



Thea News

Volume 3 Number 2 2004

Thea: Friend, Teacher, Colleague

by Cristeen Custer

small group of women who knew Thea assembled in the St. Rose Convent gathering room in La Crosse during the April 2003 annual Flavor of Soul celebration held at Viterbo University and shared their memories of Thea. The women were: Lee Etta James Clark and Jennette Wilson of Chicago, sisters who grew up in Canton, Miss., and attended school with Thea at Holy Child Jesus; Viterbo University graduates, Kathi Ashmore of Madison, Wis., and Marilyn Johnson of La Crosse, who both had Thea as a professor in the late 1970s; and Mary Walter Heires, FSPA, and Rita Mae Fischer, FSPA, who lived with Thea when she taught high school in Canton. The text below is presented in the words of these women who each knew a different Thea—as a friend, a teacher, or a colleague.



Standing (l-r): Mary Walter Heires, FSPA; Jennette Wilson; and Rita Mae Fischer, FSPA. Seated (l-r): Marilyn Johnson; Lee Etta James Clark; and Kathi Ashmore.

Childhood memories

Lee Etta: (Recalling primary school days.) Two types of students attended Holy Child Jesus School, children looking for a better education and children who had been left by the wayside. They (the FSPA) really took time with you one on one. They took an interest in my weaknesses and strengths. I remember growing up with Thea. She got along with all the kids. She was always sharing her lunches, giving her lunch away.

Speaking tours

Lee Etta: (Describing some of Thea's appearances at churches in Chicago.) I first saw Thea speak at St. Anselm Catholic Church in Chicago. There was a small turnout, about 20 of us. Undaunted, Thea said, "We can still have church." . . . Her performances were preaching, singing, and lecturing. Thea would come in from the back of the church, dancing or singing, and go down to the altar. She would go up to the podium. She would greet us and start lecturing and, all of a sudden, it would be just like our ancestors, she would start to sing With me, gather at the river. Then she might quote from the Bible or Socrates or say something in Latin, and then she leaned back down to street language saying, "You're my

"Old people in the black community taught us that we should serve the Lord until we die. We can even serve the Lord onour deathbeds or in any circumstances in life. If we have faith, hope, and love. we can pass it on.

If we work
together,
pray
and
stand
together,
we can
create
a new heaven
and
ease life for
each other."

 from "She Inspires Thousands but Who Inspires Her?"
 CUA Magazine (Winter 1990).

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From the TBL Coordinator

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September 1, 2004



Charlene Smith, FSPA

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Dear Friends of Thea,

A look at a few Thea events so far this year—if you missed them, the photos give a glimpse of each occasion.

Mississippi. At the Jan. 22-24 annual Winter Scholar Symposium in Oxford, Miss., the Alliance for Graduate Education in Mississippi (AGEM) honored Thea, posthumously, with its 2004 High Achiever award, for "outstanding dedication and commitment to service and community." Fr. Joseph Dyer gave the keynote address titled, "Thea as Scholar."

Pennsylvania. More than 300 persons attended the 8th annual fundraiser dinner sponsored by the Thea

Bowman Black Catholic Education Foundation at Duquesne

University, Pittsburgh, March 25. The foundation grants college scholarships to qualifying Thea Scholars.

Wisconsin. Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, who ministered at Holy Child Jesus Mission with Sister Thea, gathered in La Crosse, May 7. They took part in a morninglong interview session for Thea research. (See pp. 4-5 for Beth Erickson's article and photos from 4th annual Thea Bowman "Flavor of Soul" commemoration.)



Mississippi, above, Lr: Rev. Joseph Dyer, pastor Holy Child Jesus Church, Canton, Miss.; Juanyce Taylor, symposium coordinator, Charlene Smith, FSPA; Fabvienen Taylor, Mississippi Catholic reporter.

Pennsylvania: Charlene Smith, FSPA, and Derrick McGruder, Thea Scholar, Duquesne '03, currently a graduate student in social work. Derrick is from Canton, Miss.

