Goodbye, Rollins!

The Irrepressible Kate Moves On

By Constance Kakavecos Riggs

There is an affectionate story at Rollins that, having been introduced to Sister Kathleen Gilbey, listened to ten minutes of her dynamic plans and conversation, and fallen firmly under her spell, an awestruck parent stared at her departing form, murmuring in accents that might be compared to an admiring whistle, "That's a nun!"

In June, 1990, Sister Kate left Rollins after almost two decades of service as campus minister, academic adviser, counselor, and activist. If the hundreds of students whose lives she touched were asked to describe her, 'Catholic nun' might be one label on a list of descriptive words, but 'friend' would undoubtedly rank among the first.

Fred Lauten '75 was one of a kaffe klatsch which congregated in Sister Kate's apartment in the basement of McKean Hall. Now Assistant State's Attorney, 9th Judicial Circuit, in Orlando, Lauten has fond memories to recount.

"She was always cooking up snacks for us," he reminisced. "We had long discussions about politics and religion. We'd play a 20 Questions sort of game with philosophy as the subject."

"She's just like ordinary people," said a former student guilelessly, and a third called her "a source of security," adding firmly, "but not a parental figure."

A long-time colleague, alluding to a popular TV series of the '60s, said that
Hello, World!

after spending a week on the periphery of Kate’s campus ministry, he had no trouble at all believing in a flying nun.

Indeed, there is about her an incredible energy that is transmissible. Students, drawn by that vibrant force, found genuine warmth and understanding, along with insistent demands on their better selves.

Brendan Contant ’89 saw it as exciting encouragement.

“I wish,” said Contant, “that I had gotten involved in Kate’s projects earlier. We could have done so much more.”

President of the Inter-Fraternity Council in 1988-89, Contant spearheaded campus support of Kate’s work in the Feed Orlando program.

“She didn’t believe anyone should be out on the streets—not in a country like America,” said Contant, explaining how the hungry homeless became Kate’s cause.

Attending an Orlando meeting to discuss the plight of the wandering men, women and children, Kate had been struck by a plea from a house painter. He had made a single-handed effort to feed the homeless, but was in desperate need of help.

“Who will help me?” he pleaded.

“I will,” said Kate.

Buying foodstuffs from her personal budget, cooking it in her kitchen, carrying it to the site under an I-4 bridge in downtown Orlando, she served on Sunday until the food was gone.

When Kate has a cause, the world is apt to hear of it, and this time the world began with Brendan Contant’s fraternity.

“I told them I welcomed their help,” said Kate, “but that every single X-Club member had to help, not just three or four. They were wonderful. As the project grew, we got permission from Food Service to cook in the college kitchen; then the staff took over the cooking. Campus offices and groups began donating money. It had turned into a community project,” she said with satisfaction.

Contant, continuing the challenge,
next organized a campus effort which collected two truckloads of shoes and wearing apparel for the homeless.

"In their hearts," affirms Kate, "students want to help mankind. You will see an immediate response to need, although you have to prod them to keep them going. What may be lacking is long-term commitment."

On the other hand, she admits to being "a little nervous at the students' total willingness to do whatever we tell them to do."

"I find there are times when I want them to demand more from us. I would not characterize it as apathy, but in 20 years I have seen very few signs of uprising among them."

"The young people in the 60s had tons of role models for their activism," she continues, "but I don't see that happening now. It is distressing that even a major world crisis is scarcely mentioned by students in the classroom."

That is one important advantage of television, Kate says, because it "shows us the world's needs, enlightens the ignorant."

"We have a moral obligation to see the needs of the world. Helping foreign countries is fine, but I think the real definition of service is meeting a need as you see it, most often at your own elbow."

Understandably, she believes, students are concerned with their own lives.

"They have seen movies like Wall Street—television shows with young people making it big. They want the good life, too, and they don't want to hurt their chances of getting it. They translate that desire into certain graduate schools and professions, and rather than jeopardize their chances, they avoid challenging studies and professors. We—not the students—have created this."

Ask Kate about the students she has known—both 8th grade and college age, and you will be regaled with humorous stories, complete with dramatic stance and vocal flourish.

"I'll never forget the day we changed the habit. It was in the '60s, and I was in the classroom—just at the

---

**I happen to be an educator who is also a nun.**

The most exciting part in reading *Death of a Salesman*.

