

strides

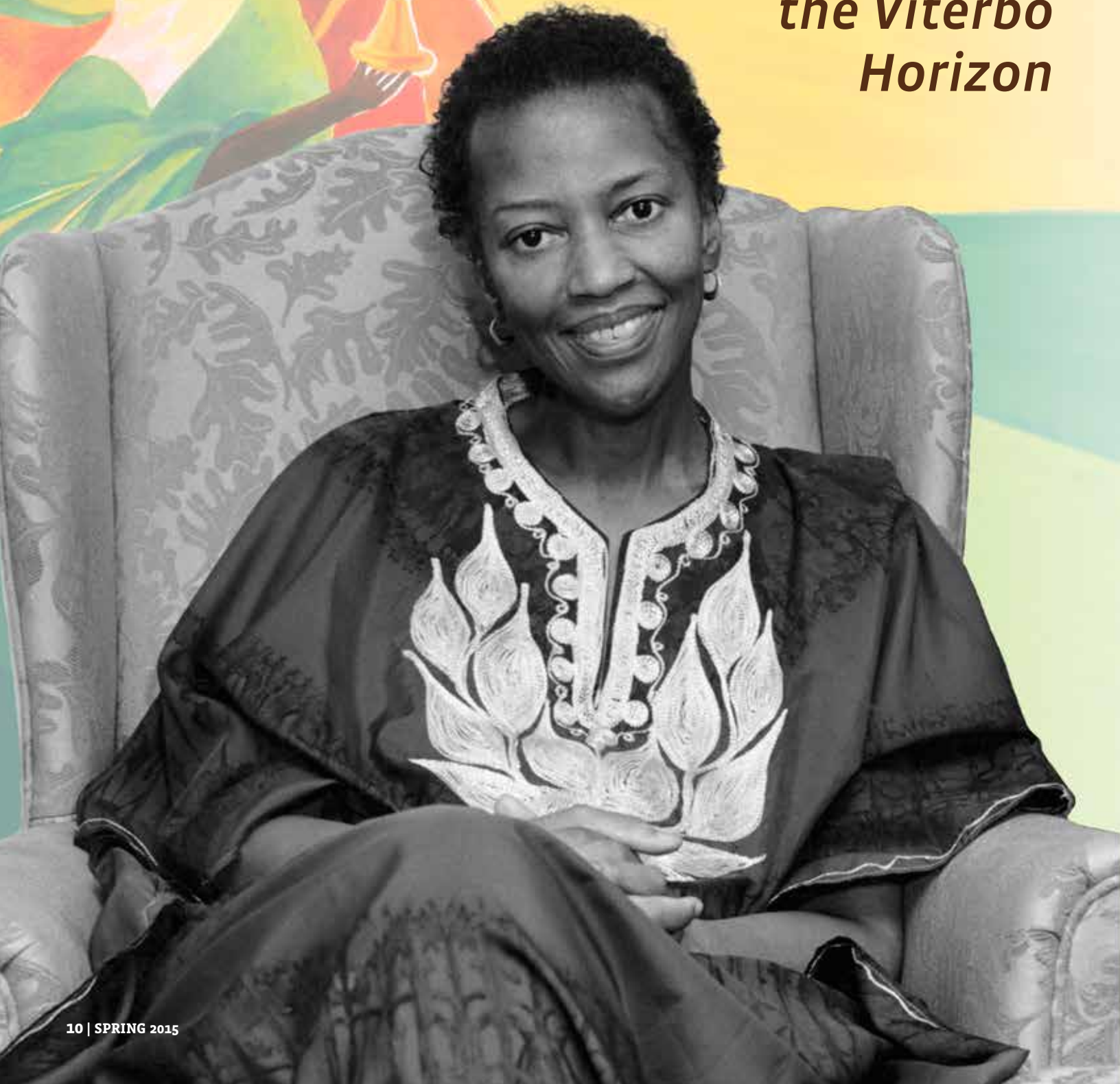


**Sr. Thea Bowman '65:
A Very Special
Life Remembered**

ON THE COVER |

Sr. Thea Bowman

*Shooting Star Across
the Viterbo
Horizon*



Twenty-five years after her death, the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration and Viterbo University are celebrating the life of Sr. Thea Bowman '65.

A professor of English at Viterbo in the '70s, she would later gain national prominence as vocal performer, activist, Civil Rights leader, and leading voice calling for an increased role for African-Americans in the Catholic Church.

Famous *60 Minutes* journalist Mike Wallace interviewed an incredible list of people during his legendary career—world leaders, politicians, stars of sport and entertainment, basically a Who's Who of American and international society and culture.

