

Thea Forum

Sister Bowman Kept On Trying

▲ by Alice Mikolyzk

Georgeann Campbell first met Sister Thea Bowman in 1987 at the Black Catholic Congress in Baltimore. In 1988, Sister Thea came to St. Pascal Baylon parish in St. Albans for a revival. "She set a fire in that church and I don't think it's gone out yet," recalls Campbell.

On Thursday, April 29, Campbell brought that fire with her to the Immaculate Conception Center in Douglaston, to learn more about the life of Sister Thea at a Tablet Forum.

The event was The Tablet's most popular forum to date, with tickets exhausted weeks in advance. And no wonder: to date, no forum honoree has left quite so potent a mark on the recent memories of Brooklyn and Queens Catholics, particularly in the African American community.

As with each Tablet Forum, the night began with a documentary film about the life and work of the subject and was enriched by a guest speaker.

Father Frank Mann, organizer of the Tablet Forum, introduced the film: "Sr. Thea: Her Own Story," from Oblate Media and Communication.

"Thea Bowman had an uncanny ability to bring people together in peace," Father Mann said. "She was an edu-

cator, evangelist, gospel singer ... she drew capacity crowds wherever she went. She urged us to be the Church that is faithful and faith-filled."

In 1989, Oblate Media did a series of interviews with Sister Thea in her parents' home in Canton, Miss. The film interplayed these interviews with brief biographic information describing Thea's journey from her life as Bertha Bowman – an inquisitive, rambunctious little girl from a small town in the Deep South – to a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration, a scholar, educator and inspiration to countless hundreds of people whom she met.

Brother Michael (Mickey) O'Neill McGrath, an Oblate of St. Francis de Sales and artist, was the evening's speaker. He only became aware of Sister Thea's existence in 1993, three years after her death, when he was caring for his own dying father. While absently flipping through a magazine in his father's house, he happened upon an article titled, "Glory Bound," containing the last interview of the ailing Sister Thea. Brother McGrath was stricken with such intense inspiration that he took up his paint brush and did not put it down for two weeks. When he stepped back from the easel, he had created a biographical series dedicated



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▲ Books and artwork relating to Sister Thea Bowman were hot items at The Tablet Forum dealing with the life and legacy of the Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration.

to Sister Thea and painted in an entirely new style from his other work.

In his presentation, Brother McGrath used his whimsical series and photographs from a recent trip to Canton, Miss., to tell the story of Sister Thea's life and work through touching personal anecdotes from those who knew her.

Both the film and Brother McGrath focused on Sister Thea as an icon of pure love and inspiration, radiating an omnipresent joy in the face of adversity and suffering. As a charismatic figure she touched lives and charmed souls, including many in the Diocese of Brooklyn.

In 1983, Marjorie Moore met Sister Thea at Our Lady of Charity in Weeksville. Her daughter, who was three or four at the time, developed an instant bond with her. "Everyone fell in love with her immediately ... That's the kind of person she (Thea) was." At one point, Moore said Sister Thea picked up a Pan-

African flag that was on display and carried it, barefoot, around the church.

According to Campbell, in 1992, then-pastor Father Robert Seay, O.S.F., put out a call for people to start up a new order of secular Franciscans at Our Lady of Charity. Twelve people responded. They chose Thea's name for the order and wanted especially to include the initials of her order, F.S.P.A. Their mantra, "Lord, I'm Tryin'" was derived from Sister Thea's epitaph, "She tried." Campbell said after meeting Sister Thea she was inspired to evangelize, host revivals and minister to the poor, sick and elderly.

Mary Overton brought a letter that Sister Thea had sent her dated Jan. 22, 1990. She kept it tucked in its original envelope in a plastic photo album. Overton said she first met Sister Thea in the early 1980s when she visited St. Clement Pope parish in South Ozone Park.

In the letter, Sister Thea spoke openly about her treat-

ment: "My blood counts were low and December 19 my doctors prescribed two transfusions of packed red blood cells ... I started the five day chemotherapy treatment January 8," and the light she always kept shining: "I ask your prayers. I'm very weak but my spirits are good and I'm trying to keep on keeping on."

As they filed out to have Brother McGrath sign copies of his book, "This Little Light," and posters of his artwork, most audience members wore smiles. Some could even be heard singing the film's signature song, "Old Time Religion," which Sister Thea was shown teaching to Mississippi schoolchildren.

If you are interested in learning more about Brother McGrath's work, visit his website, www.beestill.org.

To purchase a copy of "Sr. Thea: Her Own Story," call Oblate Media & Communication, 800-233-4629, or visit www.videoswithvalues.org.



▲ Tablet Forum speaker Brother Michael McGrath chats with participants at Immaculate Conception Center.