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Stunned with Sorrow

The sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary were among both the victims and the heroes of the horrific 1958 Our Lady of the Angels school fire.

By Suellen Hoy

***“Stunned with sorrow. Words cannot express.
We suffer anguish with all of you in your tragedy.
We pray God give you strength and support.”***

—Telegram to BVM Sisters in Chicago from Sister Mary Editha Brown and Sisters, BVM, Washington, Iowa, December 2, 1958

Forty-six years after Chicago’s most disastrous school fire, the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVMs) remember December 1, 1958 with sadness—and sometimes tears. The sisters recall those whose lives were altered forever by the destructive flames that broke out on the clear, cold winter day at Our Lady of the Angels (OLA) elementary school at 909 North Avers Avenue on the city’s West Side. They mourn the loss of ninety-two children and three of their own: Sister Mary Clare Therese (Eloise Carmelite) Champagne, Sister Mary Seraphica (Anna Virginia) Kelley, and Sister Mary St. Canice (Mary Ellen) Lyng. Although the BVM Sisters are no longer “stunned with sorrow,” the memory of that day remains very much alive.

Prior to the 1960s, few professionally active women voiced their opinions in public. If seen at all, they were seldom heard. This was especially true of Catholic women who knew and accepted their place in a traditional church that was both patriarchal and hierarchical. Nevertheless, from a current point of view, it is striking that the BVM Sisters, so intimately involved in the 1958 crisis and its aftermath, remained so invisible and so silent. In Monsignor William E. McManus’s sermon during the funeral mass for the three nuns on December 4, 1958, he referred to them as “professional women and experienced teachers” and praised “the Sisters’ gallant heroism.” But he chose not to name them, believing that they “would want to be remembered simply as the BVM Sisters who died with their pupils in the fire.” Perhaps so, perhaps not. But whatever the case then, it is appropriate now, almost fifty years after the fire, to piece together the sisters’ story.

Although the area around Our Lady of the Angels had once been predominantly Irish, it had become largely Italian by 1958. Yet the Catholic sisters who taught in the school since it first opened in 1904 remained mostly Irish or Irish American. The BVMs, about 2,200 strong in the post–World War II years, trace their origins to nineteenth-century Dublin and the beneficent works of a small group of women led by Mary Frances Clarke. In 1833, they immigrated to Philadelphia where they formed a religious community dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Ten years later, they relocated to the small Mississippi River town of Dubuque, Iowa, and built their first motherhouse (Dubuque remains their headquarters today). By the 1950s, the BVMs operated, in Chicago alone, thirty grade schools, three high schools, and Mundelein College.

December 1, 1958, “the day Chicago wept,” began like every other day at Our Lady of the Angels, a large school offering kindergarten and elementary instruction to about fourteen hundred children. The fire reportedly started between 2:00 and 2:20 P.M. near the base of a stairwell in the north wing of the U-shaped, two-story building. For approximately thirty minutes, the fire burned undetected and filled the stairwell with suffocating smoke and heat. The north wing, on the first floor, held 234 students in four classrooms; on the second floor, in six rooms, were 329 students. No one on the first floor (grades one through four) was injured or killed. But the flames, which spread to the second floor with startling swiftness, left many victims in their wake. The hallway proved impassable, and the windows posed an uninviting prospect—the sills were high off the classroom floors, and the ground outside (of concrete and crushed rock) was twenty-five feet below. The third alternative was for students and their teachers to remain calm, hoping and praying that they would be rescued.

Built in 1910, OLA’s north wing had been renovated several times but was never brought up to modern fire codes. Although it had passed a fire department inspection a few weeks before the fire, the parish had not been forced to comply with all of the safety guidelines in the most recent municipal code (1949) because the guidelines were not retroactive. In hindsight, the old brick building, with a wood interior and without up-to-date features, such as smoke detectors, sprinklers, an automatic fire alarm, and fire-safe doors, was an accident waiting to happen. But, as *Newsweek* reported two weeks after the tragedy, these conditions were hardly unusual. A national survey published by the U.S. Office of Education had discovered that “nearly one school building in five [was] a potential fire trap [and that] another one in five [was] on the borderline.” Immediately after the fire, school systems across the country cracked down, responding to parents “who had suddenly realized . . . that it could have been their own children trapped in those classrooms.”

