

Sr. Dorothy Ann Kelly, OSU

An Extraordinary Leader in Higher Education

At the time that Sr. Dorothy Ann Kelly died on March 27, 2009, her association with the College of New Rochelle had spanned more than half of its history. She first came to campus on a bus as a freshman “day hop,” i.e., commuter student, from the Bronx in 1947 and eventually served as President of the College for 25 years from 1972-1997, continuing her service as Chancellor until 2001. In those intervening years, her roles also included American history professor, Chair of the History Department, and Dean. Sister often told the story of her first teaching



“A Remarkable Student”

As a student she is remembered as a leader among peers, a tower of strength with a zest for life. The director of her doctoral dissertation has remarked that despite her gifted scholastic talent, “Her providential task was not, however, to write history, but to shape it. Future historians will, I am confident, honor her for the courage and intelligence with which she took up that task, and for the brilliant success she achieved.”

- Dr. Philip Gleason, Professor Emeritus of History, University of Notre Dame

assignment as an Ursuline nun. Imagine the sophisticated scholar, professor, and administrator that we know looking into the expectant faces of nearly 60 second graders at St. Philip Neri in the Bronx— no teacher’s assistant in sight! The scene could be the opening shot of a hilarious comedy film, but the reality was more likely that she quickly stole their hearts, engaged their minds, and inspired them to succeed with the same passion she applied to all her future endeavors.

She was a natural leader – always had been – and was soon either elected or volunteered to take responsibilities in student governance and national student organizations. In an interview with Dr. James Schleifer, she noted the influence of Mother Therese Charles who always referred to CNR students as “women.” “No one had ever called me a woman before, and she had a sense of our possible roles as college women in anything you want, parish organization, the bigger world. I found it all very fascinating.” And so it was that she pursued her fascination with the bigger world for the rest of her life. Her natural aspirations, eagerness to explore opportunities, and drive to find new solutions to vexing problems guided her work to the very end.

Sr. Dorothy Ann's leadership was evident in all aspects of her life. Though difficult to untangle, we will attempt to focus on her achievements in higher education in this issue and then shift the focus to her devotion to social justice, and the impact of her deep faith in subsequent issues. After graduating in 1951, Dorothy Ann Kelly entered the Ursuline Order in January 1952 and returned to CNR in 1957 to teach American history. She received an M.A. in American Church History from The Catholic University of America and a Ph.D. in American Intellectual History from the University of Notre Dame.

Several important factors set the stage for this era at CNR. In 1956, the College received a \$280,000 (very sizable at the time) grant from the Ford Foundation for faculty salaries and endowment, affirming the reputation as one of the nation's leading women's colleges with demanding academic programs and a vigorous intellectual atmosphere. CNR had been a charter member of Middle States Association of Colleges and Universities since 1921 and had maintained continuing accreditation through 1956 when the College community was preparing thoroughly for the upcoming periodic review. Fresh viewpoints and new ideas were needed if the College was to prosper. Even then, complex questions of mission, real estate, identity, and the Ursuline heritage were under serious scrutiny as they figured into the future of the institution and its preparation for profound transformations. The need to enhance top lay leadership was already noted as the prospect of fewer Ursulines became apparent. The period from 1963-1970 was a time of great religious, social, and political upheaval when many colleges and universities were poised on the brink of change. In 1963 CNR President Mother St. John was quoted as saying, "The curriculum must reflect more than adherence to a set pattern of truths: it must adapt these truths to contemporary experimentation while retaining the roots of the past." The challenges of Vatican II, the modern civil rights movement, and the women's movement added to volatile yet exciting times to seek creative ways to adapt the traditional mission to a very different social, cultural, and educational environment.

Sr. Dorothy Ann stepped into her role as Dean in 1967 after her experience as a young professor under the tutelage of CNR President Mother Mary Peter Carthy who spotted her potential and shared her openness to change and willingness to adapt to the times. She benefited from the



"A Compassionate Educator"

As a teacher she is remembered as "smart and articulate...embracing and inspiring people of all backgrounds and experiences," sharing her joy in learning and imparting the need for careful and precise work. "She was fun and funny. I picture her laughing so hard that there were tears in her eyes. And she was compassionate, and encouraging, and loving. We learned from her that history was not a list of facts, but the living story of real people that constantly changes, and that its study requires intelligence, attention, flexibility, and open-mindedness."