"I think the difference between me and some other people is that I'm content to do my little bit," she said. "Sometimes people think they have to do big things in order to make change. But if each of us would light a candle we'd have a tremendous light."

—THEA BOWMAN, FSPA

None of his interview subjects however, had quite the effect on him as the member of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration he profiled in 1987.

"I don't remember when I've been more moved, more enchanted, by a person whom I've profiled, than by Sister Thea Bowman," Wallace wrote in the foreword to the book *Sister Thea Bowman: Shooting Star* by Celestine Cepress, FSPA. "I confess I was a little skeptical when she was first suggested to me, but just one session with this remarkable individual convinced me; her openness, her compassion, her intelligence, her optimism, and her humor captured me."

The praise from this always tough and hard-hitting interviewer and investigative journalist was testament to Sr. Thea's incredible charisma and charm. During her *60 Minutes* profile, which was filmed over two years in Washington, D.C., New Orleans, and in her hometown of Canton, Miss., she gave the now-famous quote:

"I think the difference between me and some other people is that I'm content to



Above: Days and dress of yesteryear: Friends Sr. Charlene Smith and Sr. Thea Bowman as young FSPA.

Right: Sr. Thea Bowman was a champion of social justice issues and helping others. She is pictured here at a soup luncheon to raise money for a good cause.



Photos courtesy of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration

“Sr. Thea was the type of individual who brought life and joy to everyone around her...She taught us to be the best we could possibly be, to take our education and share it with others, and to never forget from where we came.”

—NOLA JO RATLIFF-COBB '74

do my little bit,” she said. “Sometimes people think they have to do big things in order to make change. But if each of us would light a candle we’d have a tremendous light.”

For many people, Sr. Thea was a tremendous light herself. Pledging to “live until I die,” she gave that famous quote while she was suffering from the breast cancer that would claim her life in 1990.

To mark the 25th anniversary of the passing of this remarkable woman and Sister, a variety of events are being held this year by the FSPA and other organizations to celebrate her life and legacy. It is a legacy that touches her religious order, the city of La Crosse, the African-American community, countless people nationwide, and of course, Viterbo, the university she loved.

Sr. Thea’s story began on Dec. 29, 1937 in Mississippi when she was born Bertha Bowman, the daughter of doctor Theon Bowman and teacher Mary Esther Bowman. The daughter of Protestants, Sr. Thea was baptized a Catholic at the young age of nine, becoming a very rare person at the time—a black Catholic in the South. She attended Holy Child Jesus School in her hometown of Canton, Miss., which was staffed by members of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration.

Loving the education she received and the Sisters who were her teachers, Sr. Thea decided to become one of them. Despite the initial objections of her parents, Sr. Thea entered St. Rose Convent in La Crosse at the age of 15 in 1953 and took the name of Thea. Her father warned her that she wouldn’t be liked by her fellow Sisters or the La Crosse community, to which she responded, “I’m going to make them like me.”

“She was a gift to our community,” said Sr. Thea’s close personal friend Charlene Smith, FSPA, ’63. Sr. Smith is the author of *Thea’s Song: The Life of Thea Bowman*. “Even though she wasn’t fully accepted, I think overall the community was generally happy and grateful she became a member.”

Taking her final FSPA vows in 1963, Sr. Thea earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English, speech, and drama from Viterbo in 1965. One of the very few black people in La Crosse at the time, she was a face of the Civil Rights movement, often appearing in local media and working to promote racial equality. La Crosse and the Midwest had brought challenges of their own however. She had left Jim Crow and overt racial oppression in Mississippi in exchange for an underlying prejudice in Wisconsin. Through it all, she remained a very positive person, Sr. Smith said.

Sr. Thea moved to Washington, D.C., to attend The Catholic University of America, from which she earned a Master of Arts in English in 1969 and a Ph.D. in English language, literature, and linguistics in 1972. She would go on to become the first African-American woman to earn an honorary degree

from Boston College.

“Sr. Thea learned a great deal in Washington, D.C.,” Sr. Smith said. “That was the first time she saw black professionals doing really well. She realized there was a different world from what she knew where she grew up and in Wisconsin. She came back a changed woman. She wasn’t afraid to be who she really was. She knew she was beautiful, supremely talented, and not inferior to anyone because of the color of her skin.”

Sr. Thea returned to Viterbo as a member of the English faculty in 1972, quickly earning the reputation as a “master teacher” and a favorite of students. One colleague even described her as “the most powerful woman on campus.” A wonderful singer, she founded the Hallelujah Singers choir.

“She taught me how to succeed in life by being more dynamic and tolerant of differences and diversity,” said former student Greg Lind ’76, who is now a member of the Viterbo Board of Trustees. “She would say that we have to tackle our common problems and advance the public good. Have faith, not fear.”