FSPA, and Thea's long-time friend and companion, Dorothy Ann Kundinger, FSPA, enjoy the AGEM presidential

A look ahead to a 2005 Thea event.

banquet and each other's company. The 15th anniversary of Thea's "home going" is March 30, 2005. A festive "high church" liturgy at 10:30 a.m.,

on Wednesday, March 30, in Mary of the Angels Chapel, St. Rose Convent, La Crosse, will celebrate that event. Priests who served at Viterbo College (now University) while Thea was on the faculty will preside. Thea's kind of music will be performed by the renowned Viterbo University Concert Choir.

The delicious "Flavor of Soul" Southern cuisine lunch

Pennsylvania: Executive Director Mary Lou Jennings and Dr. Foundation Leonard Jennings of Hibbing, Minn., celebrate another successful fundraiser.

follows the liturgy.

By popular demand, "Friends of Thea" will lead discussions and showings of Thea videos at the university during the preceding week.

Times and places to be announced.

Everyone is welcome!



Wisconsin, standing, l-r: Mary Terway (sister of Rita Mae Fischer, FSPA, who taught at Holy Child Jesus School in the 1970s), Sisters Sarah Wiesneske, Mary Walter Heires, Rita Mae Fischer, Ruth Winnike, Virgina McCarville, Ann Pollpeter. Seated, I-r: Sisters Delberta Schmitz, Dorothy Pieper, Mary Avila Wittig.

Mississippi: Charlene Smith,

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Family and Friends Were Thea's Strengths

by Nancy Lafferty, FSPA

amilies: Black and Catholic, Catholic and Black is the text Thea Bowman, FSPA, created in 1985. She knew from the rich experience of her family and from all of the families she became a part of that her family was a great strength in her life. For Dr. Theon and Mrs. Mary Esther Bowman, their marriage was the foundation of their home. Thea's

education was their goal and treasure. Her family was the deep carrier of values that formed her in a strong tradition of faith and love.

The loving relationship between Dr. and Mrs. Bowman and between Thea and her parents was a great gift that they shared with me over the years. I became Thea's friend as a Viterbo College (University) student in 1953 and her classmate in the Franciscan Sisters of

Perpetual Adoration community when we were novices in 1956. After a bout with tuberculosis, from which she recovered in River Pines, Wis., she returned and joined our Vow Class of 1958. Thea and I lived together as first-year teachers at Blessed Sacrament School in La Crosse and continued on as friends until her death. Our Perpetual Vow Day, Aug. 10, 1963, and our Silver Jubilee, Aug. 10, 1983, were days that we celebrated together with our family and friends.

In the 1960s, Thea and I journeyed together through graduate studies at Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. We went to church together at St. Anthony Parish and Sts. Philip and Augustine Parish at the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. During the 1970s and 1980s, we supported each other in our teaching ministries. We exchanged our reflections in frequent letters. Of course, Thea's prayer often came to me in a song that she would write out:

Give me a clean heart, so I may serve You alone. Sometimes I'm up and sometimes I am down, Sometimes I am almost level to the ground. But please give me a clean heart, So that I may follow You.

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She had seen plenty of ups and downs even before I met her. I was witness to the many times she felt almost leveled to the ground. But it was the vitality of Thea's family that radiated into the lives of others.

In May 1979, Thea called and asked me to come to Canton, Miss., to live with her and her parents. I had been asked by FSPA leadership to be the principal at Holy Child Jesus School. So, I went to Canton and moved into the Bowman home at 136

Hill Street. By that time, Dr. and Mrs. Bowman were housebound, and Thea was caring for them while continuing her ministry in the Diocese of Jackson. During those years, the family experienced great private pain as Thea's parents became more limited in their physical abilities. But, they also shared deep public joy in seeing their daughter blossom in her sharing of the faith that they



College (University) student *The Bowman family (l-r): Mary Esther Bowman,* in 1953 and her classmate in *Sister Thea Bowman, and Dr. Theon Bowman.*

had nurtured in her.

