

McKeon: Sr. Marion Garneau remembered as a champion of social justice

On Sunday morning, December 6, the word came from New Brunswick that Sr. Marion Garneau had just died the night before. She was 81. In the flurry of local Edmonton phone calls and emails to faith and community contacts that followed, those spreading the word used words like beloved, committed, trusted, respected, wise, strong, and faithful to describe Sr. Marion.

Many of us came to know Sr. Marion in a nearly 20-year period between 1994 and 2013 when she worked, volunteered, and lived in the inner-city neighbourhood of Boyle McCauley. We came to know her as a ministry partner, mentor, friend and neighbour.



Sr. Marion Garneau

Sr. Marion worked as a pastoral associate with the ecumenical Inner City Pastoral Ministry (ICPM) helping to organize Sunday worship and lunch at the Bissell Centre, and a weekday street outreach. She was a familiar face at neighbourhood drop-in centres, shelters, prisons, residences, and on the street. She developed close relationships especially with women on the margins, who often were homeless, involved in the sex trade, survivors of sexual abuse, or seeking to transition from time in prison. She helped animate inner-city women's groups of sharing and mutual support. The group at ICPM included an annual weekend Women's Wellness Retreat at the Star of the North Retreat Centre in St. Albert, which continues to this day.

Others from the wider Edmonton area encountered Sr. Marion through her

involvement with Development and Peace and the ecumenical outdoor Good Friday Way of the Cross. Sr. Marion was active in the neighbourhood. I remember a bold moment when Sr. Marion called out the local Member of Parliament at a neighbourhood meeting for his undercutting of urgently needed affordable housing and community development initiatives.

Often, we learn much about the important people in our lives when stories are told and obituaries written at the time of their death. This is true for Sr. Marion. Sr. Marion's Metis great grandparents, Laurent and Eleanor Garneau, arrived in Edmonton from the Red River settlement in 1874. Their original farm property along the North Saskatchewan River today is part of the Garneau neighbourhood.

Sr. Marion was born and raised in Edmonton. She met the Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception while attending her local Catholic school. She experienced a call to religious life, and crossed the country to join the Sisters of Charity in New Brunswick at 16 years of age. She completed high school there, earned degrees in science and education, and served as a high school teacher for 13 years in Saint John.

In 1972, her life took a very different course. She was assigned to her community's mission on the outskirts of Lima, Peru. There, for nine years, she lived with and reached out to those living in extreme poverty, journeying with the people in new models of church seeking new ways of living the Gospel and working for social justice. In Peru, she experienced the emergence of small Christian communities, and saw the importance of lay leadership.

Sr. Marion returned to Canada, and after a few years she was elected as leader of her religious community in 1985. After nine years in congregational leadership, she was able to return to her home town for an extended time of ministry in Edmonton's inner city. Sr. Marion, as a woman religious, was able to model and embrace the style of ministry in Edmonton she had been introduced to in Peru, a ministry of presence, accompaniment, spiritual support, advocacy and community building with those living in what Pope Francis calls "the peripheries." She made her home in the midst of the people she served.

Sister Marion received the Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal for community service in 2003. In 2011, she also received the Salvos Prelentzos Peace Award from Project Ploughshares in Edmonton.

Many can share stories of being invited by Sr. Marion to step out and risk to join in an unfamiliar project or ministry. Sr. Marion would enliven spiritual and community gatherings with her gift of music on the guitar.

In 2013, in declining health, Sr. Marion had to retire from her Edmonton ministries, and return to New Brunswick, where she spent her last years. Her life and witness continues to be remembered and carried forward in the lives, ministries and organizations that she touched here in Edmonton.

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