

Thea News

VOLUME 1 NUMBER 1 2002



*I pledge
allegiance
to the destiny
of Black
people:
to the Red,
Black
and Green.
I give
my life
and love
to my people.
I promise
to keep
an open mind
toward
all people,
to seek
the goals
of unity and
community,
to stand up for
what is right
from now
until
Judgment
Day!*

An eighth grade class from
Father Bertrand School,
Memphis, Tenn.

Thea Bowman Scholars assured a quality education

When the Sister Thea Bowman Black Catholic Educational Foundation Board gathers in Pittsburgh on March 22 for its annual meeting, the members have much to be proud of. In 12 years, the Foundation has graduated 58 students from major Catholic universities and has 22 students currently enrolled.

The Foundation began with two people who had a passion for both Catholic education and helping African American students, Dr. Leonard and Mary Lou Jennings. “Most of our help went to elementary schools,” says Mary Lou, “but we saw we needed to help students go to college.”

But how? They weren’t sure. Someone said to them, “Meet Sister Thea Bowman.” They did, in 1984. She encouraged them to go national. Mary Lou made six trips to Canton, Miss., to work with Thea on a mission statement. With that, the Sister Thea Bowman Foundation was born. Thea was with Len and Mary Lou at St. Michael’s College, Winooski, Vt., on Oct. 19, 1989, when several Catholic university presidents and bishops joined with them to officially launch the Foundation.

Students have received degrees from Notre Dame University (South Bend, Ind.), Catholic University (Washington, D.C.), Xavier University (New Orleans), Duquesne University (Pittsburgh), Boston College and St. Michael’s. Today’s scholars are enrolled at Duquesne, Notre Dame, Xavier and St. Francis University (Loretto, Pa.).

Seeing these students succeed is what makes working with them so rewarding, says Mary Lou, who serves as executive director of the Foundation. “If you love them, mentor them, support them and stay with them, they’ll make it,” she says. “Hold them up for two years and they fly, and that is one of God’s miracles.”

Each student receives a grant of \$30,000 which is matched or exceeded by the college or university. The Foundation raises \$100–\$125 thousand per year. This year they hope to make that \$150 thousand because they are adding single mothers to the program and

also working toward a \$5 million endowment fund.

When that is in place, Mary Lou says she’ll be ready to pass her job on. Her and Len’s dream of providing African American students a quality education into the future will be a reality.



Mary Lou Jennings

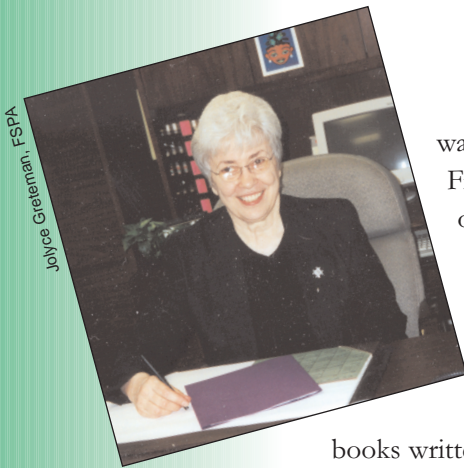


Dave Siroki, Duquesne University

Thea Bowman scholars were among guests at last year’s scholarship dinner.

From the TBL Coordinator

March 1, 2002



Welcome to *Thea News*!

This newsletter is part of the new Thea Bowman Legacy ministry. With it we want to brief Friends of Thea—the African American Catholic community, Franciscans throughout the world, women and men religious, U. S. Catholic bishops, Catholic educational institutions, Catholic media, church and civic society—about developments related to our beloved Sister Thea Bowman, FSPA (1937–1990).

Thea lit up the church in the United States! With dignity, eloquence, talent, she lived, sang, spoke, used her powerful voice to integrate black Catholics *fully* into the universal church. Her voice continues in songs she recorded, in books written about her, in videos of her life. Her voice is singing still in schools, education and health programs, and housing projects named in her honor. We hope to contribute to letting Thea's voice soar.

The Thea Bowman Legacy office opened July 1, 2000, here in La Crosse, Wisconsin. We serve as a clearinghouse for information about Thea. I am grateful to our FSPA congregation for providing us with time and resources for this important ministry.