When my own mother was diagnosed with cancer, I returned to my home in Sioux City, Iowa, to care for her. Thea wrote often, reminding me: "Mama says to tell you she can sympathize with you. Daddy says to welcome you to come back."

And, later, when her parents were nearing their own deaths, Thea wrote: "Mama continues about the same. Daddy is concerned about you, too."

So through it all, the faith and love of Thea's family remained a strong support to her and to everyone she met, especially to her friends.

In Thea's July 25, 1981 letter, she again reminded me: "I have prayed much for you of late. I, too, wonder what God is asking of you, calling to you." And, of course, she closed the letter with a song:

Your road may not be easy. He never said it would be. But, when it gets dark.

Can't find your way,

He told you just put your trust in Him.

That's why we're saying, "Lord, help us to hold out!"

Thea often would hum one of her favorite songs over the phone when we talked long distance

"Family and Friends..." continued on page 7



Nancy Lafferty, FSPA

Nancy A. Lafferty, FSPA, is a retreat director at Dorothy Day Retreat, 1701 South Cecilia Street, Sioux City, Iowa 51106. She has been giving retreats and doing spiritual direction there since 1990. She was principal at Holy Child Jesus School, Canton, Miss., from 1979-1981, and lived with the Bowman family during that time.

She completed 31 years of teaching and consulting in universities and colleges with the rank of professor, and before that taught and consulted in high schools and junior high schools from 1958-2004.

SECOND THEA ICON

by Beth Erickson

Prayer is like music—it filters through the air," said Malinda Gerke, FSPA, as

she prepared to play her harp at the 2004 Flavor of Soul event in La Crosse, Wis., on March 30.

Prayer and music alike serenaded the many in attendance at the annual event, which celebrates the life of Sister Thea Bowman on the anniversary of her death. And, appropriately so, as prayer and music were the key ingredients in the writing of the most recent icon of Sister Thea, which was unveiled at the event.

"The song, "This Little Light of Mine' kept going through my head," says the artist, Carlene Unser, FSPA. "I sang it over and over during the process. I let it sing in my heart."

But the inspiration wasn't immediate. In 1999, she was asked by Charlene Smith, FSPA, coordinator of the Thea Bowman Legacy, to write an icon of Thea. "Something stopped me then. I wasn't ready. But, I got up one morning and said. I'm going to write an icon of Thea today," says Sister

Carlene.

And that's when she pulled out the information on Thea that she was given, and she began to research, study, and pray. "In writing any icon, you begin with prayer and ask blessings on those who will pray with the icon or be with the icon—that no evil will come to them only goodness. It's part of the Iconographer's Prayer,"

she explains.

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Of course, her preparation was aided by the fact that Sister Carlene knew Thea. The two were professors at La Crosse's Viterbo College (now

University) at the same time—Sister Carlene in art and Thea in English. "I didn't know her as well as many others knew her, but I always thought that we were good friends, and we could always stop and tell a joke or share a laugh when we saw one another."

Sister Carlene remembers a time when Thea returned to La Crosse to visit after one of her missions. She came back in a wheelchair and "she just glowed. You could see the spirit working in her always. She had that

way, a special gift. Thea didn't lose gifts; she used them. So many of us have gifts and don't use them."

"You could see the spirit working in her always. She had that way, a special gift.
Thea didn't lose gifts;
she used them."

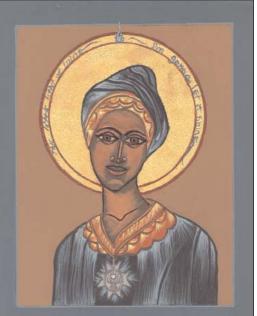
That visible spirit is exactly what provoked Sister Carlene into writing the icon of Thea—so she could share that depth of spirituality with others.

After doing several weeks of preparation and prayer, Sister Carlene began sketching, then traced the image onto a board, and began laying in all of the dark colors—progressively bringing the icon from dark to light. The painting process took around 70 hours to complete.

"As God brought the world from the darkness



- Turban—representing Thea's battle with cancer.
- Medal—representing her ties with the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration
- Dress—representing her African style.
- Words on Halo— "This little "light of mine. I'm gonna let it shine"— representing her gift of song.