A self-described “white kid in a white town,” Lind’s eyes were opened on a student bus trip through St. Louis and Memphis to Mississippi in 1974. He and his fellow



Sr. Thea in Washington, D.C., receiving the presidential courage award for cancer survivors in 1988.

Photo courtesy of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration

Continued on page 33

Lizz Doers '14 is a registered nurse at Aurora Sheboygan Memorial Medical Center.

EmmaLee Eckardt '14 is an account manager sales representative at American Marketing and Publishing, LLC, Eau Claire.

Emily Ernest '14 is a mental health practitioner at Hiawatha Valley Mental Health Center.

Mary Fitzpatrick '14 received a Tribute to Outstanding Women award in the community service category from the YWCA of the Coulee Region/La Crosse, November 2014. She is the La Crosse Warming Center Coordinator, a Catholic Charities program.

Cassandra Gebhart '14 is a registered dietitian at Hy-Vee, Moline, Ill.

Clarissa Goetzke '14 is a financial analyst at Pepsi-Cola of La Crosse. She is pursuing a Master of Business Administration at Viterbo University.

Caley (Cavadini) Griswold '14 is a community living assistant at Lakeview Health Center, West Salem.

Hannah Haley '14 is a social worker and activities director at Ostrander Care and Rehab, Minnesota.

Lauren Harris '14 is bar admissions coordinator at Minnesota Supreme Court's Board of Law Examiners.

Whitney Hegseth '14 is a team coordinator at St. Jude Hospice, La Crosse.

Danielle Matthies '14 is a clinical dietitian at Aramark Healthcare, Waukegan, Ill.

Cherish Myers '14 is a counselor at Gateway Foundation, Lake Villa, Ill.

Izac Sheforgen '14 is a fifth grade teacher at Eagle Bluff Elementary School, Onalaska, and the junior varsity boys' basketball coach at Onalaska High School.



Karen Sissel '14 received the 2014 Teacher of the Year Award from the Des Moines Rotary Club. She is the gifted and talented consultant for the Des Moines School District.

Nicole Sobkowiak '14 is pursuing a Master of Science in Mental Health Counseling at Winona State University. She is direct care staff at Family and Children's Center, La Crosse.

Heather St. Clair '14 is a human resources generalist at Mathy Construction. She specializes in equal employment opportunity.

Billy Strickler '14 is the grade 7-12 assistant principal and dean of students at Albia Community School District, Iowa.

Leah Young '14 is a registered nurse at Franciscan St. Anthony Health-Crown Point, Ind.

Tiffany Young '14 works at Logistics Health, Inc.



Nick Zwieg '14 is a location scout/specialist at Athletes for College, Madison.

Sr. Thea Bowman *continued from page 12*

Viterbo students were stopped on the street by police who wanted to “make sure we knew we were in the negro part of town. And I can still see the signs above doors and drinking fountains that read ‘For Coloreds Only.’”

Nola Jo Ratliff-Cobb '74 was an African-American student from Canton, Miss.

“Sr. Thea was the type of individual who brought life and joy to everyone around her,” said Ratliff-Cobb, who is now an elementary school principal in Kenosha. “She loved the girls from Canton and she made sure we were part of the campus community. She taught us to be the best we could possibly be, to take our education and share it with others, and to never forget from where we came.”

Sr. Thea left Viterbo in 1978 to return to Mississippi to be near her aging parents. She accepted a post as a consultant to the Jackson Diocese Office of Intercultural Awareness, and she would eventually serve as the director. A few years later she would help to found the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University in New Orleans.

Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, Sr. Thea became prominent on the national speaking circuit. Speaking was

one of her many natural talents, and she was a celebrity who filled lecture halls and venues across the U.S. She would address the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops at Seton Hall University in 1989.

Diagnosed with breast cancer in 1984, Sr. Thea managed to keep her indomitable spirit throughout her illness and the subsequent pain it brought her. She returned to speak at Viterbo in 1989. Bald from chemotherapy and often using a wheelchair, she rose to the occasion and received rousing applause. Many in the crowd wanted to touch her.

“She told me that she wasn’t ready to die yet because there was much left to do,” Sr. Smith said. “But she influenced many people, people who are continuing her good work.”

Sr. Thea died in Canton on March 30, 1990. She was 52 years old. Her death made national news. *The New York Times* published her obituary and *60 Minutes* rebroadcast her profile.

“She was a star,” Sr. Smith said. “I often tell people that I was very fortunate because for 35 years I knew Thea and that I was in orbit around her star.”

For more on Sr. Thea Bowman, visit www.fsfa.org/content/about/sister-thea-bowman.