"I confess to being a little annoyed at the interruption, but in the hallway, a Sister told me word had just come from Rome that we no longer had to wear the veil."

"I took off my veil and returned to class, where, for the rest of the period, kids kept signalling me that I had forgotten my veil."

"After class, one young girl stopped at the door to say with some disappointment, "I could have sworn you were a blonde."

During her years at Rollins, Kate can recall no student who has ever been disrespectful to her. Colleagues and students don't treat her differently simply because she is a nun, "although one sort of expects some of them to hide behind trees when they hear the word!"

She delights in stories to the contrary, and laughs that Tom Wells of Physical Plant took her to task for collecting three parking tickets.

"Don't think just because you're a nun, you can get away with this!" he warned.

Parents can be a bit non-plussed, however, and the Irish in Kate finds the confusion humorous. After a long morning's talk about his son's perilous academic position, one parent finally relaxed and asked, "Now, what's all this Sister Kate business? Do you belong to a sorority?"

Kate's happy recollections of State's Attorney Lauten include the night he gathered a band of late-studying students to tap on her dorm window at 2:00 a.m.

"I stayed very still," Kate said, "pretending to be asleep. Then they began to chant: 'We know you're awake. Nuns don't lie. We know you're awake. Nuns don't lie.' I had to let them in," she sighed. "Richard Reinhart was there and Bob Sullivan and Kevin Nelson. We played Hearts until 3:00 a.m., and then we had spaghetti."

"She had a great sense of humor," said Lauten. "One night a bunch of us watched that Hitchcock thriller, *Psycho.* I had never seen it, and it was scary. An hour and a half later, when I was sound asleep in my room, the phone rang, and when I picked it up, there was this terrible moaning. It was Kate, of course."

Sent by the Holy Union Sisters to the Diocese of Orlando in 1970, Kate was breaking new ground—a woman in the field of campus ministry.

"It was a new description for what Catholic priests had been doing for a long time," said Kate.

Over the next two years, she established several campus ministries, including one at Florida Technological University (now the University of Central Florida) and in 1972, at Rollins College. She was active in opening the Newman Center on Lyman Avenue, then and now a lively center of activity for Rollins students. The hundreds of Centers on campuses across the nation are named for John Henry Newman, an Oxford (England) professor who turned Catholic, was later named a Cardinal of the Church, and became the "patron saint" of college students.

"We were a Catholic presence," says Kate of herself and other nuns newly in the field. "We spread the Gospel while functioning as active campus officers."

The solid foundation for Sister Kate's new work had been constructed of 34 years of devoted preparation.
Following her Holy Union postulancy and novitiate during 1944-46, she taught in Catholic elementary schools in New York, New Jersey, Rhode Island and Massachusetts. Interspersed among the several 8th grades which she enlivened were responsibilities as Director of Candidates to Religious Life at the College of the Sacred Hearts and as Superior of Convent and Principal of Inner-City Elementary School in New York.

Kate’s energetic pursuit of her own education never flagged. She gained her B.S. in Education from Catholic Teachers College and an M.A. in Drama from Catholic University of America in Washington. She received Certification in Film from Fordham University, and both her M.A. in Counseling (1972) and her M.S. in Criminal Justice (1979) were awarded by Rollins.

Still teaching, still being taught, she served as Master Learner in Rollins’ International Program in the fall of ’85—where else but in Dublin, Ireland!”

“Education is fascinating work,” said Kate, “because we are dealing with budding, fresh life.

“Someone once said, ‘The medium is the message.’ We teach in everything we do. We must be careful in that we are the Bearers of all kinds of messages to these young people.”

She was born Kathleen Gibney in Fall River, MA, in the early years of the Great Depression, the third child of John and Alice Gibney. When Kathleen was ten, John Gibney died, and Alice returned to the profession of nursing to support her family.

“Kathleen,” says Alice Gibney Shea with an Irish brogue as lilting as any stream that bubbles in Killarney, “was terrific. She was even as she is today—always on the go, always thinking of things, always doing things. She was a wonderful skater. She liked singing, and she was inclined toward the theater—always putting on plays at the convent.”