"This Little Light of Mine," an icon of Sister Thea Bowman, was created by Carlene Unser, FSPA.



Talking about Thea at the 2004 Flavor of Soul event are (l-r) Doris O'Leary, Sister Carlene Unser, and Sister Mary Walter Heires.

INSPIRED BY SONG

into light, so we bring the image into the heavenly realm," explains Sister Carlene.

As she painted, she became more and more aware of the importance of light in the image, perhaps a result of her frequent singing of "This Little Light of Mine."

She says, "Life came into that image of Thea as I started working on the eyes—light. You are



Thea Bowman Legacy Coordinator Charlene Smith, FSPA, organized and led the 2004 Flavor of Soul event.

drawn into the image through the eyes."

But, it's important to remember that icons are not identical images of the human person. "It shouldn't look photographic," she explains. "Icons are windows into heaven and, therefore, you see the person as they are in heaven."

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Sister Carlene hopes that her new icon of Sister Thea, which now hangs at the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration Thea House in La Crosse, helps people come Thea know better.



Malinda Gerke, FSPA, soothed the audience with her renditions of Thea's favorite spirituals played on the harp.

"I hope it increases people's desire to know more about her," she says. •

Beth Erickson

Beth Erickson is a freelance writer, managing editor of Thea News, and editor of Coulee Region Women, a 15,000 circulation home and healthy living magazine distributed in the Greater
La Crosse area.

A graduate of
Viterbo University
with a major in
English and minor in
communications, Beth
is also a cancer survivor and met Sister
Thea Bowman when
the two were in
Washington, D.C., to
receive a National
Courage Award from
the American Cancer
Society in 1988.

Tips on Praying with Icons

raying with icons is an ancient custom and was once one of the two most important ways people learned of their faith, says Carlene Unser, FSPA. In fact, in the Eastern Orthodox Church, icons are recognized as scripture. They began being used at a time when many people couldn't read. "The people understood the scripture and their faith through the images," says Sister Carlene.

Today, the faithful are invited to pray with icons, but it's not as easy as it sounds. It takes a special knack to pray with the aid of an icon. "An icon is two dimensional. You're not allowed into it. In ordinary paintings, you can move around in the image layers with your eyes. In an icon, there

are no layers. The image blocks you."

So what's the secret? "You just gaze into it," says Sister Carlene. "You've got to be patient. And, after a while, something happens. Then you can start being in contemplation with that

person in the image. We need to be patient and to stay with it as we do with many jobs. Gazing is a simple way of being with another person," she adds.

Sister Carlene offers the following tips for interacting with icons:

- Listen to it
- Talk to it
- Ask it questions
- Be patient
- Allow the image to respond •

Thea Notes..

Namesakes

The rebuilt library at St. Peter



Recipients of the Thea Bowman Award from the Sister Thea Bowman School in East St. Louis on Jan. were (l-r): Bishop Wilton D. Gregory, Dorothy Vickers, and Jesse Gurley. 2004.

> The school reopened in 2001 after being closed for 13 years. The recently rebuilt library was dedicated to Sister Thea because of her commitment to education and cultural diversity.

Sister Georgette Gavioli of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Chestnut Hill, Penn., recently wrote us about her order's **Thea House**. On July 31, 1992, the sisters converted a lovely brick building into a convent and named it for Thea.

Siena College in Loudenville, N.Y., plans to open the Sister

Thea Bowman Center for Women this fall.



Among the sisters and postulants who have lived at Thea House convent in Chestnut Hill, Penn., are: front row, Rockville Center, 1-r: Sister Lynn Marie Ralph and N.Y., found a spe-Sister Georgette Gavioli. Back row, cial way to cele-1-r, Sister Febe (from Eltria), Sister brate. Cansalee Jane McKenna, and Sister Kay Coll.