People in many places are excited about Sister Thea and her message! *Thea News* will aim to increase awareness of that message and to insure that Friends of Thea are kept in the picture. Persons in the African American, Catholic and Franciscan communities, along with many others, dream about canonization proceedings in her behalf. A proposed guild can foster that process. Perhaps in the future, *Thea News* will be a conduit for a Thea guild.

Friends of Thea, Internet surfers, parishes, students, website editors, women's groups and writers are in frequent contact with our office. Already Thea has been featured in, or is the subject of, more than twenty books. Currently, five books are being written about her. She continues to inspire artists and iconographers. Now in its 12th year, the Thea Bowman Black Catholic Education Foundation, www.theabowmanfoundation.org, funds Thea scholarships. Through foundation backing, more than 55 Thea scholars have graduated from Catholic universities. In November 2001, Thea was twice nominated to the Mississippi Hall of Fame. A TV film about her life will be produced. We experience a whirlwind of Thea activity.

This year marks the 65th birth anniversary of this amazing woman whom Robert Ellsberg has called "one of the great treasures of the American Catholic Church." With glee, we add the voice of *Thea News* to the celebration.

Our premier issue will be disseminated widely in print form. It is also available on line www.fspa.org. Subsequent issues will circulate primarily online.

Finally, most importantly, we are interested in your experience of Thea. Tell us about developments and Thea events which merit our attention. We welcome news on issues she impacts.

I hope you will find *Thea News* an indispensable news source—and inspiring as well.

— Charlene Smith, FSPA

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Happy 65th, Sister Thea!

'I was privileged to know you, Thea'

by Antona Ebo, FSM

Sister Thea Bowman was my friend. I still miss her. I remember the fun times, like visiting at her home in Canton when I worked as chaplain at the University of Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson. Thea was *not* a good cook. She'd put things together like cornbread and some leftovers and I'd look at it and think, "I can't stop by here too often." So I'd fix a meal in casserole dishes and call her and say, "Are you going to be home for awhile?" Then I'd drive to her house and we'd have supper. Daddy Bowman would stand up afterwards and say, "Sister Thea, this is the best meal you've served in this house in a long time. It was almost as good as Mrs. Bowman used to do." Thea would look at me, wink and say, "Thank you, Daddy."

I remember, too, how she was on *60 Minutes*. When I heard Mike Wallace was going to interview her I thought, "I better start right now to pray because she could be in big trouble; she could say something that would embarrass herself and all the rest of us." But she didn't. And I remember how she had Mike Wallace at her feet and she got him to say "Black is beautiful." He loved Sister Thea and the weekend after she died he had a special tribute to her on the program.

She spoke to the media, to the multitude, to all of us. And her transforming message is still there for us.

Thea let herself be led by the Spirit. That Spirit first led her to the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration where she was the first and only Black sister. When she was there she hungered for being with her own people and having a good taste of some soul food. But she stuck it out because she was led by the Spirit.

But she followed the Spirit in her own way. Canton had two Catholic churches, one white and one black. Indianola had two Catholic churches, one white and one black. I said, "Sister Thea, someone needs to do something about this!" But she would just listen quietly and then go about her global ministry. That was her call. She had to "do what the Spirit said do."

Thea was saying all the time, "Get right, Church." She was calling all the Church to fight

against racism, to be like Jesus in our hearts, to be loving and forgiving. She's still saying that to us, that we must carry on and "get right, Church."

She learned as a sister of perpetual adoration what it was to be in the presence of the Bread of Life. She didn't have to be at the motherhouse in a kneeling posture, but she had to break bread with others, and she encouraged all of us to break bread with one another. And the blessedness for Sister Thea was not ignoring our cultural differences, not ignoring the shade and hue of our skins, but *celebrating* the differences. And we know that's what we should be doing, celebrating the similarities *and* the differences.



I heard on the radio the story of a father and his little son going camping. The father was putting up the tent and the little boy went swimming in the lake, but he went out too far. Pretty soon he called out, "Daddy, I can't make it back." The father threw out an old rope and told him to grab it and hang on. But the rope was old and frayed and pretty soon the boy yelled, "Daddy, the rope is going to break."

The dad called out to him, "Reach beyond the break." That's what Thea was always calling us to do, to reach beyond the break—in our relationships, in our churches, in our homes. In her transforming presence she called us to do that and she has left us with a message that her transforming presence will be with us.

