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Franciscan sister dedicated her life to teaching, health care

Zoe Ryan | Apr. 15, 2013

Sr. M. Patrice Kerin, a Franciscan sister in Sylvania, Ohio, who served as general superior and established the health care system Franciscan Services Corporation, died April 7 after a brief illness. She was 86.

Kerin was a good debater and listener, someone who helped people discover solutions instead of giving orders herself, friends said. She exhibited Franciscan values and Irish hospitality, they said.

"She had just a wonderful way of giving you the reverence that you were the only person that was important to her at that time," Franciscan Sr. Rachel Nijakowski said.

Congregational minister Sr. Mary Jon Wagner echoed that very sentiment of the attention Kerin gave to people. Each one felt special, Wagner said, from men and women who sat on the bishop's Cabinet with her to the people in the health care system.

Kerin was "truly a visionary," Wagner said.

From 1976 to 1984, Kerin was general superior (a title that later became congregational minister) for the Sylvania Franciscan sisters. From 1977 to 1981, she also served as president of the Franciscan Federation, a national group of members of the Franciscan Family where she and the sisters were involved in the rewriting of the Franciscan Rule.

In 1984, Kerin established Franciscan Services Corporation (now Sylvania Franciscan Health) as a way to provide professional oversight for the sisters' growing health care ministry. She served as chair of the board of trustees for 20 years.

"She had a vision," said John O'Connell, retired CEO of Sylvania Franciscan Health. Kerin hired him as CEO in 1984.

She believed it was appropriate to have a health system to bind the hospitals. There were few health systems in the 1980s and even fewer Catholic systems, he said. Creating the system also provided a venue to bring on lay experts and embark on involvement in elder care.

"She wanted to work with people as opposed to have people work for her more than about anybody I've ever seen," he said.

Today, the system has hospitals, nursing homes and assisted living homes in Ohio, Texas and Kentucky. Business excellence was required for the system, but it was a ministry first and foremost, Kerin insisted to those involved.

"You could walk into them and see, feel Franciscan values," he said.

Kerin was an elementary school teacher and principal in schools in Michigan, Minnesota and Ohio over a span

of 24 years.

In Toledo almost 50 years ago, Kerin was the principal of the first school in which Wagner taught. For many years, Wagner worked with and for Kerin, who was a strong force in Wagner's decision to become a Sylvania Franciscan.

Kerin was a teacher in profession but also in the way she led anything, Wagner said.

Nijakowski, like Wagner, lists Kerin as a mentor.

"She was great at helping me mentor my own gifts as a counselor," said Nijakowski, who started as an elementary school teacher but went on to get her degree in psychology. She now runs Sophia Center, a therapeutic center part of Sylvania Franciscan Health.

From 1989 to 2002, Kerin worked as associate director of programs, retreats and spiritual direction in Santa Fe, N.M., at the Sangre de Cristo Renewal Center for religious and priests from all over the world. Those she met at the center stayed connected with her, Nijakowski said.

In 2002, Kerin returned to Sylvania. She moved to Rosary Care Center, a nursing home in Sylvania, in 2010.

"When you have a cross-section of [many] human beings, be they religious or lay or diocesan or local or international ... and these people all feel like she touched their lives -- to me, that's iconic," Wagner said.

Kerin was born on Feb. 5, 1927, in Toledo, Ohio, and made her first profession in 1947. She received a degree from Bowling Green State University in Ohio and a master's degree from Siena Heights College in Michigan.

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