None of the BVM Sisters remained inactive in the face of the fire, nor did they all respond in the same way. Alone and in their classrooms, some attempted to prevent a stampede or panic by encouraging their students to stay seated and pray while waiting for assistance. Others immediately, or eventually, urged the children to jump out the windows. Such was the case of Sister Davidis (Lenore) Devine, a native Chicagoan and an experienced teacher

of thirty-two years. At the time of the fire, she was fifty-five years old and had been teaching eighth grade at Our Lady of the Angels since 1956. She survived the flames with visible scars on her hands and face. Although the sisters were not encouraged to speak publicly, Sister Davidis's voice was heard. During an impromptu news conference at the convent on December 7, the day she was released from St. Anne's Hospital, she explained what had happened in her classroom.

Sister Davidis complimented her students and recalled that a boy first smelled something burning. She then discovered smoke from floor to ceiling in the hallway. The smoke was so black, she said, that it looked "like huge rolls of black cotton." To keep it out, she instructed several boys to cram their arithmetic books in the cracks around the door. She also moved her pupils to the windows and led them in the rosary. At the window, one smart boy figured out that he could jump safely to a first-floor roof and then to the ground. Others, who by then could barely see each other, followed his lead until all were out—or so Sister Davidis thought. As she descended a ladder, provided by a fireman, she looked back. With a voice broken in grief, she confessed: "That's when I saw the little one, the one I missed." Beverly Ann Burda failed to escape from room 209. Months later, Valerie Ann Thoma, another student of Sister Davidis, died of burn injuries.

The three nuns who taught across the hall from Sister Davidis also lost their lives in the fire. Their classrooms—rooms 208, 210, and 212—were located adjacent to the stairwell where the fire reportedly began. Sister Mary St. Canice Lyng was forty-four years old and taught forty-seven seventh graders in room 208. She was born in Chicago but her parents, Michael and Bridget Butler Lyng, were Irish immigrants from County Kilkenny. In Chicago, Michael Lyng joined the police department and eventually became a sergeant at the Rogers Park Station. He and his wife and their two children, Mary and John, belonged to the neighborhood's St. Gertrude's parish.

Mary attended St. Gertrude's BVM-staffed parish school. There she first met Monsignor Joseph Cussen, future pastor of Our Lady of the Angels. When Mary and her classmates graduated from eighth grade in 1928, Monsignor Cussen awarded them their diplomas. She then enrolled in Immaculata, a BVM high school that had opened in 1921 and a popular choice for Catholic girls who lived on the city's North Side. While at Immaculata, she decided to become a BVM. For her, the decision was easy: "Since first grade," she wrote in her application letter, "I have been taught by our [BVM] Sisters and it is the only order that appeals to me." The sisters had made a profound impression upon her, but, above all, she believed her choice was "what God wants of me, and I want to dedicate my life to Christ." In 1941, a year after making her final profession as a religious, she offered her services for the BVM mission in China but was assigned locally instead.

Sister St. Canice taught at Our Lady of the Angels from 1937 to 1944 and 1956 to 1958. By the time she returned to OLA in 1956, she was an accomplished teacher and a former principal of St. Mary's in rural DeKalb, Illinois (1950–56). Serious and scholarly, she liked

literature and Irish history; she had also spent several summers studying theology at Marquette University. In the classroom, she demanded order and discipline. On the day of her funeral, one seventh grader, Thomas Handshiegel, who came to pay his respects, admitted that he liked her: “She was real good to us—most of the time.” Handshiegel said Sister St. Canice helped him onto a ladder, then fled back into the room. Serge Uccetta, another student, agreed: “She was trying so hard to help everybody.” Sister St. Canice remained until the end and died with twelve of her students. She suffered burns over 90 percent of her body.