One memory I treasure is being with her on her last birthday, Dec. 29, 1989. I was living in St. Louis then, but that day I was in Mississippi and I stopped by her house. I knew it would be the last time I'd see her. I sang "Happy Birthday" to her, not any old "Happy Birthday," but Stevie Wonder's "Happy Birthday."

"Happy birthday, Thea. Happy birthday, Thea. Happy birthday."

I was privileged to know you, Thea, to be with you, to learn from you. I will always miss you, but like you I will continue to "do what the Spirit says do," to work so we "get right, Church," to celebrate the differences and to reach beyond the break.

Thank you, Thea. ●



Sister Antona Ebo

Antona Ebo, a Franciscan Sister of Mary, works as a pastoral associate at St. Nicholas Parish in St. Louis. She recently received the 2002 Distinguished Humanitarian Award from the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., State (of Missouri) Celebration Commission.



Recalling the life and message of Sister Thea

by **Jeremy R. Tobin, O.Praem.**

The Interregional African American Catholic Evangelization Conference held in Memphis in November 2000 provided a special treat. Memphis, after all, is the city where Sister Thea Bowman is buried.

Bruce Nieli, CSP, associate pastor of St. Patrick Church, went around to our meeting rooms at the pre-conference institute suggesting that we go to historic Elmwood Cemetery, not far away, and offer Mass at Sister Thea's grave, a few feet away from a memorial to 300 slaves who lie in that cemetery in unmarked graves. This was a special perk planned by the Holy Spirit to bring us all back to the fountain head.

The sun was fast setting. We gathered around Sister Thea's grave. At the base of the tombstone, to the very left, "Sr. Thea, 1937–1990. She tried." Then, an uncle, her

father and mother.

Sister Thea, the inveterate preacher and teacher, was present as we celebrated the Liturgy of the Word. I cannot tell you the readings. I cannot tell you the homily. I just felt her presence.

Her gentle frame came to mind with those eyes that could go from compassion to intensity in a minute. I could picture all the times and places I witnessed her raise us up to God. I kept looking down at those diminutive letters, "Sr. Thea, 1937–1990."

She was preaching from the grave so much of what she stood for, calling us to be family, to come together, to bring everyone together and to feel the healing and guidance of Jesus.

We sang. We proclaimed Scripture. We listened to preaching, but I kept feeling her presence teaching us once again. I saw so many of my friends who became her devoted followers. Sister Thea's power flowed from this

Father Jeremy Tobin lives in Jackson, Miss., and writes for both religious and African American publications. The above is an edited version of an article that appeared in the Dec. 1, 2000, *Mississippi Catholic*.



place all over the land. I was at the heart, the spirit-source, but I felt more.

About 15 feet past her monument sits a dark, rough granite stone, about 4.5 feet high. It is the color of old granite Victorian houses with a hundred years of dirt on

*I could picture
all the times and places
I witnessed her
raise us up to God.*

them. We laid out our altar cloth and corporal on it and celebrated the suffering and death of the Lord.

On one side of this stone was an inscription commemorating the burial of 300 slaves. The words "O Freedom" were chiseled in italics. From 1852 until 1865, men, women and children—slaves or children of slaves—were interred here. No names. No traces. But their spirits were all around us. They were the ancestors whose fruits of their labors stood all around me—their children. Successful, faith-filled people, all around me, carrying on their legacy.

How fitting it was for us to proclaim, "On the night he was betrayed . . ." How many lie here who were betrayed, abused and broken?

"He took bread and broke it. . . ." How many of all ages with no name, maybe not even a coffin, were scourged and broken and worked to death? ". . . And gave it to them saying, this is my body which will be given up for you. . . ." No faces. No names. Three hundred human beings with stories to tell, families to celebrate and grieve over. Their presence was thick around us. I felt something that rose above the pain. It was quiet. It was strong. It was that serene, solid dignity that radiates from old African men who say nothing, but reflect wisdom.

Their work, some all around us, was not as present as was their strength. Their mothers and fathers survived the middle passage. They survived the most psychologically damaging process known to history, but I felt their pride. All around was their pride, their children. No one was speaking, for we were in the presence of the holy.

