

Thea News

VOLUME 1 NUMBER 2 2002



I pledge
allegiance
to the destiny
of Black
people,
to the Red,
Black,
and Green.
I give
my life
and love
to my people.
I promise
to keep
an open mind
toward
all people,
to seek
the goals
of unity and
community,
to stand up for
what is right
from now
until
Judgment
Day!

An eighth grade class from
Father Bertrand School,
Memphis, Tenn.

Celebrating Life with Thea

by Beth Erickson

It was courage that first brought us together. By us, I mean Sister Thea Bowman and me. She was a “shooting star” and I was a shy and awkward 17 year old. It was March 1988 and the two of us were being honored by the American Cancer Society at their National Courage Award celebration in Washington, D.C. She was the state of Mississippi’s Courage Award recipient and I was Wisconsin’s.

The award was presented to those who had shown “unusual courage” in the fight against cancer. I hardly felt worthy of the award. After all, it had been 10 years since I’d been diagnosed. I’d been cancer-free for eight years. I was no longer “in the trenches.” I was still alive while many of my friends with cancer were not. “How am I courageous now?” I wondered.

But Thea, she was another story. Thea was still battling cancer. I use the term battle because it is a fight. You are fighting not only to keep your body alive, you are fighting to not be looked on with pity. You are fighting to keep your spirits high. And there was no one with higher spirits than Thea.

By accounts, she would have been about 50 then. But, oh, she looked young—and beautiful. The funny thing is that I can hardly recall our first encounter that week. But what I do remember is a wheelchair and a radiant woman with an amazing smile. Even when her mouth wasn’t set in a grin, she smiled. She did it with her eyes. There was light there. There was fire. There was passion. And it was all Thea.

My mom approached her first. She knew of Thea through my great aunt, Sister Laurella Seipel, who worked with Thea in Canton, Miss., for several years. It was this connection that brought us together. My mother, a nurse and an amazing woman herself, immediately took Thea under her wing.

For those few days in Washington, Mom, Dad, and I would pick Thea up at her room and wheel her wherever she needed to be. Together, we attended a celebration dinner



Beth (Jaekel) Erickson and Sister Thea Bowman visit at the American Cancer Society Celebration of Life awards dinner in Washington, D.C., 1988.



Thea made new friends wherever she went—at the same event, she also found fellowship with other black cancer survivors.

“Celebrating Life,” continued on page 3

From the TBL Coordinator

September 1, 2002

Photo: Jolyce Greleman, FSPA



Charlene Smith, FSPA

Dear Friends of Thea,

Glowing notes and letters from many readers of the premier issue of *Thea News* told us that you prize our efforts—through the newsletter—to hand on the legacy of Sister Thea Bowman, FSPA (1937-1990). Thank you for that. We thank our FSPA congregation for providing resources to pursue this important ministry.

Thea continues to inspire authors. We are excited about the acclaimed all-new *Lives of the Saints: From Mary and Francis of Assisi to John XXIII and Mother Teresa*, by Richard McBrien, the Crowley-O'Brien-Walter Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame. (HarperCollins, June 2001. 672 pages, \$34.) “In addition to offering a lively, contemporary account of saints, McBrien recognizes there is a more universal understanding of sanctity: Catholics whose holiness has not yet been formally acclaimed, such as Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Mother Teresa, Thea Bowman, and Oscar Romero. McBrien also addresses the political nature of the canonization process and argues that there is a need to expand the ranks of saints to properly include women, Asians, Africans, married people, and those who identify with the poor and the oppressed.”

African Americans, those in Catholic and Franciscan communities, and many others, remind us they dream about Thea canonization proceedings. To foster that process, some Friends of Thea want to create a Thea guild. In the future, *Thea News* may serve as a conduit for that guild.

From all over the U.S., our office receives inquiries about our beloved Thea. It is gratifying to hear about prayer services in her honor, about religion textbooks that feature her life as an example for youth in America, about presentations on her life at church events.

We celebrate, on Dec. 29, 2002, the 65th birth anniversary of this remarkable woman. Friends of Thea plan to mark the occasion with galas and memorials. Join them.