Sister Mary Seraphica Kelley was forty-three years old and taught in room 210 at OLA. Similar to Sister St. Canice, she was a native Chicagoan and a graduate of Immaculata High School. Anna Virginia Kelley, known to family and friends as Virginia, was the daughter of James and Anna Laing Kelley, Irish American Catholics and Midwesterners. Virginia’s mother grew up in Chicago, but her father, who worked as a night watchman, was born in Cincinnati, Ohio. Both of them had died within a year or two of the fire, but Virginia’s only brother James and his family were living in Peoria, Illinois, at the time.

The Kelleys were longtime parishioners of St. Ita’s, at the corner of Broadway and Catalpa Avenue, where Virginia was baptized and confirmed. As a girl, she went to the parish school, which was staffed by the Sisters of Mercy. Virginia was not acquainted with the BVMs until she enrolled in Immaculata. A good student, Virginia especially loved music and was a member of the high school orchestra. In July 1933, shortly after graduation, she acknowledged in a letter that “for many years” she had desired “to be a religious.” This choice never disappointed her. In September 1958, less than three months before her death, Sister Seraphica wrote to a sister-friend of “the richness that is ours in the blessings of Community living.” She taught for twelve years at Annunciation parish school at Wabansia Avenue and Paulina Street before coming to OLA in 1952.

Sister Seraphica also suffered burns over 90 percent of her body. Sister Frances Jerome Sykora identified Sister Seraphica’s charred body at the morgue by her number in the community, #2764, found on her cincture. Twenty-eight of her fifty-seven students died with her—more died in her classroom than in any other. When the firemen finally reached room 210, they found many of the fourth-graders wrapped around her, clinging to her for protection. In the face of so few options, she apparently tried to keep these children calm by leading them in prayer until they could be rescued. Trapped by the smoke and flames that quickly engulfed and darkened the classroom, only those terrified children who were able to find the windows and climb onto the high sills survived. Most of them, however, were badly burned.

The youngest of the three nuns to die in the fire was Sister Mary Clare Therese Champagne. At twenty-seven, she was young, pretty, had an easy way about her, along with a slight southern drawl, and was a favorite among many of the schoolchildren. An unfounded rumor even circulated that she had been a Mardi Gras queen in New Orleans.

On the day of her funeral, an eleven-year-old student remarked: “I liked her so much. All the kids felt that way about her.” The BVM Sisters who remember her recall her playful sense of humor and her creative flair.

Eloise Carmelite Champagne was born and baptized in New Orleans, Louisiana, in May 1931. Her parents, Louis and Carmelite Martinez Champagne, were born into strong Cajun Catholic families in the small Louisiana towns of Bourg and Chackbay. Eloise had one brother, Hugh, who today practices dentistry in New Orleans. Eloise and Hugh attended grammar school at Holy Name of Mary School in Algiers (now a suburb of New Orleans) until their family moved to San Francisco in 1944. As an employee of the Southern Pacific Railroad, their father had accepted the transfer and accompanying promotion during World War II. The family returned to Louisiana in 1952.

Eloise graduated from St. Paul’s High School in San Francisco in 1949. At St. Paul’s, she first encountered the BVM Sisters and flourished under their tutelage. Her favorite subjects were art and music, and she enjoyed the instruction and attention she received from her music teacher, Sister Jean Helene Ward, an “energetic, passionate, and artistic” young nun. Eloise always loved to draw and over time, according to her brother, she learned to play both the accordion and piano. She also liked movies and movie stars, particularly Gloria de Haven, Van Johnson, and Frank Sinatra.