The spiritual presence of these men, women and children whose names and stories remain unknown to us assured us that there is nothing we cannot survive, but we thrive because they have paid the price.

". . . He took the cup and blessed it saying, "This is the cup of my blood of the new and eternal covenant." Yes, we are in a new day. Blood was spilled to get us here, but

Mary Ann Schmitz, FSE



The family monument in Memphis, which marks the graves of Sister Thea Bowman, her parents and an uncle.

Bowman at her grave in Memphis

Resources

we made it. Those who lie here, known to the Lord now present here, helped make this happen. The Holy Spirit was so present in this place. We were at the heart, the source that continues generating life forces to work against ongoing oppression and injustice.

“ . . . Which will be shed for all, so that sins may be forgiven.” Like Sister Thea, the collective witness of these 300 ancestors is not about revenge, but about liberation and forgiveness. Yes, forgiveness. Even the diehards will be forgiven if they let the spirit from this place into their hearts.

So much of our work is about healing and recovery, even from racism, which like an ever-mutating cancer, seems never to go away.

Like the children in the fiery furnace, we don't notice the flames, just the kindly angels of God come to save us.

Each of us touched that old, craggy, dark stone. Some were connected to their ancient families and could feel unspoken stories. Others felt strength and an urging to go out and change people's hearts. Still others felt layers of centuries of psychological disfigurement melt away and felt the quiet dignity of their families from the motherland.

I was blessed to be in a holy place. From defeat to victory. We felt the cross and the joy from the empty tomb. We went back to our workshops with the fire in our bones, to spread this healing power all over. ●

Sister Thea Bowman, Shooting Star, edited by Celestine Cepress, FSPA, is a book containing Thea's spoken and written words



interspersed with biographical information.

First published in 1993, it was reprinted in 1999 and can be purchased through the Viterbo University Book Store in La Crosse, Wis., for \$10 (single and bulk orders). Call 1.800.482.8398 or write to viterbo@bkstr.com.

A card with a short biography of Sister Thea, her picture and a prayer asking her to pray for the grace for us to hand on her legacy is published by The Franciscans, PO Box 3, Anderson, S.C. 29622-0003. Free will offering.



A word on Thea News colors —

We hope you like our *Thea News* design. We hope we like it, too. Colors look different in those tiny printer patches than when they roll off the press. The graphics were created by Theresa Washburn, public relations person for the Franciscan Spirituality Center in La Crosse. She incorporated African weaving into the art and you will recognize the colors as Pan-African—the red symbolizing blood and suffering, redemption and liberty, the black standing for the Black peoples of the world and the green speaking of the luxuriant fertility of Africa—and hope. Sister Thea was

proud of her African heritage. In one of her talks she noted Holy Ghost Parish in Opelousas, La., the largest Black parish in the United States and “one where visitors come from across the country to see what it means to be Black and Catholic.” She noticed that “red, black and green—Pan-African colors—adorn(ed) the altar and vestments to express Black pride and solidarity with all African people.” When Thea visited Kenya, Nigeria and Zimbabwe in 1985, she connected in a powerful way with her African ancestry. Afterward, in an interview with

Mississippi Catholic, she said, “One of the most moving things for me is the realization that my sisters, mothers and fathers in Africa recognize Black Americans as belonging to Africa. These people received me warmly and went out of their way to help me experience their culture in its various forms. I am grateful to them for making me realize in a new way that I am an African American. . . .” So we think she would like the touch of Africa in our color and design. And, Thea, if we didn't get the colors right this time, know that we will do so eventually.

Sister Thea Bowman's spirit flourishes across the U.S.A.

Sister Thea Bowman died 12 years ago, but her spirit lives on in many hearts in many places. Key to bringing that spirit to life are the schools, centers, programs, awards, buildings and groups which bear her name.

Some have an educational focus, like **Sister Thea Bowman Catholic School** in East St. Louis, Ill. (1990),

Sister Thea Bowman Elementary School in Gary, Ind. (1994), and **Sister Thea Bowman Academy** in Port Arthur, Tex. (1996), all elementary schools. Another is a school within a school, the **Sister Thea Bowman Middle School for Girls** (1996), part of St. Aloysius School in Harlem, N.Y. A

Jesuit magazine described it as the first Jesuit school for girls.

