

Sr. Dorothy Ann Kelly, OSU A Passionate Advocate for Social Justice



Sr. Dorothy Ann Kelly had an impressive and endearing talent for putting anyone, of any age, in any place, immediately at ease. It was on display when you saw her scoop up a runaway toddler in the Chapel or heard her pitch perfect, spontaneous response to an honored guest at the College. Perhaps that special grace she had was rooted in her deep love and respect for all humanity which she expressed in many ways, through many avenues, on many occasions.

Just as evidence of her intellect was obvious from her early years, so too was her strong commitment to social justice manifested in scholarly work as well as daily deeds. Even before she embraced the Ursuline motto of *Serviam* as a CNR student and later as an Ursuline Sister, Dorothy Ann Kelly demonstrated her devotion and compassion as a loving sister and daughter, assuming family responsibilities at a young age when her mother passed away. As a student at CNR, her natural curiosity, leadership skills, and easy way with others led to participation on numerous student government committees as well as the Democratic National Committee. The Sodality meetings she enjoyed often emphasized the needs of others who were less fortunate, the expectation of faithful Catholics to take action, and the responsibilities that the gift of higher education placed on the recipient.

In a lecture open to alumnae and the local community in the Fall of 1966 while she was also completing her doctoral dissertation at the University of Notre Dame, Sr. Dorothy Ann's firm beliefs in the protection and rights of human beings, the development of their full potential, and the responsibility of society were on full view. Titled *The Conflict between the Great and the Good Society*, her paper concluded with the words, "Those of us who have enjoyed so many of the goods of the Great Society (i.e., as expressed in President Lyndon Johnson's State of the Union address in January 1965) material and spiritual, would be wise to examine how much we are ploughing back into contemporary society. The struggle for the Great-Good Society begins where everything begins, with each of us and with all of us."

In her accompanying Psychological Analysis of the Great Society, she states, "To appreciate the potential benefits of the Great Society as it becomes the Good Society, one has to look at the effects of our present situation and the people it is designed to help. More specifically, to understand the implications of a program designed to provide an opportunity for all people to become more fully human; to insure the rights of each individual to develop himself to his maximum capabilities; one must look at what happens to people when they are denied this opportunity...I am interested in what happens to people as a result of being born into grinding poverty or having a color that leads to discrimination."

The decades of the 60s and 70s were a time of great religious, social, and political upheaval which provided countless opportunities for Sr. Dorothy Ann to pursue her profound interest in and deep commitment to social justice. In the Spring of 1970, the student revolution came to the College of New Rochelle. A decision to not renew the contract of a popular faculty member spurred student protests and a boycott of classes. In March, classes were suspended to allow time for campus-wide discussions that resulted in changes to the method of evaluating faculty for contract renewal, promotion, and tenure and placed greater importance on student evaluations. In step with events across the nation, the campus erupted again in early May when Kent State University students who were protesting the American invasion of Cambodia were killed in Ohio by National Guard gunfire. Although a deeply divided CNR campus community of students and faculty disagreed on the best way to address the national tragedy, President Sr. Theresa

Falls declared a study day and endorsed a variety of class and final exam options for students to choose how to complete the semester. In her statement she wrote, "In what may prove to be the most significant educational experience of the year, the College of New Rochelle is today undertaking a serious academic study of the questions which presently are tearing our society apart, alienating young people and producing an atmosphere of distrust in effectiveness and rightness of government...To look upon the work of the next two weeks as a 'closing down of the institution' would be to completely misread the nature and goals of the experience. On the contrary, the days of common effort and dedication may well prove New Rochelle's finest hour as she addresses herself to the enormous task of leading the way to a viable solution not only for her own constituency, but also for the society which more than ever needs the leadership and direction of men and women of reason and integrity."

As the Academic Dean at the time, one can well imagine the role that Sr. Dorothy Ann played in managing the emotions and expectations of each faction within the student body and the faculty. Her talents as astute listener, consensus builder, and compassionate servant-leader were tested beyond limits. She rose to the occasion with unflinching courage as a model "woman of reason and integrity." As she navigated these stormy seas, there is little wonder that she emerged as the "singular talent" to assume the "singular task" of the presidency on August 1, 1972.



A New Leader was Appointed

In 1972, Sr. Dorothy Ann is presented the inaugural medal by Sidney Mudd, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, and is appointed as the 11th President of the College of New Rochelle.



*Ribbon-cutting ceremony for the
CNR Rosa Parks campus in Harlem, NY*

Sister's faith and the early principles instilled in her by family and educators were guiding forces in her lifelong efforts to promote social justice. Dorothy Ann Kelly's aspirations, eagerness to explore opportunities, drive to find new solutions to vexing problems, and her commitment to excellence permeated every aspect of her personal and professional life.

Whether the cause was women's rights, racial, religious or economic discrimination, local and global peace, domestic violence, or access to quality education and health care, when she saw a need – she responded.

In Northern Ireland, Sr. Dorothy Ann's peace efforts extended to garnering American support for the Peace People, later known as Bridges to Peace, to help identify a lasting solution to end the "troubles." At Commencement 1978, CNR bestowed honorary degrees on co-founders of the movement, Mairead Corrigan and Betty Williams. Sister served on the Board of Bridges to Peace for 23 years and was appointed to the American delegation that went to the Women in Democracy Conference in Belfast in 1998.