During her senior year of high school, Eloise decided to become a nun. She wanted, as she noted on her application form, “to love God more,” and was attracted to the teaching profession. But to please her parents, she did not enter the BVM community immediately after high school. During the summer and fall of 1949, she worked as a file clerk at Getz Bros. in San Francisco. Her brother remembers that Eloise’s decision to join a religious community was particularly difficult for their mother, who had lost her parents before she was six and grown up in the homes of relatives. She was “very close to Eloise” and did not want to lose her. But Eloise remained determined, and her mother allowed her to enter the BVMs in February 1950.

Sister Clare Therese (Eloise) Champagne began her career as a first-grade teacher at St. Joseph’s in Wichita, Kansas. She continued teaching first grade after she arrived at Our Lady of the Angels in 1955. Three years later, her superiors assigned her to the fifth grade. Her new classroom (room 212) was a short distance from her friend’s, Sister Mary Geraldita Ennis. During the summer months, Sister Clare Therese continued her education at Clarke College in Dubuque, Iowa. In August 1956, she returned home for the first time since entering the convent six years earlier. It was an especially joyous occasion, her brother remembers, because she met her newborn nephew. After the fire, her sister-in-law commented to a local newspaper that Sister Clare Therese “was so happy when she visited us in 1956, so glad to be a nun.”

Unlike the other two nuns, Sister Clare Therese did not suffer from third- and fourth-degree burns. A policeman who arrived early at the fire scene reported that he saw Sister Clare Therese from the street in the smoke-filled room, “calmly talking to the children [trying] to prevent hysteria” as she helped them climb on to a window ledge. A fifth-grade boy who survived because of her efforts told the Chicago Daily News, “She was as cool as a cucumber.” Nevertheless, she and twenty-six of her fifty-five students failed to escape; almost all of them were asphyxiated.

Sister Clare Therese’s death devastated her family. In New Orleans, early on the evening of December 1, Hugh Champagne heard about the fire while watching a national television news report. Much later, he received word of his sister’s death via telephone and immediately called his parents. Although the entire family was grief-stricken, Hugh believes his mother suffered the most. According to people who knew her, she was never really the same. Hugh has not forgotten his sister or the disaster that took her life. His third child, a girl born in February 1959, is named Mary Clare Therese, and nearly fifty years later, he readily admits that he dreads both the first Monday after Thanksgiving and December 1.

As the fire smoldered in the late afternoon of December 1, the nuns who lived at Our Lady of the Angels convent gathered around the dining room table. Several nearby BVM Sisters joined them. All were in a state of shock and disbelief. Sister Mary Donatus DeCock arrived on the scene shortly after the fire had been extinguished. She remembers that Sister Mary St. Florence (Miriam) Casey, the sixty-five-year-old convent superior and school principal, sat at the head of the table. As the sisters choked back tears, they tried to console one another, come to terms with what had happened, and decide what to do next.

Sister Donatus stood at the convent door and refused entrance to reporters. She believes that Monsignor McManus, the Catholic schools’ superintendent, wanted to protect the sisters as well as the archdiocese and its new head; only weeks before the fire, Milwaukee’s Albert G. Meyer had been installed as Chicago’s archbishop. (An honest Monsignor John “Jack” Egan admitted years later to his biographer that he was “relieved when they carried the body of a nun out. . . . It would have been a greater tragedy if no nuns had died along with their students.”) But stepping into the spotlight and speaking publicly to the press was not something Catholic sisters were inclined to do. Sister Mary Andrienne Carolan is a case in point.

“Heroine Hides Her Name: How Nun Rescued 40 from Flames” read the front-page headline of the Chicago Daily News on December 3, 1958. Although she “elected silence rather than give her name,” others identified the small woman bent on saving the students as Irish-born Sister Andrienne of room 201. She admitted that she “felt untold strength” during three trips into the burning building, but said little more. Because of her quick response to smoke in the south wing hallway, all seventy of her seventh graders escaped. Telling them not to be afraid, she led some youngsters out in hand-by-hand

chains, rolled others down the stairs, and carried a few to safety. She remarked that she did not “want to be a hero” since “there were so many sisters trying to help.” Sister Andrienne continued to teach in Chicago (at Our Lady of the Angels and at Presentation) until 1963.

