

BLACK CATHOLIC HISTORY MONTH

Sister Thea's 'tremendous light' continues to inspire

Seattle man shares memories of his friendship with nun who spread black spirituality to the world

SEATTLE

BY TERRY MCGUIRE

Gregory Lind pulls out a yellow sheet of paper containing thoughts he has scribbled about his friend, Franciscan Sister Thea Bowman. He recites her most famous quote: "Sometimes people think they have to do big things in order to make change. If each of us would light the candle, we've got a tremendous light."

Such a "simple statement," says Lind, who will speak on Sister Thea's black Catholic spirituality Nov. 21 at 6:30 p.m. in the St. Anthony Parish Hall in Renton to celebrate National Black Catholic History Month. Yet her words endure today, almost two decades after her death.

Why?

Because "she had that evangelism, she had that love," Lind says. "She could brighten up a room with her spirituality and it was so infectious. She had no fear about professing her spirituality."

Lind, a member of St. James Cathedral Parish in Seattle and a nurse practitioner who owns two area medical clinics, knew Sister Thea long before she became the famed black nun and author who joyfully spread black Catholic spirituality and racial unity to the world. It was before she told Mike Wallace on "60 Minutes" that "black is beautiful;" before she had the mostly white hierarchy in tears at the 1989 U.S. Catholic bishops meeting as she led them in singing "We Shall Overcome" after challenging them to better recognize the gifts of black Catholics; before she became a bone cancer victim who inspired others with her prayer: "Lord, let me live until I die."



*Sister Thea Bowman
Artist: Marshall Bouldin*

It was 1974, and Lind was a student at Viterbo University in his hometown of La Crosse, Wis. The liberal arts school was founded by the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, and Sister Thea, a convert from Protestantism, was its first black sister and a teacher at Viterbo.

Lind, who is white, was intrigued by her class in black literature, so he took it for two semesters. "The minute I walked into the room, I knew it was going to be the two best courses I've ever taken in my life," he recalled last month.

He was struck by Sister Thea's enthusiasm, energy and insight. And the experience of having her as a teacher introduced him to elements of black spirituality that she would later write about: of being spontaneous, participatory and involved.



*Gregory and Diane Lind hold a photo of their inspirational friend, the late Franciscan Sister Thea Bowman, whom they first met in 1974.
Photo: Terry McGuire*

A visit to segregation

During the Easter break, Sister Thea, the granddaughter of slaves, invited her students to travel with her to her hometown of Canton, Miss., to visit the rural settings of some of the authors they were studying. Lind's future wife, Diane, accompanied him, as did some black students from the Canton area who had been studying at Viterbo after being brought there by Sister Thea.

Though it happened a decade after the civil rights movement had begun to grab the national consciousness, the trip was an eye opener for Lind, whose only previous exposure to minorities had been a Japanese student he met in the second grade. The civil rights movement wasn't an issue in "all-white" La Crosse, he said, because it was something that was happening "elsewhere."

In Canton they encountered a town still living in the past, with segregated movie houses, public water fountains and entrances to doctors' offices, he said.

White passersby yelled derogatories at their mixed group of white and black students, Lind said. Lind and his fiancée stayed at the home of a black grandmother, who gave them silver for their wedding gift. They attended a dance at a black school and experienced for the first time what it was like to be the minority in a crowd. While walking in a black part of town they were stopped by white police officers who made derogatory statements after discovering they were among "those kids from up north," Lind said, the officers telling them they had "no idea of the situation" there.

"Just going and seeing what it's like to be in the town where she grew up, it ended up being life changing," Lind said last month, "not only in how I thought, or would think as an adult, but how I was able to see the differences that you might only read about ... or see on TV. "And it changed my relationship with her [Sister Thea] from being just a professor."

Love was at her center

The two stayed in touch after that, and Lind, who moved to Western Washington in 1987, watched her gain fame through her writings and media exposure.

He said Sister Thea had an impact on his parenting in the way he and Diane raised their daughters to strive to be colorblind.

Sister Thea and others also gave him a deeper understanding of Catholicism and what black Catholic spirituality brings to the faith.

She opened him up to the “concept of love,” he said, noting that love was central to everything she did.

“When she would talk about what it’s like to be a black Catholic, she always prefaced it in love. And that is the tenet of Catholicism ... I think that drew her to being a Catholic.” She also was a “strong believer in education,” Lind said.

When he last heard from her she was battling bone cancer, but she wrote to him that she hoped to visit Seattle as part of a nationwide tour. It never came to be. She died on March 30, 1990 at age 52.

Earlier this year Lind joined the archdiocese’s African American/Black Advisory Circle. The only white person among the 12-member group, he says he is there to listen to the experiences of other black Catholics and better understand black Catholic history and spirituality.

“It’s great to have him [on the circle] and to have his insight from a different perspective,” said Philip Tran, the archdiocese’s assistant director for cultural and ethnic ministry. “It’s wonderful that he knew Sister Bowman personally. She has a great impact on his life.”

Want to learn more?

Sister Thea Bowman and Her African American Catholic Spirituality

When:

Saturday, Nov. 21, 6:30 p.m., reception following

Where:

St. Anthony Parish Hall, 416 S. Fourth St., Renton

Presenter:

Gregory Lind, a friend

For information, or to schedule Mr. Lind to speak at your parish, contact [Philip Tran](#) at 206-382-4828.