At the convent, when others chose the names of saints, Kathleen chose to be Sister John Alicia, a name to honor her parents and one promptly shortened to “J.A.” by her students.

“Giving up one’s name was one more sign of the giving of oneself,” said Kate. “Later, Pope John asked that the religious return to their baptismal names. Baptism is a sacrament, and it was felt the name given then was the most important name we would ever have.”

And so, once more, she was Kathleen, Sister Kate, or just plain Kate.

A neighbor remembered young Kate’s ready humor, sweet disposition, and impertinent jests. He relished retelling the comic daily routine between the child Kathleen and the neighborhood Curate. It never varied, he said, just the same set pattern of verbal sparring which ended with small Kathleen chasing the cleric to the end of the block.

“From her infancy, we watched her grow until the day she left for the convent,” wrote Fred Shea, who became Alice Gibney’s second husband. “She brought the joy of laughter to everyone. Even learning to walk (I never saw a kid fall so much!), she accepted the challenge of life with a determination to conquer. I never saw a kid with such pep.”

That unfailing energy has been a hallmark of Sister Kate’s 20 years in Central Florida. Immersed in establishing Campus Ministries, she nevertheless found time for the program development of an Alcohol Conference at UCF and inaugurated the joint-institutional efforts of “Project Care.”

Through Project Care, every Saturday for a year 45 to 50 Rollins, UCF and Seminole Junior College students were mustered to devote time and energy to teaching children of the Migrant Workers Camps in Zellwood and Plymouth. Since parents and older children worked in the citrus groves and produce fields, smaller children often spent the day alone and unattended, a condition
Sister Kate Named
1990 Outstanding Advisor

Sister Kathleen Gilbney has been named a 1990 Outstanding Advisor in the National Recognition Program for Academic Advising sponsored by NACADA. The award is given in recognition of demonstrated abilities as an advisor in nationwide competition.

In his letter nominating Sister Kate for the award, Dr. Daniel DeNicola, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost, described Kate as Rollins’ “Catcher in the Rye.” It is Kate who stands watch on our educational interactions, retrieving wayward students, catching those who fall through the cracks in the system, helping and guiding into educationally sound alternatives. Her advice is forthright, realistic, and always caring. She is sensitive to personalities and life histories, knowing when to sympathize and when to admonish. (She knows when to lecture parents, too, and she gets away with it!) Her energy is boundless, and she has an impressive legacy here in academic advisement. She has become ombudsperson without having the title. And her greatest legacy is surely the legions of Rollins graduates who know that Sister Kate got them through.

The award will be presented to Sister Kate at the NACADA Annual Conference in Anaheim, CA on October 17, 1990.

inviting helplessness, hopelessness, and delinquency.

Newspapers reported that “to gain the children’s trust, the students bring athletic gear and play games with the children.”

Having gained that trust, the students sought to produce practical results, teaching reading, basic math, English, and simple community relations.

“We’re moving to create a situation where the children will be able to compete in the world,” said S. Kate in an interview at the time. More important, she added, was to keep it going, to encourage hope.

In 1972, Rollins offered Kate the position of Resident Director of New Women’s Dorm, beginning a campus tenure that would continue to 1990. Throughout those years, she has been most closely associated with the Office of Student Affairs.

N. Ronald Pease, Dean of Student Affairs in 1972, termed her “unpretentious, totally accepting, trusting, giving.” Assistant Dean Alzo Reddick remembers her as “one of the most credible people on the campus.”

Then president of Rollins, Jack Barron Critchfield wrote, “She displayed that unique blend of professional training and personal qualities which attracted students in need of advice and counsel to her side.”

Traci McConnell puts it all in its proper perspective.

“She was there for the student,” says McConnell, Kate’s office assistant during the late ’80s. “Whatever the student needed, that’s what we worked for. That was our mind set. Kate would talk with the student, with faculty or parents and take the problem to a point where the student was in a positive situation.

“She used to say, ‘I’m lethal,’” laughed McConnell. “She could be very stern with the students who came in for counseling, but she was equally forgiving. And her ministerial posture overrode everything.”

Students, Kate admitted, “generally entered consultations with a defensive, ‘Ya know what’s wrong with this college?’ Being an incurable optimist, I always want to know what is right, and usually we found something right with the place.”

