

The amazing grace of Sister Thea

Book chronicles inspired life of Franciscan nun

By **GERI PARLIN**
gparlin@lacrossetribune.com

Anyone who ever met Sister Thea Bowman already knew she was a person of amazing grace.

For those who never had the opportunity, Sister Charlene Smith, FSPA, and John Feister have written "Thea's Song: The Life of Thea Bowman."

Sister Thea died of cancer in 1990, but as the book proves, she certainly is not forgotten.

Sister Charlene was a classmate of Sister Thea's when both studied to join the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in the 1950s. But their backgrounds couldn't have been more different.

Thea had come to La Crosse from Mississippi, despite her parents' fears about sending their only child north into a white community.

But Thea would not be denied. Even at 15, she knew her destiny and that began with study at St. Rose Convent in La Crosse.

For Sister Charlene, the book was a way to immerse herself in the goodness of Thea's life and thoughts as she immersed herself in

research, reading everything she could find that Thea had written. And though she studied alongside her all those years ago, there was so much she didn't know about Sister Thea.

La Crosse was far outside Thea's experience, Sister Charlene said, but the young nun won over stony hearts and ignorant minds with the power of her personality and the strength of her love.

"She had to do everything we did, only she had to do it better," Sister Charlene said.

"Her parents would not allow her to accept any indignity. ... They tried to teach her that the problem was whites were ignorant. That's really the truth, isn't it?" Sister Charlene said.

"I knew she was special just because she was so incredibly talented and she was so funny. She struck me as an old soul — wise beyond her years," Sister Charlene said, and that's probably because Sister Thea spent a lot of time around her elders.

"She was treated so well by her elders that she wanted elders to be respected."

Beyond that, though, was Sister Thea's capacity to reach out in love to everyone, Sister Charlene said. Not just to friends, but to those who would be enemies.

"There was something magnetic about her. She could sing the song



BY THE BOOK

BOOK: "Thea's Song: The Life of Thea Bowman"

AUTHORS: Sister Charlene Smith, FSPA, and John Feister

RECEPTION: 4 to 6 p.m. May 13 at St. Rose Convent, 701 Franciscan Way; free

BOOK AVAILABLE: Sophia Bookstore inside the Franciscan Spirituality Center, Viterbo University Bookstore and online at www.amazon.com

that was in your heart even when you didn't know the melody. She said herself she had a gift ... it enabled her to help people make their lives better."

And despite all the injustices she encountered as a black woman, it was not Thea's way to respond in anger, Sister Charlene said.

"I think back, and I would have exploded if I had been treated the way she had been treated."

Thea was powerful, Sister Charlene said, because she knew that love is power. "The important thing is to love, and she really learned to love. I think the thing that fueled her was gospel music. She took that literally. She could sing those songs and she knew them

all." She once challenged a gathering of bishops by singing, "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," Sister Charlene said, because she wanted the bishops to understand how mistreated blacks were.

Sister Charlene said she recently was struck by something said during a visit to a memorial for Sister Thea.

"Father Maurice, who succeeded Thea in teaching preaching at the Institute for Black Catholic Studies, Xavier University, New Orleans, delivered a lively, inspirational homily about Thea, saying, 'She knew who she was and whose she was — a beloved child of her parents and of God.'"