– Ellen Toal Wry SAS '64

strong Ursuline tradition of consciously preparing the next generation of leaders. It was also the time that Ursulines wisely decided to accelerate the effort to place the younger Sisters in prominent roles with greater proximity and influence with students, shaping their extracurricular activities as well as their academic life. Thus, she came into the Dean's office with a deeper understanding of students' desires and demands for increased inclusion in



“A Forward Thinker”

As a colleague and proponent of women's education she is remembered as a visionary with a compassionate heart and capacious mind. “She established the model for transformative mission that endures to this day...Chairing a special Middle States accreditation team at Trinity during those difficult days in 1987, she exerted her customary clear vision, passion for women's education, and hard-nosed business judgement in calling upon Trinity's board to exert stronger leadership for institutional change. I sat in awe of her extraordinary presence. Sr. Dorothy Ann Kelly galvanized Trinity's board to think about the future in ways we had not previously imagined. Her call to action was a turning point in Trinity's history.”

- Patricia McGuire, President, Trinity Washington University (speaking as an alumnae board member at the time)

governance and decision making. During this turbulent time of student protest and unrest, Sister drafted a letter to be sent from CNR Trustees to the State Department of Education to express their regret at seeing the New York State Legislature's “short-sighted...focus on campus disruptions rather than on the social and political crisis of which they are a sign. Rather than requiring the formation of measures against disorder, the elected leaders of state and nation might well request of every college and university a thorough study and vigorous reaction to the questions raised by the campus radicals. This would be the creative response to the current student revolution.” This young CNR Dean now took a next step into her expanded leadership role in education in New York State and the nation, addressing social change and the significant impact it would have on higher education in America. Just 19 years after her own graduation, Sr. Dorothy Ann Kelly would be the essence of “CNR Wisdom for Life” and emerge as a national voice.

From 1968-1970, the College of New Rochelle enjoyed a period of extraordinary energy and innovation that mirrored the spirit of the original founding era that had been instigated by the desire to respond to changing times and needs. In the spring of 1968, Sr. Dorothy Ann formed the Community Leadership Program to offer six young black women from New Rochelle High School the financial scholarships and the personal and academic

support to successfully earn a baccalaureate degree. A segment of that freshman class entering in 1968 was enrolled in the experimental Core Program. The Chelsea Group was another experiential living/learning program. For practical financial incentives to survive as an



“Hailed as Education Leader”

As an influencer of educational public policy, she is remembered for her leadership style and personal charisma that made her so extraordinarily effective in shaping public policy at federal and state levels. “She simply had a way about her that was authoritative yet respectful, confident yet humble, and decisive yet willing always to listen to all sides of an issue.”

– Deborah M, Stendar, Vice President for Government and Community Relations, Rochester Institute of Technology (speaking of when they worked together at the Commission on Independent Colleges and Universities)

institution as well as to thrive at the educational forefront, under her leadership, the Graduate School, the School of New Resources, and the School of Nursing all came into being by 1976, growing the institution from a traditional liberal arts college in New Rochelle to a college with four schools and seven locations throughout the Westchester/New York City area.

First came a master’s in art education that was the brainchild of Mother Justin McKiernan. With little to no new investment and at the urging of an official in the State Education Department who confirmed the need for this solid contribution to the local education community, those first courses were offered. Next came a master’s in education, prompted by the urging of Dr. Catherine Haage. Both were philosophical and financial next steps consistent with the mission of the College.

Sr. Dorothy Ann served as Acting President from June 1970 to February 1971 during the search for a new President. She again left her position as Dean to become President in October 1972 when Dr. Joseph McMurray left after two years in office. Sidney Mudd, chair of the Board of Trustees, stated, “the moment presented a singular task for a singular talent”, and her gifts as a visionary and servant leader blossomed as she soon guided the founding of the School of New Resources in collaboration with faculty

members Thomas Taaffe and Dr. James Middleton. In its initial phase it was intended to serve the adult woman learner who had either not completed college or had not initially pursued a degree. Experience had shown that combining these adult students in classes with traditional age students was not the optimum experience for either population. This new opportunity left no question about designing a more creative and innovative way to engage the adult as a partner in the learning process that acknowledged their already developed talents and life experiences and offered the tools to further discover and realize their full potential. And as the school came to life, Sister responded to the request to bring education into the communities where the students lived to further reduce the barriers to completing their degrees.

The final addition was the School of Nursing, a baccalaureate in nursing to enhance the scope of learning for nurses and meet the growing need of modern health care for leaders in the field.