Every student generation brought its own cause, but if Kate had to pick a favorite project among the ones she began, “it would have to be the World Hunger Program in 1973.

“Perhaps it was because I was discouraged from doing it at my initial presentation,” she says. “I went away feeling defeated, but I came back the next day and said I was going ahead with it.”

The Rollins World Hunger Program has been a constant on the campus since that time. One of the College’s strongest efforts, it works with OXFAM America, an independent development and relief agency affiliated with the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief. OXFAM provides financial support to low income people.
of developing nations, with a concern for the world's growing food shortages.

Once each year, Rollins students are encouraged to observe Fast Day, with the value of their meals being donated to OXFAM/America.

"We did it!" Kate recalls joyously that first Fast Day. "I remember sitting on the library steps with my rosary beads in my hands. Suddenly, the lawn was absolutely jam-packed with people. All the TV channels were represented. The manager of the Beaney said afterward he had serious thoughts about turning Catholic: only three students went through the serving lines that day!"

With typical Kate Gibney matter-of-factness, she pulls a long face. "Of course, they were probably all eating in town where I couldn't see them!"

When one student demanded proof that OXFAM money was not being spent on administrative costs, Kate brought a telephone to the library steps and called Ralph Nader, whose name she had seen on the literature.

"No one was more surprised than I when I got him. I held the telephone to the microphone, and Ralph Nader told them there was no profit in OXFAM, that everyone who works in the program is unpaid, a volunteer."

"What we were doing back then," she continues, "was not alleviating the world’s hunger. We wanted to raise awareness of the global situation and to promote college involvement in alleviating hunger in Central Florida. We were raising consciousness."

Kate is wary of tagging any project as successful.

"I, personally, don't concentrate on (the idea of) success. Success of anything is when you have a change of heart, and that is very hard to define. We simply dedicate ourselves."

Her dedication has embraced the student's life, from arrival at Rollins to departure. Her personal counseling has dealt with every student difficulty: loneliness, family death, drink and drug abuse, roommate problems, and academic difficulties.

With forgiving glee, Kate claims that she could talk with any student, regardless of the unproductive attempts of others to track him/her down. In one classic instance, Kate's usually efficacious efforts had been stymied. The student was not attending classes. Major difficulties loomed, and still he ignored telephone calls, memoranda in his mailbox, even hand-carried messages. Kate the Persistent refused to accept defeat.

"I waited until late one night and marched into his room. He was in bed and corners Things happened. 'Now,' I said, 'we'll talk.'"

According to Dr. Daniel DeNicola, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost, Kate was a major force in helping commuting students "develop an organization and gain a sense of identity and participation in the life of the campus. As a result, our attrition among commuting students was cut in half in one year."

She worked with students on academic probation, organized special testing and study skills opportunities, and made a major contribution to the development of orientation programs for new students. She organized the Academic Consultation Team (ACT), a peer counseling group that volunteered time from its own studies to help other students.

But academic success is not the whole of college life, and Kate initiated endless campus ministry outings for relaxation, recreation, a time of togetherness, and a time of quiet thought.

"The Church must provide silence and seclusion as an integral part of any program teaching the Gospel," Kate said. "If this is neglected, we run the risk of providing nothing but social gatherings under the name of religion."

To that end, Campus Ministry outings such as the Meditation Canoe Trip on Wekiva River and the Ocean Retreat at New Smyrna Included times of quiet thought, group prayer, and scripture and meditative readings as well as jogging and swimming, fellowship and food.

Kate was ever-present at campus events: holiday Tree-Trimming, Senior Nights, Orientations, Candlelight Ceremonies, Pancake Breaks and O.O.O.O. initiations. At her farewell reception in May, the Alumni Association noted her constant support of students in designating Kate an honorary member of the Class of 1990.

"I cannot imagine this place without her," said Dr. DeNicola in supporting her nomination for a prestigious advising award. "Who would call our faculty advisers to conscience? Who would take on policies sometimes passed over for our convenience than with the students' perspective in mind? Who would bring such perceptiveness and vitality to advising conferences? Who would show us how much advising is a profound form of teaching?"

A bit facetiously, but with the reality of "rescued" students in mind, he concluded, "It is too bad that the continued on page 38
"Sister Kate" — A Parting Shot