grants to support CILAH

She was a fine China Consultant – her teacup collection was amazing and well-known throughout NJ.

She was part Hospitality Manager. The FN Department was the star feature on campus for every event, especially the “Christmas Party.”

I think she was the original inventor of the” post-it” note! She was a beautiful writer, especially her loving reminders to faculty to unplug the coffee pot, lock up, and shut windows. If not, you would be sure to get a SAR note in the morning! SAR never wasted a scrap of paper—a good steward of all resources, she would have Jessie carefully cut paper scraps to source SAR’s “post-it” notes.

Above all, SAR was a true educator, and she has a legacy of markable graduates. I’m sure each has its own SAR story, well, maybe two of three or more!!

SAR was a force of nature – but I’m not talking about the weather for the past week (floods, snow, lightning, an earthquake, and solar eclipse) – I’m referring to her driving! On her days off, SAR had the pedal to the metal and zip off her visit to her beloved sister Myra and family in Spring Lake.

Just as she loved her Sister of Charity community, she loved her family. Over the years we (FN faculty and staff) came to know her family, especially the late Fr. Benet (Larry), OSB, her niece Carolyn, and her family.

SAR mentored all her FN faculty, and because of her joy in family, we all became part of her extended family. I know this was true for my family.

My oldest son, Matt, once commented, “Mom, who’s this SAINT who keeps sending us money?” and John’s comment, “Mom, Sister Anita was one of the highest contributors to my First Communion Fund.”

SAR was generous in many ways, but her cards and notes reflect a lifetime of kindness and generosity. As I mentioned earlier, SAR was a gifted writer. She wrote to everyone and always picked the most beautiful cards. These were SAR's everyday gifts to all of us! SAR had a wonderful way of making each person feel appreciated and loved.

SAR was a force of nature and love; her love for God, and her community has blessed us all.

When the forsythia blooms and a rainbow crosses the back of the campus, I will remember our dear Sister Anita “SAR” affectionately.

God Bless you, SAR, on your journey home.

**by Monica Luby, Faculty, Department of Foods and Nutrition,
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