Months later, in June 1959, Sister Mary Helaine (Nora) O’Neill of room 211 received the Illinois Veterans of Foreign Wars’ “Citizen of the Year Award.” The heroic actions described in the citation resembled those attributed to Sister Andrienne in the wake of the fire. Although Sister Helaine’s comings and goings during the tragedy were not mentioned in newspaper accounts, her slow recovery received notice. Severely burned and suffering from intense shock, she was not expected to live for more than a week. She gradually improved and, after undergoing several skin grafts, was released from St. Anne’s Hospital in February 1959. She went immediately to the BVM motherhouse in Dubuque, where she convalesced during the spring and summer. In the fall, she accepted a new assignment at Gesu Elementary School in Milwaukee. Although she had no recollection of what happened during the fire, she accepted the VFW Award in the name of Our Lady of the Angels and the BVM Sisters.

In the face of such a horrific disaster, few people found consolation in awards or commendations. John Cogley, an OLA graduate and at the time a columnist for *Commonweal*, a national Catholic magazine located in New York City, wrote about the fire. Calling it “one of the greatest tragedies of modern history,” he summed up what so many felt: Words were “too cheap” to offer to “the stricken parents, the valiant nuns, and the children who have survived.” Each faced an immense challenge, “to believe that the hand of God ha[d] not been withdrawn from the world.” The alternative, Cogley pointed out, was to find “only bitter meaninglessness in the universe.” The BVM Sisters chose to rely on their faith despite the difficulties before them.

Chicago’s nuns tried to cope with the tragedy as they attended wakes and burials and attempted to console grieving parents. The sisters at OLA lived together in close association, and they had lost three friends and colleagues. Each morning, wrote Sister Donatus in March 1959, they “gathered around the breakfast table in a silence made eloquent by three empty places.”

Sister Geraldita suffered the loss of one of her closest friends, Sister Clare Therese. On several occasions, the two had visited Sister Geraldita’s sister and her family in Riverside, Illinois. Her niece, June O’Connor, recalls that neither her aunt nor Sister Clare Therese was “overly formal or religious” and that on these visits everyone had fun with them, singing or making fudge or toffee from scratch. When the O’Connor family learned of the loss of Sister Clare Therese, they were “shocked and burdened by the details of her death” and were also worried about Sister Geraldita.

Petite with a round face and fair complexion, Sister Geraldita is remembered as a people person with a good sense of humor. Born in Chicago in 1921, Rosaleen June Ennis—called June—was the youngest of four children. Her parents, Gerald and Rose Dempsey Ennis, both Irish immigrants, had met and married in Chicago, where Gerald worked as a streetcar conductor. The Ennis family belonged to the Our Lady Help of Christians parish, and June attended the parish elementary school. In 1939, she graduated from St. Mary's, a BVM high school on the city's West Side.

First a student and later a friend, Jacqueline Powers Doud remarked that Sister Geraldita was a bright woman who “lived with a lot of odds.” The first of which was the loss of her mother on her twelfth birthday, June 2, 1933. Then in 1947, while teaching in Phoenix, Arizona, Sister Geraldita became seriously ill with tuberculosis and had a lung removed. Although only twenty-eight, she was hospitalized for an extended period, during which she suffered bouts of depression. When she recovered, Sister Geraldita returned to teaching in Glendale, California, where she became Doud's fourth-grade teacher. Doud believes Sister Geraldita took a special interest in her, because she had lost her own mother. Whatever the reason, Doud grew attached to Sister Geraldita and laughingly admits becoming fascinated with Chicago, a place she had never seen.