Looking ahead, the 3rd annual Thea “Flavor of Soul” Commemoration will be on Wednesday, April 2, 2003. “Flavor of Soul” cuisine will be served for the enjoyment of participants at the FSPA motherhouse and Viterbo University. For the centerpiece of the occasion, we are delighted to announce famed Thea artist, Michael O’Neill McGrath, OSFS, www.beestill.com, will present “An Evening with Thea,” in the Fine Arts Center, Viterbo University, La Crosse, Wis. Spirited gospel music by the Viterbo Concert Choirs under the direction of Daniel Johnson-Wilmot will give a “Thea” musical background to McGrath. Join us.



Photo: Hilbert Stanley

Sister Charlene and Michael McGrath in March 2001.

And now I want you to meet our new *Thea News* editor, Beth Erickson. Beth comes with singular qualifications: great writer, excellent communication and computer skills, and, best of all, a unique relationship with Thea. (See story p. 1.) Welcome aboard, Beth! In mid summer, Beth spent some days in New Orleans. On the campus of Xavier University, she was the guest of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies, www.xula.edu, one of Thea’s most-loved programs. Watch for stories in the March issue about her experiences with the Institute, its instructors, its students, and Thea’s active “presence” there.

Six thousand copies of the *Thea News* premier issue were circulated in the spring of 2002. This issue and subsequent issues will circulate primarily online at www.fspa.org.

I know that you will read every word of this *Thea News* issue and be transformed by Thea.

— Charlene Smith, FSPA

“Celebrating Life”

continued from page 1

where we mingled with singer Leslie Uggams and the late actress Jill Ireland (who was receiving a courage award for her battle with breast cancer), and Ireland’s husband actor Charles Bronson. We had lunch with our state representatives. And, since the First Lady was also receiving a courage award, we had an audience with her and President Reagan in the White House Rose Garden.

The week was a whirlwind of activity and we all felt a sense of wonder that we were a part of such an incredible celebration of life. Being with Thea made it even more special. She told us about Canton and her busy schedule of appearances. We talked about Viterbo and the changes that had taken place there since she last visited. She encouraged me to attend Viterbo University and sang the praises of its English department.

Being with Thea was like being with a friend. It was comfortable but at the same time, you knew she’d help keep you in line if necessary. Just like family and friends would. In fact, during that trip, Thea called us her “family away from home.” We were lucky to be with her and we knew it.

I never saw Thea again after our time in Washington, D.C., but I did write to her. We struck up a correspondence that spanned the two years until her death. Because she was so ill, many of her letters were form letters, but there were handwritten notes on several. In one dated November 1989, Thea thanked me for my strength and courage. Imagine. Thea thanked me for my strength and courage. Me. This incredible woman who had been battling cancer for five years, while maintaining such

an inspirational passion for life, was thanking a girl who battled cancer for a mere two years—and survived.

I have no idea what I wrote to Thea to inspire such encouraging words. I can only imagine them as the somewhat careless words of a teenager trying to do a little of everything all at once. A teen who wanted so badly to live a normal life that she wanted to wish away the fact that she’d had cancer. Pretend, for even a moment, that it didn’t happen to her. To take those two years back and fill them instead with laughter, play, friendships, and nonsense.

I didn’t get it then. But Thea knew. She knew that while cancer itself was a battle, survivors have other battles to face. She knew that the fear takes a long, long time to leave. She knew that only those that had been there could truly understand. And, in her own inimitable way, Thea was telling me I had strength and courage. And that would see me through.

Though I knew Thea only briefly—and not at all very well—I miss her. We all miss her. But we know she’s still reaching out to people around the world with her legacy of words, songs, and memories that remain alive in our hearts and minds. And we know she’s there, lighting up heaven with her smile, and helping us “keep on keepin’ on.” ●



Beth Erickson

Beth (Jaekel) Erickson is a 1993 Viterbo University graduate with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. Beth was diagnosed in 1978 with Ewing’s sarcoma, a type of bone cancer, and immediately underwent radiation therapy followed by two years of chemotherapy. She has been cancer-free for 22 years. You can reach her by email at berickson@fspa.org.

Editor’s Note: This article was reprinted with permission. It originally appeared in the June 2000 issue of Viterbo University’s Strides magazine.