As mentioned in the previous article focused on her contributions to higher education, as Academic Dean in 1968, Sr. Dorothy Ann established CLP – the Community Leadership Program which offered six young women from New Rochelle High School full scholarships and professional support to pursue their studies at CNR. That program eventually evolved to become the statewide Higher Education Opportunity Program, HEOP. In 1972, the School of New Resources was founded to provide adults with previously limited access to education a specially designed curriculum that acknowledged their life experiences and included a collaborative style of instruction adapted to their other responsibilities as employees, spouses, parents, etc. She oversaw the expansion of that school into underserved neighborhoods in the boroughs of Manhattan, Bronx and Brooklyn to increase access to greater numbers of students.

Sr. Dorothy Ann was a founding member and President of the Inter-religious Council of New Rochelle and hosted a biennial seder at the College. She was appointed to the National Executive Board of the National Conference of Christians and Jews founded in 1927 to promote religious, racial, and ethnic inclusiveness in the American democratic experience. Her leadership and mentorship paved the way to diversity training before it was legislated. In 1988, she founded CORE at CNR, the Committee on Diversity and Equity. She was a founder and Chair of the Westchester County Racial Diversity Project established to address racism based on color, religion, or ethnic background which held weekend workshops to train student, faculty, and staff

leaders on the evils of racism. Trained leaders then returned to their campuses to prepare others for participation in a multi-racial and multi-cultural workforce they would encounter.

Admired for her leadership in promoting health care education as well as the right to access quality care, she served on the Board of Sound Shore Medical Center for many years and was Chair of the External Affairs Committee.

In the Spring 1973 issue of CNR Alumnae News, Sr. Dorothy Ann authored an article on *Women and the Challenge of the 70s*, tracing the evolution of women's rights movements from the 16th and 17th centuries to the present day ([click here to read the article](#)). Shining a spotlight on her many perspectives, it was a scholarly, well researched article that featured the pull quote – “The biggest task is education of the human heart.” Sister was honored as Woman of the Year by the Westchester County Federation of Women's Clubs in 1984. She also served on the Board of Directors of the National Museum for Women in the Arts. It seems she answered in the affirmative whenever there was another opportunity to open doors for others.



Sr. Dorothy Ann in Beijing, China in 1995

She was appointed to the official United States government delegation to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, September 1995. Also tapping into her numerous advocacy efforts, this was perhaps her most widely publicized honor. One of 46 in the delegation, she was the only women's college president and only woman religious to be included in the task of collaborating to create a platform to improve the status of women globally and improve equality between women and men. She proclaimed, “As a woman religious, I bring an obvious and tested concern for the religious and moral principles underlying the issues of this conference – human rights of women, the life-span approach to health and education, efforts to balance work and family responsibilities of men and women, economic security, and full participation of women in political and economic decision-making. Improving the status of girls and women's lives is key to building a safer and more secure and peaceful world. Women everywhere share the same aspirations – for access to opportunity, strong families, quality health care and education, personal safety, and the ability to participate in the decisions that affect their lives. We are trying to say to women around the world, ‘Don't give up the hope. Your secret aspirations are part of a worldwide woman's experience.’”



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“The biggest task is education of the
human heart.”

- Sr. Dorothy Ann Kelly, O.S.U.

Ever the practical, down to earth communicator, Sister wrote in an article for the local New Rochelle newspaper, “At one of the preparatory meetings for the conference, I heard a story that beautifully illustrates the power of women working together to solve their problems. In one African village, women formed a community group to address the problem of wife battering, among other issues. When one of the group’s members was beaten, the others would grab pots and pans and bang on them as loudly as they could outside the batterer’s house. As a result of the public humiliation, the incidence of battering dropped precipitously. In Beijing, the world’s women will be banging on their metaphorical pots and pans, taking action to put an end to violence and discrimination.”

During Women’s History Month, March 1997, Sr. Dorothy Ann received the New York State Governor’s Award for Excellence. Upon her retirement from the presidency later that year, the College of New Rochelle Board of Trustees established the Woman of Conscience Award created to acknowledge the work of other

women who reflected her own deep personal values. The citation for the award states that the tribute “recognizes and celebrates moral leadership of women who by acts of conscience have elevated humanity.”

Sr. Dorothy Ann Kelly made the world a better place as an outstanding steward of her time. The litany of her efforts, achievements, and awards is testimony to her faithful service. Her involvement never stopped after the accolades were publicized, or the conferences ended. Her commitment continued long after headlines and spotlights disappeared. She was still working on her unfinished agenda in the very last hours of her life.

Thank you once again to Dr. James Schleiffer for his eloquent and comprehensive writings on the life of Sr. Dorothy Ann Kelly. His words and those preserved in the files of the CNR Office of College Advancement stimulate precious memories and inspire us to follow in her footsteps. Our next and final article in the series will focus on the impact that Sr. Dorothy Ann’s faith had on her own life and on the lives of countless others.

With boundless admiration and gratitude,
Eileen Niedzwiecki, SAS ‘72
CNR Alumni Communication Committee