Events & **Fundraisers**

Black Catholic History month is recognized each November and the people of

Johnson, working with the Ministry to Catholics of African Ancestry, created a special play, "Reaching Beyond the Break," illustrating a small portion of Sister Thea's Life.

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Approximately 225 people attended the Thea Bowman Award Benefit Dinner at Sister Thea Bowman Catholic School in East St. Louis, Ill., in February 2004. Recipients were: Bishop Wilton D. Gregory, for leadership and commitment to Catholic education; Dorothy Vickers for 25 years of Catholic school teaching dedication in the Belleville Diocese; and Jesse Gurley for more than 25 years of service to

Catholic education.

The Tabor Retreat Center in Oceanside, N.Y., was the site of a March 26-27, 2004, conference called "Praying with Sister Thea." The 24-hour retreat used the works of Sister Thea and the power of the Sister Thea

Bowman Mass Diocesan Gospel Choir's music to encourage prayer and build community so retreatants are better prepared to face life's challenges.

"I Am Somebody," a Sister Thea Bowman Memorial Celebration, was held April 25, 2004, at Holy Child Jesus Parish in Canton, Miss. Father Joseph Dyer, pastor of Holy Child Jesus and Sacred Heart Parish, was the speaker. The Sister Thea Bowman Youth Memorial Choir and other choirs participated.

St. Peter Claver Catholic School in St. Paul awards a Sister Thea Bowman, FSPA, Award each year to a student who exemplifies the spirit of educational excellence and the charism of Sister Thea.

In Print

The 2004 Kuemper Catholic School's 50th Anniversary publication, Happy Birthday Kuemper, included a photo of Sister Thea from when she was a guest at the 50th graduation ceremony of St. Bernard School in Breda, Iowa, in

The Little Black Book, a Lenten companion booklet by Bishop Ken



Pictured above are the retreatants from the 'Praying with Sister Thea" weekend held March 26-27, 2004, at the Tabor Retreat Center in Oceanside, N.Y.

> Untener (published in 2004 by the Diocese of Saginaw) featured a March 30 (the day of her home going) reflection on Sister Thea.

Announcement

Sister Thea Bowman School in East St. Louis, Ill., has a new principal—Sister Janet McCann, a member of the Adorers of the Blood of Christ. •

Tell us your Thea news: Thea News, 912 Market Street, La Crosse, WI 54601-8800 or email theanews@fspa.org.

"Thea: Friend, Teacher, Colleague" continued from page 1

homie right? We don't have to have a podium to preach. We can preach in our living room." That way she reached everyone.

Kathi: "Each one teach one" was her theme. **Jennette:** Her message was "We are all one."

Lee Etta: Speaking as a black woman of faith, she would say, "We have a long ways to go." She spoke to all people who struggled, speaking about racism, "We are all God's children. The same sun shines on all of us." She would say simple things to help people see how useless it was for them to get bogged down in this racism thing—like, a goose knows when to fly south in winter, and fly north in summer, these are basic things. Yet the basic things such as men and women getting along have not yet been reached.

Thea as Teacher

Kathi: She was a wonderful teacher. She knew so much. She could assess people very well. It didn't take her long to figure out what you were capable of and push you to do it. She really challenged you. I loved her classes. She would start her classes with a song. Jesus is on the phone line, call him up and tell him what you want. Or, Who did swallow Jonah?—a call and response in class, she'd get us involved. I was always really happy to go to her class. She knew everyone, Shakespeare to Milton. She taught black literature when it was just beginning to be taught. She had a very dialectical method. She would definitely engage people in talking and in making an interchange in class.

Kathi: Once in class, a student asked, "What is folks?" Thea responded, "We're all folks together."

Marilyn: She took us to Shakespeare plays in Madison, Milwaukee, and the Twin Cities. She was serious about Shakespeare. When she would get up in front of the class, she would say, "When we speak of Shakespeare, we bow our heads." I always thought that was funny coming from a nun. She

revered Shakespeare and you couldn't say anything negative about Shakespeare.

Kathi: She had a natural gift or talent for performance. She could captivate a class or audience.