More on Pan-African Colors...

Comprised of the oldest colors known to humankind, the colors of Pan-Africanism are an ancient symbol of Black hope and pride.

The red stands for the land lost by black people through bloodshed and suffering. Black represents the black people of

the world and green stands for the luxuriance and fertility of the black homeland—Africa.

According to the Kwanzaa Information Center Web site, Pan-African colors were “resurrected by the Hon. Marcus Garvey, father of African Nationalism, as

the symbol of the struggling sons and daughters of Africa, wherever they may be.”

Since the African Nationalism movement took root, the colors have been adopted by many African states and as a symbol of Africans in America.

Illinois School Models Sister Thea's Spirit

by Maria Friedman, FSPA

Pre-school graduation is quite an occasion at Sister Thea Bowman Catholic School in East St. Louis, Ill. The whole school gathers, along with parents and grandparents, siblings and aunts and uncles, all in their best attire, cameras in hand. The church hall buzzes with excitement and then hushes as the graduates march down the aisle in yellow caps and gowns and then,

ity of worshipping in their style. And, Gardner finds her an ideal model for students. "I like to point out Sister Thea's emphasis on excellence, the idea that you can become what you want, that we are called to something higher and can meet our dreams," she says.

But meeting those dreams is a challenge. The tuition for a single child is \$270 a month and, for two children, \$445—a total of \$2,430 or \$4,005 per family per year. All students are African American and, though they come from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds, that amount of money is daunting for most of them. The Diocese of Belleville provides \$190,000 per year, but they have not been able to increase this amount for several years and costs continue to rise. The

only tuition assistance available is a \$15,000 grant given annually by Daughters of Charity.

But the parents find the school worth their efforts. They appreciate a place that offers their children a solid education, treats them with

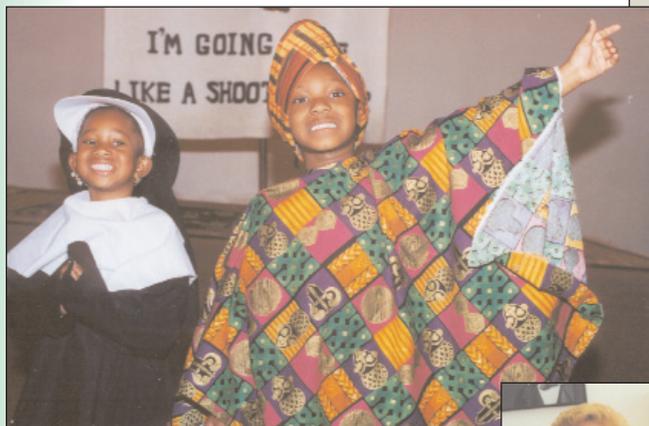
respect and calls them to high standards.

Gardner has spent a lifetime in Catholic education at both the elementary and high school level. Only 15 students at Thea Bowman are Catholic, but one thing that strikes Gardner is the centrality of religion in the lives of the students in this school. "The faith life of these people is so strong," she says. "It's just woven into their lives." As a result, she says "Kids love anything to do with religion, with gospel music" and "Religion classes are a joy."

She thinks one of the strengths of the school is offering students a sense of stability. "We're a very fixed thing in their lives, for some the only fixed thing, something they can count on and trust," she says.

She thinks the school has an important role also in helping students deal with aggression. "Many have had to learn to fight for what is theirs. We try to teach the one who didn't start the fight how to handle it,"

Photo: Deanne Stratmann, SSND



Students at the Sister Thea Bowman Catholic School (STBCS) portray the saintly folks connected to their school during the All Saints Day liturgy each year. Above: Carolyn Ross (left) and Grace Robinson (right) play the part of Sister Thea. Above right: Pre-school students enjoy the play area at STBCS. At right: Principal Alice Gardner meets with Tywana Young, mother of sixth-grader Lesley Moore.

under the direction of teacher Lynn Vandiver, demonstrate—according to the letters of the alphabet—the songs, stories and knowledge they mastered in the past year.

A visitor is keenly aware she is in an institution that has an immense energy and pride, a remarkable class, and spirit-appropriate qualities for a school that in 1990 became the first school to place itself under the patronage of Sister Thea Bowman.