Boston College, in Chestnut Hill, Mass., has a **Thea Bowman Center**, which houses programs that support African American, Hispanic, Asian and Native American students. Notre Dame University presents the **Sister Thea Bowman Award** each year to a senior who serves "as an active and visible mentor" to other students, exemplifying the "Each One Teach One" philosophy of Sister Thea. Providence College in Providence, R.I., also has a **Sister Thea Bowman Award**, given to a senior "who, by service to the college or the local community, exemplifies the ideals of Sister Thea's life." At Sacred Heart Major Seminary in the Diocese of Detroit, the **Sister Thea Bowman Catechetical Award** is given to a lay student majoring in catechetics whose life is dedicated to Christ's call through leadership. The Office of

Black Ministry in the Diocese of Brooklyn presents the **Sister Thea Bowman Life Long Achievement Award** each March. It goes to a woman who has made a major contribution to African and African American heritage in the Catholic Church through art, business, education, leadership, literature, medicine, science or sports.

Housing centers bear Thea's name, with the oldest of them, **Sister Thea Bowman Manor**, sponsored by the Diocese of Oakland, Calif., now constructing a new building to add to the 55 units which have provided affordable senior housing since 1990. Washington, D.C. has a 14-unit **Thea Bowman House**, which has provided low-rent transitional housing, primarily to women and their children, for the past 12 years. Rockville Centre (N.Y.) Diocese built a 31-unit **Thea Bowman Residence** in 1999 in Long Island, N.Y., to provide safe, affordable housing for people with disabilities.

Two healthcare facilities bear Thea's name, the **Sister Thea Bowman Family Health Center** in Brooklyn (1996) and the **Thea Bowman Wellness Institute** in Highland Park, Mich. (1997). Both provide a broad range of primary health services to people who would not have these services otherwise.

Several projects have a social service orientation, like **Thea Bowman House** in West Utica, N.Y. (1996), a child care center for low-income at-risk children, **Sister Thea Bowman House** in Gary, Ind. (1993), which responds to people experiencing physical and spiritual violence resulting from racial and economic injustice, and **Thea House** (1996) in Philadelphia, which three days a week serves as a drop-in center for

women who need social services, counseling, job referrals or the support groups who meet there.

Some spiritual centers bear her name. The first of these, the **Thea Bowman Spiritual Advance Center**, is located at St. Sabina Parish in Chicago. It includes three meeting rooms, Victory Hall, a prayer room, dining room, book and tape room, full-size kitchen, a spacious backyard and sleeping accommodations for 39 people. Another, the **Thea Bowman Center for Spirituality**, was established in the Diocese of Jackson, Miss., with its first programs starting in 1999.

And there are groups named after Thea, among them the **Sister Thea Bowman, FSPA, Fraternity**, a Secular Franciscan group in our Lady of Charity Parish in Brooklyn.

There are even choirs named after her—the **Thea Bowman Choir** at Holy Child Jesus School in Canton, Miss., and the **Sister Thea Bowman Gospel Choir**, sponsored by the Diocese of Rockville Centre, N.Y. It has 75 members aged 13 to 90, whose mission is "to continue Sr. Thea's ministry, which was education through music."

The newest project to bear Thea's name, incorporated only a few months ago, is the **Thea Bowman Faith and Services Mall** at Epiphany Church in Cleveland. It offers a holistic approach to caring, providing at one site educational, health and wellness, religious, cultural and social service programs. Children have opportunities for learning and performance in music, art and crafts. People of all ages can learn computer or writing. Outside agencies staff literacy and GED programs, a hunger center, a clothing boutique and health and nutrition information and classes. ●

No doubt there are other entities bearing Thea's name. If *Thea News* readers are aware of any, we would appreciate your taking the time to let us know.

Thea, Joyous Troubadour of God

“Icon of the new evangelization.” That’s what Bruce Nieli, CSP, former director of the Catholic bishops’ Office of Evangelization, called Sister Thea Bowman. And now Maryam Gossling, FSPA, has made Thea an “icon” in another way, the subject of a style of painting that goes back to the 6th century, iconography.

An icon is a special kind of art. You don’t “paint” an icon; you “write” it. And you make the writing a prayer, sometimes even fasting during the process. “Icons are meant to be a window on the infinite,” Maryam says. That’s why being realistic is not important. “You put just enough of the real person there to make her recognizable.”