In 1958, Sister Geraldita had been at Our Lady of the Angels for two years. She taught forty fifth and sixth graders in room 207, a room by chance with an emergency exit door. Although no one in her room died, Sister Geraldita had forgotten to carry the key to the door. For the rest of her life, she lived with the realization that she had inadvertently endangered her pupils' lives. According to one of her students, Matt Plovovich, Sister Geraldita “acted in a truly heroic fashion that day.” She and two boys made several attempts to break through the locked solid oak door. When they failed, she gathered the class near the door, ordered them to the floor, and led them in the rosary. Plovovich compares her to “a captain going down with the ship. She was steadfast. She never wavered and was an inspiration to us.” To those who criticize her for leading the children in prayer, Plovovich responds that Sister Geraldita was a woman of faith. “When she felt she had done everything physically possible to get us out of the room,” he insists, “she wanted to get us spiritually ready for what she and we all felt was inevitable.” With the fortunate assistance of the janitor and associate pastor, Sister Geraldita and her students escaped the deadly blaze through the emergency exit.

Sister Geraldita healed over time or, as one BVM Sister suggested, became adept at using “her wit and her charm . . . to cover her pain.” Following her rescue, she spent three days in St. Anne's Hospital, where she was treated for smoke inhalation. Following her release and according to convent records, she suffered a nervous collapse and spent a short time in Loretto Hospital, the only Catholic hospital in Chicago with a psychiatric unit.

In early 1959, Sister Geraldita returned to teaching at Cameron Elementary School, one of three public schools used temporarily by OLA faculty and students. The following year,

she was assigned to St. Joseph's in New Hampton, Iowa, a small farming community approximately forty miles north of Waterloo.

Sister Geraldita (or Sister June, as she came to be called) lived and taught in New Hampton for seventeen years. Her nieces believe the change from Chicago “did her a world of good,” and a former superior, Sister Lorraine Tierney, observed that Sister June lived a normal life; even during fire drills, she “remained calm and very much in control.” In 1977, Sister June began teaching and conducting parish visits at St. Anthony's in Dubuque, from which she officially retired in 1988. During the thirty-year period from the fire to her retirement, she was at times knocked off balance, but she managed to lead a productive life and overcome many odds, including breast cancer.

In the dark days and months following the fire, the BVM Sisters at Our Lady of the Angels solaced their grief through prayer and quiet acts of kindness. Almost immediately, the sisters attended to the needs of specific families. Until then, as customary, they had kept their distance from parishioners and students—never entering their homes, sharing meals, or displaying signs of affection or compassion. In the fire's aftermath, those practices changed quickly. Several sisters recall that in pairs they accompanied heartbroken families to wakes and funerals and visited with them in their homes and hospital rooms after school, during weekends, and on Christmas Eve. Sister Mary Remi (Rose) Caldwell, who had taught kindergarten at OLA since 1950, said the nuns spent most of their visiting hours listening and holding hands. They often helped bewildered and grief-stricken parents recall incidents from happier times. In a letter to the Catholic New World, Sister St. Florence wrote, “the courage, the patience under intense pain, and the tremendous loyalty” of injured children and parents whose children had died inspired the sisters to carry on.

The burden of the tasks at hand fell most heavily on Sister St. Florence, OLA superior and principal since 1954. Those who remember her describe her as both competent and kind. Sister Remi remarked that the nuns “really appreciated her” (which, she confided, was not true of all superiors) and that in the long months after the fire Sister St. Florence “absorbed the sorrow of us all.” At the same time, she secured classrooms and teachers for the thousand-plus OLA students without a school. She became the essential link holding everyone and everything together—so necessary that her six-year term ending in 1960 was extended for an additional year. Monsignor Cussen, OLA pastor, initiated the extension request, acknowledging his “dependence on Sister Mary St. Florence to organize and supervise” in the temporary schools and help with building plans for the new one.

Almost immediately after the fire, Sister St. Florence began working with Sister Mary Savina (Cecilia) Schroeder, principal at Our Lady Help of Christians, a large BVM-staffed school located less than two miles from Our Lady of the Angels. The two principals developed a schedule of double-shift classes and arranged for buses to transport OLA students to and from school. On December 9, 1958, one week after the fire, approximately

twelve hundred OLA students attended afternoon sessions at Our Lady Help of Christians (its own 1,665 pupils attended classes in the morning). To supplement the teaching staff, several young sisters in training replaced those who died or were incapacitated by the fire.