As the school—pre-school through eighth grade—begins its 14th year, there are projected to be 200 students, 11 classrooms, 13 teachers, and eight other staff persons. (Enrollment is down from last year's 250 students because, in the depressed economy, a significant number of parents have lost their jobs.)

Alice Gardner has been principal for the past three years. She thinks Sister Thea fulfilled a need that no one else had, offering black Catholics the opportun-

rit and Spreads Her Message

she says, and then adds, "However, we don't want to take away their spirit. They will need it out in the world."

One feature that contributes toward stability is the school's "6:30 to 6" program. Students can get help with their homework at school. Last year, 12 students took advantage of the early morning time.

Over 100 students were present from 3 to 5 p.m. each day and 13 remained until 6 o'clock, with both homework and sports part of the after-school programs.

Teri Garner, who operates one of the dining rooms at a nearby casino, appreciates this feature. "I'm a working mother. I need that," she says. But she appreciates other things as well. "They treat you like family," she says, noting how important this is because both her children have asthma. She is pleased, too, that her son Darryl, now going into the seventh grade, is reading and that he loves math.

Parents are an important part of the school, where they are involved in fundraising, field trips, and the sports program. "I would like to see even more," says Gardner.

Gardner is proud of the improvement in math skills that students have made in recent years. She is looking forward to the results of the October Terra Nova (standardized test) scores to verify the movement forward. This coming school year the concentration will be on writing skills.

Both staff and teachers are important in allowing the school to achieve its goals. "We do hugs here," says school secretary Elizabeth Roberts (Ms. Liz) as first grader Jesse Beemon reaches up to receive one.

Brandy DeBusk finished her second year as kindergarten teacher last year. "I love it here. I have a lot of academic freedom. I'm given guidelines for

what I need to teach but I can do it as I please." She also likes "the cohesiveness of the faculty" and enjoys the occasional nights they clear tables at a local ice cream shop and a pizza



Above: Brianna Hill participates in the school's graduation ceremony. At right: Fourth-grade teacher Deborah Scates (standing) instructs students in her classroom (left to right) Tamejeia Jackson, Charles Cooper, Ahymber Cox, and Shaniece Williams.



Above: Proof that "we do hugs here," last year's kindergarten student Tia Ingram sits on the lap of Stormy Hunt, who assists in the classroom each morning as part of a federally funded Foster Grandparent Program.



place to receive 20 percent of the profits as a school fundraiser.

Students leave eighth grade with a good preparation for high school. Approximately half of them go on to attend Althoff Catholic High School in nearby Belleville, and the remaining students attend various public schools.

As a teacher herself, Sister Thea Bowman had a great concern for African American children, that they know their dignity as human beings, experience pride in their African American heritage, become aware of their gifts, and be allowed to make their unique contribution to society. Sister Thea Bowman Catholic School is making that happen for children in East St. Louis, Ill. ●



Maria Friedman, FSPA

*Maria Friedman is a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration and was the editor for the first issue of **Thea News**.*

She lives in La Crosse, Wis. and is the North American Coordinator for the Global Awareness Through Experience (GATE) Program.

Thea Notes...

Serving Others With Love

Fifty women were honored during the annual Sister Thea Bowman Awards Luncheon

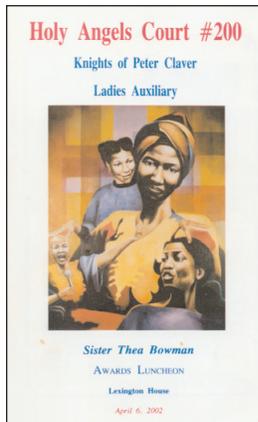
on April 6, 2002, at the Lexington House in Hickory Hills, Ill.

The women, from the church and civic community,

received the Sister Thea Bowman Humanitarian Award for their work ministering among God's people.

For the first time this year, honorees included non-Catholics. Among those receiving the award was M. Roland Lagarde from the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, one of the founding members of the National Black Sister's Conference (NBSC). Sister Lagarde met Thea in August of 1968 at the first NBSC at Carlow College in Pittsburgh.