Sister Mary Walter: And yet, she found teaching high school kids very difficult. She was asked to teach biology, which was not her field. She taught it hard all week and gave a quiz at the end of it, and they all practically failed. She said, "We are going to do it next week." And next week, she hammered it again, but it didn't get any better. She couldn't see how kids could go to school and not study.

Challenging others

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Kathi: She had little tolerance for people who didn't put forth good effort. She wanted to see effort.

Lee Etta: She would put the burden on the students to challenge themselves. She was frustrated that enough people were not challenging themselves to get better.

Sister Rita Mae: She had such ideals for students. She often came home dejected when teaching high school. College was better for her.

Jennette: What amazed me was how being a nun, she could get up in the pulpit in most churches. For so many years, Catholic churches didn't even allow women to be in the pulpit. She was basically up there preaching.

Kathi: She had this ability to connect with people at a very human level. It didn't matter what color, nationality, or where you were from, she just looked at you as a human being. I think people felt that from her. •

Cristeen Custer, director of communications for the FSPA, never met Sister Thea, but has been keenly interested in learning more about her legacy since those who knew her speak so passionately about her.



"Family and Friends Were Thea's Strengths" continued from page 3

between Canton and Sioux City—like: I don't believe He brought me this far just to leave me.

On the back of the St. Francis plaque that she sent me before her death, she wrote: "God bless and keep you. Francis pray for you. PEACE. SUR-RENDER. JOY. May you ever be His own true joy

and daughter." And in her last letter to me, Thea summed up all that family and friends meant to her: "Thanks for all you've been to us. God keep you in the palm of His hand. Love, Thea."

To the end, she was a true daughter to her family and a true friend. •

Thea Bowman



1937-1990

Sister Thea (nee Bertha Bowman) was a native of Canton, Miss., and the granddaughter of a slave. At age 9, she chose to become Catholic and then attended a new mission school taught by the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. At 15, she went to La Crosse, Wis., to become a Franciscan Sister.

She is known for helping bring the richness of black culture and spirituality, as well as the message of community and equality, to the Catholic Church and to society.

A scholar, teacher, singer, poet, story-teller, preacher, and performer, Thea traveled the country, spreading her message in hundreds of venues. She developed breast cancer at 46, but continued her public appearances choosing, as she said, "to live until I die." She died in 1990 at 52.



Want to read Thea News on the Web?

You'll find it at: www.fspa.org. Click on "FSPA News" and scroll to

"Thea News."



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Resources on Thea are Readily Available

Sister Thea: Ole-Time Religion: A series of four videos designed for grade 6-adult, there are eight 15-minute segments that capture Sister Thea's unique style of singing and preaching. \$29.95/video Treehaus Communications, Inc. 800-638-4287; www.treehaus1.com; treehaus1@fuse.net.

Sister Thea: Her Own Story: Made shortly before her death, this video explores Thea's childhood, calling, and aspirations for humanity. It contains interviews with Thea and her friends. 50 minutes. \$29.95. 800-233-4629.





Almost Home: Living with Suffering and Dying: An Emmy, Gabriel, Wilbur, and Angel Award winning video, this shares Sister Thea's own words about her personal experience of living with a terminal illness. 30 minutes. \$39.95. Liguori Publications. 800-325-9521.

Sister Thea Bowman Shooting Star: Edited by Sister Celestine Cepress, FSPA, and with a forward by Mike Wallace, this book has selected writings and speeches of Sister Thea's. \$9.95. ISBN 0-9671699-0-9. Viterbo University Bookstore. 800-482-2455.

Thea, Joyous Troubadour of God: Created by

Maryam Gossling, FSPA, this icon is available in greeting cards for \$1 per card; 11"x14" posters, \$15; 4"x5" plaques, \$12.50; 11"x14" plaques, \$25. Add \$3.50 for shipping and handling for orders up to \$15—\$4.50 for larger orders. Send to Maryam Gossling, 2060 Edgewood Road, NW #10, Cedar Rapids, IA 52405; call 319-360-2559; or email gosslingmaryam@mcleodusa.net. •