Maryam knew Thea well. They were novices together for two years in the 1950s as both pursued the goal of becoming Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. They spent summers together, professed and renewed vows together.

What does Maryam recall most about Thea? “I was impressed with her just plain joy, her zest for life,” says Maryam.

It’s that joy that became the focus for her icon, *Thea, Joyous Troubadour of God*, with the tambourine representing rhythm. “Thea was always inviting us to get up and dance,” says Maryam.

Did she have reservations about using a halo? “Well, yes, at first a little, but then, Oh, shucks! I just ‘canonized’ her. She was a good person.”

A deeper reservation was that the Orthodox tradition, from which iconography originates, has certain unwritten rules, and one of them is that the painter writes people whom the official Church has called holy.



Maryam Gossling, FSPA

“However, many of the saints celebrated in icons are people we don’t have a clue about,” Maryam says. She thinks it’s important that “we develop our own icons, using the same philosophy in the writing as Orthodox iconographers.”

In icons colors are important. Maryam chose earth tones for the background because of Thea’s “earthy beginnings.” She used blue because it’s a color connected with heaven and the Divine, but also a color Thea wore often. The background is

based on mud paintings from Kenya, paintings so named because the artist spreads mud on the cloth wherever s/he does not want color, and then dips the cloth into dye.

“I chose Kenya because I remembered how Thea said she felt so at home there the first time she



went to Africa,” said Maryam. The halo breaking into the border carries a special meaning also: “Her Divine spirit was not constrained by borders.”

As she worked Maryam did something common in Orthodox iconography: She talked to her subject, and that became for her a spiritual experience. “I had a sense that Thea approved of what I was doing,” she said.

Icons have a special place in prayer for people of the Eastern Church. “They are meant to be a focus for meditation.” The eyes of the subject often look out to the viewer, says Maryam. “In a ‘prayer of gazing,’ you look into the subject’s eyes and let the icon speak to you.”

Maryam did her first icon in 1990 but since a workshop in Hungary in 1998, has become more passionate in its use.

Greeting cards with the Thea icon are available for \$1 per card; 11" x 14" posters, \$15; 4" x 5" plaques, \$12.50; 11" x 14" plaques, \$25. Add \$3.50 for shipping and handling for orders up to \$15 and \$4.50 for larger orders. Send to Maryam Gossling, FSPA, 120 E. Boyson Rd., Hiawatha, IA 52233-1277 or call 319.395.6700 or write maryamg@prairiewoods.org. ●

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You'll find it at www.FSPA.org/WhoWeAre/FSPANews.

Want to remain on our mailing list?

We sent the premier issue of *Thea News* to a broad range of people. If you want to remain on our list, you need to let us know by June 1. We are not charging you for this though we do accept donations to help cover costs of printing and mailing. Make a copy of the address label and mail or fax it to us. Or type it onto an e-mail—theanews@fspa.org.

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Sister Thea Bowman 1937-1990

THEA, NEE BERTHA, BOWMAN, was a native of Canton, Miss., and the granddaughter of a slave. At age nine she chose to become a Catholic and shortly after attended a new mission school taught by the recently arrived Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. At age 15, she went north to La Crosse, Wis., to become a Franciscan Sister herself, taking the name Thea, "of God." She taught elementary and high school—in an all-white school in La Crosse, Wis., and then in her hometown—before getting a doctorate in English literature and linguistics and heading the Viterbo College English department.

ALL THIS TIME she was becoming aware of her real calling, to bring the richness of Black culture and spirituality, as well as the message of community and equality, to the Catholic Church and to society at large. Thea was multi-talented. Besides a keen mind, she possessed a magnificent singing voice, the soul of a poet, the artistry of a storyteller, the passion of a preacher and the dramatic sensitivities of a performer. She traveled the country, giving hundreds of presentations in churches, on college campuses and in city auditoriums, communicating always joy, freedom and pride. Mike Wallace interviewed her on *Sixty Minutes* in 1987.

WHEN SHE WAS 46, she developed breast cancer, but continued her public appearances almost to the end, choosing, as she said, "to live until I die." She entered eternal life on March 30, 1990, at the age of 52.

*Want to have access to Thea News in the future?
 Turn to page 7 and learn how.*