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Noting a life of service God and the Church

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Iowa City native Sister Micheline Curtis celebrates 50 years of serving God and the church. **Press-Citizen / Rob Daniel**

Going to church while growing up was such a regular occurrence for Sister Micheline Curtis that the event found its way into her playtime with friends.

"We used to play church a lot," she said. "They tell me I always insisted I be the priest."

Church and faith were such big components in the life of the Iowa City native that while a student at the now defunct Marycrest College in

Davenport, she decided to become a nun. She said much of her inspiration came from watching the nuns who ran the women's college.

"I admired the sisters," Curtis, 69, said. "I liked teaching. I liked the idea of being identified with a group. All that religious atmosphere and training (had an impact)."

Her decision occurred in 1957, and at 2 p.m. June 24, she and 18 other Sisters at the Congregation of Humility of Mary in Davenport will celebrate their Jubilees. The occasion will be marked with a special Mass presided over by Bishop Martin Amos of the Davenport Diocese.

"I remember when I was a young Sister, I thought people who were celebrating their Jubilee were rather old," Curtis said with a laugh. "They're not as old anymore."

Curtis grew up in Iowa City where her and her family attended Mass at St. Wenceslaus Parish. While religion was not a "fanatic thing" in her household, she said attendance at Mass and religious education classes was expected for her brother, Timothy.

"We said the rosary in our home during Lent," she said. "If we didn't know (the religious lessons), we couldn't go out on Friday or Saturday night without knowing them. Religion was not something you did at Christmas and Easter. It was a daily and weekly thing."

After graduating from City High in 1956, Curtis moved on to Marycrest College to become a teacher. Inspired by her life in the Church and the Sisters at Marycrest, she decided to join the order. She said her parents were surprised, especially considering the strict rules governing nuns at the time that included visits home once every three years. However, she said they eventually supported her decision.

"They never stood in the way," Curtis said. "For family members, it was a matter of pride."

She began her new life at the congregation in Ottumwa, where it was located until moving to Davenport in 1982. Housed in a former naval air station due to a fire of the convent's historic building, Curtis and the other "apostulates" took their vows of chastity, obedience and devotion in 1960, an occasion marked with an elaborate ceremony.

"You put on a wedding dress," she said. "About midway through the ceremony, you left and changed into the habit with a white veil."

Curtis eventually returned to college, earning a degree in English in 1965. She then began teaching, first in Ottumwa and followed by stops in Rock Island, Ill., Phoenix and Council Bluffs. After a four-year stop at Regina High in Iowa City, where she taught government and social studies, she moved on to Montini Catholic High in Lombard, Ill., where she spent the next 25 years helping the school achieve a 98 percent graduation rate, a high point among Chicago area schools. She said schools changed a lot during those years.

"The Catholic schools still insist on uniforms and rules," Curtis said. "Some kind of structure was required. I've noticed some public schools have joined in (with uniforms). I think we did something right."

She left her mark on students and others around her, said Sister Ann Therese Collins, who presided over the Humility of Mary community from 1976 to 1984.

"She was a great teacher," Collins said. "She was very demanding, but she got the results she wanted."

A stroke forced her to retire in 1999. However, fueled by a love of history, she became the assistant archivist at the Humility of Mary center, where she oversees historical documents, memorabilia and school and community photos dating back to the founding of the order by a French priest and 11 nuns in 1854 in Pennsylvania. It is a job she said she has enjoyed.

"I enjoy that as a history person," Curtis said. "The community has given me a lot of opportunities I normally wouldn't have."