

Community SPOTLIGHT



SISTER THEA BOWMAN

A Bridge over Troubled Water.

Article: Andrea Culetto

The lobby of Washington D.C.'s famous Omni Shoreham Hotel brims with movement as people hurry to and from important engagements. Two Catholic sisters from La Crosse, Wis., enter the lobby, one dark-complected, the other light. An Argentinian piano player sits nearby, his fingers dancing melodically across the ivories. The sisters listen appreciatively.

He plays a song from the American opera, "Porgy and Bess." The darker sister begins to sing in a rich, full-bodied tone. Hotel patrons stop in their tracks. Silence falls across the busy lobby as her joyful and uplifting melody rises to the rafters.

The other sister, Sister Charlene Smith, shifts uncomfortably, unsure if she should acknowledge her connection with the more audacious sister — but then the crowd erupts into enthusiastic applause. It is a standing ovation, right there in the hotel lobby! A woman whispers, "Do you know her?" Sister Charlene smiles and proudly replies, "That is my friend, Sister Thea Bowman!"

"That's who Sister Thea was," says Sister Charlene. "Besides being an extremely dedicated, religious woman, she was vibrant, spontaneous and alive. That's what drew people to her." Another close friend and

Franciscan Sister, Sister Malinda Gerke, agrees. "Sister Thea wasn't afraid to be herself. She was so magnetic. She even got cardinals and bishops to link hands, sing and dance. That's how compelling she was."

Sister Thea was a life force. She spearheaded the movement to bring African-American song and dance into Catholic churches and compiled "Lead Me, Guide Me," an African-American Catholic hymnal. Her love of music bore fruit here in La Crosse, as she directed Viterbo University's Hallelujah Singers. Sister Malinda still sees "Thea's vivacious spirit and love of music living on in her students today."

"Sister Thea sang all the time," remembers Sister Charlene. "That soulful and active type of singing was different. In the beginning, Wisconsin Catholics didn't know much about it, so there was some fear. But, when they saw her jubilation, they liked it. It's extremely catchy."

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Sister Charlene

Music was one way Sister Thea opened the doors to people's hearts, something that she did often and well. Bowman was an agent of positive change in the civil rights movement. She was La Crosse's first black Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration and the first black woman to receive an honorary doctorate in theology from Boston College. She co-founded the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University and was appointed as the Jackson, Miss., diocesan consultant for intercultural awareness. She was often called to speak publicly, in Wisconsin and across the nation, where she taught people to embrace their heritage and appreciate the cultures of others.

Her accomplishments did not go unnoticed. She was interviewed on "60 Minutes" by Mike Wallace, and her life story was considered for a movie with Harry Belafonte and Whoopi Goldberg.

Much of Sister Thea's life was spent teaching and uplifting others, beginning at La Crosse's Blessed Sacrament Parish. "She was able to see into the spirit of everybody," says Sister Charlene. Bowman was particularly concerned with facilitating positive intercultural relations, while celebrating, rather than erasing, different cultural identities.

In an interview, Sister Thea once said, "I can introduce my Black friends to my Hispanic friends, to my Anglo friends, to my Asian friends, to my Native friends. I can be the bridge over troubled water. I can take you by the hand and take you with me into the black community. I can walk with you into your community, and if I walk with you into your community, I don't walk as a stranger, I walk as your sister."

Sister Thea Bowman died in 1990, at the age of 52, from cancer. Today, her legacy lives on in those she taught and inspired, here in La Crosse and abroad, as well as in six schools, a women's center and a foundation, which all bear her name. These organizations, and many others, continue Sister Thea's work of educating and enriching individuals of all cultural identities.

The Franciscan Sisters of La Crosse have planned a series of events to commemorate the 25th anniversary of their friend and teacher, Sister Thea Bowman's, passing.

Andrea Culetto is a freelance writer in the Coulee Region of Wisconsin. Her work can be seen at AndreaCuletto.Wordpress.com.



If You Go

"Friends of Thea: Sharing the Joy"

March 29, 2015, 2-4 p.m.

Franciscan Spirituality Center

A panel discussion on Sister Bowman's legacy with author and renowned evangelist Rev. Maurice Nutt, artist and writer Brother Mickey McGrath, fellow Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration Marla Lang and the Sister Thea Bowman Black Catholic Educational Foundation's Mary Lou Jennings.

"Thea Bowman: Life and Legacy on Display"

March 17- 30, 2015

Franciscan Spirituality Center

A showcase of art and artifacts, illustrating Sister Thea's effect on the world.

"Come and See"

March 27- 30, 2015

St. Rose Convent

A discernment weekend for women, ages 21 to 45, who are interested in living a vowed religious life.

"Mass"

March 30, 2015, 10:30 a.m.

St. Rose Convent

Sister Bowman's friend and student, Rev. Maurice Nutt will be joined by the Viterbo University Concert Choir for Mass.

Those unable to attend can view the live stream on FSPA.org.

Event details, registration information and a deeper look at Sister Thea and her life's work are available at www.fspa.org/theabowman.