"This honor is special to me and I am grateful for having been chosen to receive it because I knew Thea personally and for many, many



years. It challenges me to keep on serving others for the love of God as Thea did and it affirms my efforts thus far," says Lagarde.

The annual awards luncheon is sponsored by the Ladies' Auxiliary of the Knights of St. Peter Claver Court #200 of Holy Angels Church in Chicago.

If you have information for *Thea News*, we would appreciate your taking the time to let us know. Drop us a note at *Thea News*, 912 Market Street, La Crosse, WI 54601-8800 or email theanews@fspa.org.

2nd Annual "Flavor of Soul"

With a little bit of that "Old-time Religion," some good friends and good food, more than 350 people honored the memory of Sister Thea Bowman on the 12th anniversary of her death during the annual "Flavor of Soul" celebration held at St. Rose Convent in La Crosse, Wis.

The event on Wednesday, April 10, kicked off with several of Thea's favorite spirituals sung by her longtime friend Daniel Johnson-Wilmot, a music professor at Viterbo University. Then, Maryam Gossling, FSPA, unveiled and explained the icon she wrote of Sister Thea. Guests were treated to a soul-food meal in the convent's dining room. Students at neighboring Viterbo also enjoyed a "Flavor of Soul" lunch. Menus included: praline chicken, baked catfish, collard greens, sweet potato fries, and pecan pie. For information on "Flavor of Soul" 2003, see page 2 of this issue.



Sister Thea icon

Thea in Print

Sister Thea Bowman: A Child of God is a new 4-page pamphlet that details the life and work of Thea.

Part of the "Celebrating Women Witnesses" series by FutureChurch and Call to Action, the essays and prayer services celebrate the lives and works of 12 holy women including Thea, Clare of Assisi, Dorothy Day, Mary of Nazareth, and Therese of Lisieux.

Reprints are available for \$1 each. Contact FutureChurch at 15800

Montrose Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44111; 216.228.0869; info@futurechurch.org; www.futurechurch.org.

Recent books that feature Sister Thea Bowman include:

All Saints by Robert Ellsberg. Crossroads Publishing Company, 1999.

Leading Ladies: Transformative Biblical Images for Women's Leadership by Jeanne Porter, Innisfree Press, 2000.

Lives of the Saints: From Mary and Francis of Assisi to John XXIII and Mother Teresa by Richard McBrien. HarperCollins, 2001.

Prayer with Searchers and Saints by Edward F. Gabriele. St. Mary's Press, 1998.

Praying with Visionary Women by Bridget Mary Meehan. Sheed and Ward, 1999.

Remarkable Women Remarkable Wisdom by Mary Frances Gangloff, OSF. St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2001.

Twentieth Century Apostle by Phyllis Zagano. Liturgical Press, 1999.

Why Not Become Fire by Evelyn Mattern and Helen Brancato. Ave Maria Press, 1999.

Women Shaping Church History by Lynn Figueroa. Harcourt Religion Publishers, 2001.

Other books about Thea you may find interesting are:

Leaning on the Lord: A Retreat with Thea Bowman and Bede Abram by Joseph A. Brown, SJ. St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1991.

Sister Thea Bowman, Shooting Star: Selected Writings and Speeches, Celestine Cepress, FSPA, editor. St. Mary's Press, 1993.

Thea Bowman Handing on Her Legacy by Christian Koontz, RSM. Sheed and Ward, 1991.

Just Call Me Maria

by Maria Harden, CSJ

The majority of people do not expect a woman of color to be a Catholic sister. Whoopi Goldberg and *Sister Act* aside, it simply isn't a part of their real-life experience. I've actually had people give me looks of disbelief and say, "I've never heard of a black sister," out loud in my presence. There are only two African American sisters in my community.

I had the great grace of meeting Sister Thea Bowman twice. On the second occasion, we were attending a liturgy workshop in New York. I told her that I was entering a predominantly white community. She said, "You go, girl! You'll have struggles, but you can do it!" To Thea, being a woman of color and becoming a part of a community of women religious was something worth doing. She was such a role model for reaching out beyond her culture. She was always teaching others about African American culture and learning about their cultures.

In my third grade classroom, I make an effort to let my mostly African American students learn about other traditions.