The opportunity surfaced largely because Sr. Dorothy Ann was serving on the Board of the Sound Shore Hospital Medical Center in New Rochelle at the time that it terminated the diploma program. Since she had been involved in detailed discussions at the medical center, she was well prepared to understand the academic requirements for New York State approval. Beyond the campus, Sr. Dorothy Ann was a highly respected leader in education whose gifts were acknowledged by her peers with honorary degrees from eight other institutions, including Mercy College in 1976. Just as CNR was experiencing change and facing hurdles in this era of higher education, so too were other colleges. Her commitment to students, sage advice, determination to innovate, and boundless moral support of her peers has had long lasting national impact.

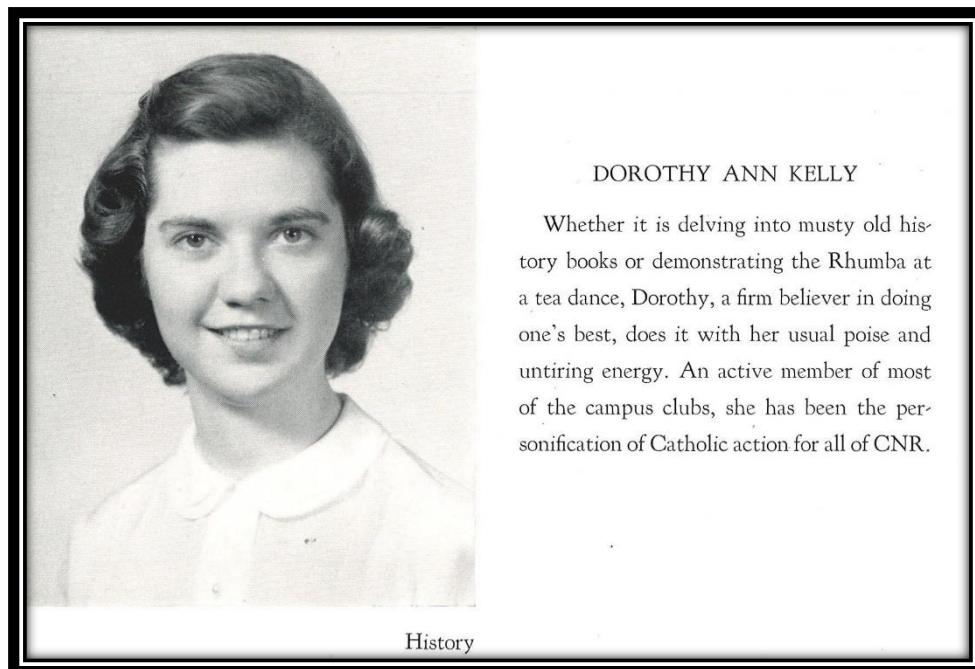
Timeline of academic achievements:

- 1975 Appointed to the Board of Association of Catholic College and Universities
- 1978 Named first woman Chair of the Commission on Independent Colleges and Universities of New York State
- 1980 Named to Board of Westchester County Association
- 1987 Becomes first woman Chair of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities
- 1989 Inducted into the Westchester County/Avon Women's Hall of Fame
- 1991 Appointed to Commission on Higher Education of Middle States Association
- 1994 Receives Henry D. Paley Award from the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities
- 1995 Appointed by President Clinton to serve as a member of the official U.S. Delegation to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing
- 1996 Named to Board of National Museum of Women in the Arts
- 1997 Retires as President of the College of New Rochelle after 25 years, and Sr. Dorothy Ann Kelly Woman of Conscience Award is created in her honor
- 1997-2001 Serves as Chancellor of the College of New Rochelle
- 2001-2003 Becomes Prioress of Community of St. Theresa's in New Rochelle
- 2003-2009 Serves as Provincial Prioress of the Eastern Province of Ursulines of the Roman Union
- March 27, 2009, Dies suddenly at the age of 79

During her 25 years as President, Sr. Dorothy Ann Kelly provided the leadership and energy to collaborate with others to re-create the College of New Rochelle – making hard decisions and willing to try new things that would enhance the mission and provide access to higher education for greater numbers of deserving but underserved students. A quick wit, a joy for life, an understanding heart, a brilliant intellect, a gift for listening and talent for building consensus as well as a woman of faith – all these phrases hardly begin to describe our beloved leader, role model and friend. But with the help of the many words written by Dr. James Schleifer and the staff of the College of New Rochelle Communications Department as well as the documents accumulated by CNR College Advancement, we will continue the story in the next issues of the CNR Alumni e-Newsletter.

With many thanks to all who have compiled the history of an extraordinary woman and with utmost gratitude to the woman herself.

- Eileen Niedzwiecki SAS '72
CNR Alumni Communications Committee



Sr. Dorothy Ann Kelly, O.S.U. yearbook photo 1951