Sister Ruth Schiffler, the seventh-grade teacher at Our Lady Help of Christians, recalls her first encounter with the twenty-two survivors of Sister St. Canice's seventh grade. When she walked into the classroom on December 9, they were "scattered throughout the room." She asked them if they would like to move toward the front, not understanding that they had taken "their old or former seats." The empty places belonged to classmates who had died or were unable to return to school. Sister Ruth remembers that those who had survived the fire, children and sisters alike, tended to be quiet and fragile "almost as if they were in shock or a daze."

As the sisters resumed teaching and caring for those outside the bounds of official interest, local newspapers paid them little notice. Instead they focused on the sixteen-man coroner's jury investigating the cause of the fire, which was never determined. Regular headlines also announced "Fire Fund Totals" and reported on the operations of the seven-man advisory committee named by Mayor Richard J. Daley to oversee the spending of relief money. A good deal of coverage also focused on revisions in state and city fire codes and the City Council's deliberations over an ordinance requiring schools to install automatic sprinklers and fire alarm systems. Catholic Charities' relief operations also received an occasional story. The sisters' efforts, however, similar to centuries of women's household and charitable work, remained hidden from public view and generally taken for granted.

In late January 1959, thirty-seven classrooms in three nearby public schools—Cameron, Hay, and Orr—officially became the temporary site of Our Lady of the Angels. Sister St. Florence remained principal of the three OLA branches and rotated among them daily in a fervent attempt to keep the school functioning as a unit. To assist her and help with plans and purchases for the new school, Sister St. Florence appointed three vice-principals, who also taught eighth grade in each branch: Sister Madeleine (Kathryn) Maher at Cameron, Sister Joachim (Marcelline) Niemann at Hay, and Sister Agnes Loretta (Alice) McElligott at Orr. Through their efforts, science exhibits, art contests, team sports, May crowning, and graduation all resembled those held before the fire.

Less than two years after the fire, a gleaming, million-dollar building rose from the ashes of OLA. The school, located at 3814 West Iowa Street, was fireproof and outfitted with the latest safety equipment: it was constructed of steel, glass, and reinforced concrete, and all of the desks, lockers, and furniture were metal. On September 7, 1960, excited youngsters and their parents entered the school for the first time. Monsignor Cussen and Sister St. Florence waited to greet them. For Sister St. Florence, as for many others, the occasion was bittersweet. As she welcomed the students, she remarked only that everyone "was happy to be back together again." In the dedication booklet, she again stated that the

parents and children of Our Lady of the Angels—their faith, devotion to one another, and thoughtfulness to the sisters—had been a wellspring of inspiration.

Sister St. Florence appeared calm and steadfast during the twenty-one months following the fire. Yet, the tragedy and its aftermath took its toll. Except for a few brief periods, she spent almost no time away from OLA. Some believed that she never completely reconciled herself to the fact that she was absent from her office, substituting for a sick teacher, and unable to ring the alarm on the afternoon of December 1, 1958. She completed her extended term as principal, but she retired at its end in 1961. Four years later, after a series of heart attacks, she died at Immaculata convent in Chicago at age seventy-two.

Sister St. Florence's funeral took place at Our Lady of the Angels on May 29, 1961. Monsignor Egan celebrated the mass, parishioners served as pallbearers, and eighth-grade girls and boys formed an honor guard. As she requested, Sister St. Florence was buried in Mount Carmel Cemetery, "close to those dear Sisters who gave their lives in the line of duty." Her grave lies directly in front of those of Sister Mary Clare Therese Champagne, Sister Mary Seraphica Kelley, and Sister Mary St. Canice Lyng. May they rest in peace.

Suellen Hoy is a guest professor of history at the University of Notre Dame. A collection of her essays, *Good Hearts: Catholic Sisters in Chicago's Past*, was published in 2006 by the University of Illinois Press.