My hope and dream is to see more women and men of color becoming sisters, brothers, and priests. Until very recently, people of color weren't accepted in religious life. I think my father might have become priest if conditions had been different in his younger years.

Racism is everywhere in the United States, and that includes religious communities. When she first met me, one of our sisters said, "When I was a child, we lived next door to a colored family. They were very clean." On another occasion, I encountered a visitor in a private hallway of our motherhouse. She stepped away from me in obvious fear. "Are you one of the sisters?" she asked in a shocked tone. I nodded, and she prattled on, "I think all black people are God's children." To which I quickly replied, "That's wonderful because I think all white people are God's children." I think she then understood her mistake and became flustered. I smiled and gently helped her to find the sister she wanted to visit.

We all know how subtle racism can be. I sometimes experience racism in the rejection of my cooking. The food and seasonings I grew up with

are not acceptable to many of my white sisters. For a while, I wore my hair in braids. I was told that it "wasn't professional." My roots are African American and Hispanic on my father's side and African American, Scotch, and Cherokee on my mother's side. I wish I knew more about my Scottish and Cherokee ancestors, but we know next to nothing about them.

It irritates me when I am expected to be the expert on black people. Do I ask any of my sisters to tell me what Irish or Italian people think about this or that issue? Sometimes even words of encouragement bother me because I wonder if the sister really thinks I am falling short of some goal or ideal. Then I feel the need to prove to myself that I am as good as the other sisters. It is a painful, self-defeating cycle.

There are constant reminders that I am different. Even going to the grocery store is a challenge. At the checkout one day, I picked up several of the grocery bags as another sister was paying for them. A woman said to me, "Those aren't yours!" in a manner that suggested I was stealing them. "We're together," I told her.

And, finally, that is the truth of it. Despite our differences, we are together. I am a Sister of St. Joseph. For some unknown reason, God called me here. Right before my first vows, I remember looking out at the sisters while proclaiming the Word during the liturgy. Suddenly, it struck me: "I love these women!"

Then I had an insight: "None of them wants to cause me pain." Not too long after that, Sister Clemmie (Clement Marie), who was in her nineties, came up to me with tears in her eyes and said, "I am so sorry I hurt you." And I said, "Clemmie, when did you hurt me?"

"They told me I hurt you by calling you colored. I didn't know that was wrong."

I replied, "Clemmie, you didn't hurt me. I love you. From now on, just call me Maria." ●

Editor's Note: This article, originally printed in *Giving Voice*, a newsletter by women religious under 50, was reprinted with permission. Maria Harden, CSJ, is a teacher at St. Benedict the Moor School in Pittsburgh.

Thea
Bowman
1937-1990



Photo: Patricia Tehippe, FSPA

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, storyteller, 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/
whoware and
clicking on "FSPA
News."



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What You're Saying about *Thea News*:

"Thea News is great. Beautiful in appearance, newsy, and up-to-the-minute. Just what the movement needs!"

—Mary Walter Heires, FSPA
Staff
Villa St. Joseph, La Crosse

credence by her voice. Thea's stories, songs, and dance compelled the Catholic Church to look at Black Catholics with new attitudes and lenses."

—Eva Regina Martin, SSF
Director
Institute for Black Catholic Studies
New Orleans

"Words cannot fully express my joy in receiving and reading the first issue of your newsletter dedicated to the memory of Sister Thea Bowman...your newsletter keeps her legacy of evangelization and spirituality alive for us."

—Deacon Ken Greene
Director
Family Life, Diocese of Kansas City

*"When I read each page of **Thea News**, I talked with her."*

—Leila Spaulding, SA
Diocese of Salt Lake City

"We are happy when an acknowledgement of the marvelous epic memory of Thea is given honor and purpose. At the Institute for Black Catholic Studies, we will always cherish the name of Sister Thea Bowman. Thea gave Black Catholics defining moments and ultimate

"Quite by chance but certainly by the will of God (I have no doubt my dear friend Thea had a heavenly hand in it!), I somehow came across a copy of the brochure on Thea. I could have danced for joy!!! Thank you for bringing her holiness and timely message to the attention of many."

—Mary Dolorine Pires, SSCC
Sisters of the Sacred Hearts, Honolulu