

Hamilton Spectator

Passages: Caring, trail-blazing nun was driving force behind St. Joseph's expansion

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Sister Joan O'Sullivan, March 15, 1922 to April 27, 2013

The nun who helped build **St. Joseph's Healthcare** into the respected teaching hospital it is today has died.

Sister Joan O'Sullivan led **St. Joseph's** from 1979 to 1988 — a time when few women headed hospitals.

"I can't remember too many women in CEO positions of hospitals at that time," said **Brian Guest, senior vice-president of corporate renewal and mission at St. Joseph's Health System**. "She was a trailblazer."

Under her watch, **St. Joseph's** went through \$60 million to \$80 million of redevelopment including rebuilding the obstetrics department despite uncertainty about how to fund it. She also created the busy **urgent care centre** in Stoney Creek.

"It was a pretty courageous decision," said **Guest**. "That was a challenging time to get the funding in place. In terms of where **St. Joseph's** is now, the community owes a lot to her."

One of her biggest accomplishments was starting **St. Joseph's international outreach**, which provides health care and medical training to impoverished parts of the world, such as Haiti and Uganda.

"She was responsible for starting that long before international work was on everyone's mind," said **Sister Anne Anderson**, her friend of 50 years.

One of **O'Sullivan's** most difficult times as head of the hospital was when it was recovering from a major fire on May 1, 1980.

"She really worked at reorganizing, rebuilding and reinvigorating the place," said **Anderson**.

Before becoming executive director, she led **St. Joseph's** nursing school from 1964 to 1972. She was also assistant executive director of **St. Joseph's Hospital in Brantford and CEO of St. Mary's General Hospital in Kitchener**.

"She mentored generations of nurses, and then when she moved into senior administration she administered generations of young administrators," said **Anderson**.

She was such a good leader, because she showed respect to all the staff, no matter what role they played in the hospital.

"I knew her as an emergency department orderly and as a vice-president, and I can honestly say she treated me no differently in the two roles," said **Guest**. "That's why she was so beloved. She saw everyone in the hospital as part of the team, no matter where you worked and inspired loyalty and commitment to the mission."

Despite her high profile, she was humble and shied away from the limelight.

"She was a very calm influence," said **Guest**. "But she had a look — you knew in a hurry when you weren't meeting expectations."

She remained committed to bettering Hamilton's health care until she died April 27 at the **Sisters of St. Joseph Motherhouse** at age 91.

"She truly believed with every fibre of her being that it is an honour to serve the sick," said **Anderson**. "I was keeping her very up-to-date on the new **St. Joseph's West 5th site**, and she was delighted to think that mental health care was going to take on such an amazing and dramatic transformation. Until her dying day, she was interested in the care of the people of Hamilton. That's her greatest legacy."

Lovingly known as "**Joan O**," she was a sister of **St. Joseph's** for 67 years. **Anderson** said she loved dogs of all kinds — "anything with four feet and a wagging tail."

"Her faith was the anchor that kept her rooted, active and interested," said **Anderson**. "Her loss certainly will leave a great void in the congregation, but her memory will be a great joy. The tone at the **Motherhouse** is that we are all profoundly grateful for a life well lived."

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