

Sister Adrienne Courchesne

D.O.B. April 4, 1934

Birthplace : St. Cyrille de Wendover

Profession of vows : July 16, 1954

Interests : picking fruit, caring for babies, reading, visiting with Sisters, doing puzzles

Community and Missionary experience : working with single mothers and babies across United States and Canada

*A letter to tell my younger self a reflection of my experiences:*

It seems so very long ago that I left home to learn about caring for babies at the crèche at the hospital in Montreal.

It was at the hospital that I first met some of the Misericordia Sisters who supervised the floors. I liked their work and decided to join them – as simple as that!

Dad was quite surprised at my decision, while Mom said, ``Go and try it; we`ll wait for you to come back.`` But I didn`t go home because I loved the work.

I helped so many young mothers and their babies in so many places: Milwaukee, Green Bay, Wisconsin; Chatham, Ontario, Winnipeg, Manitoba and others.

Chatham holds a special place in my heart as I made great friends with the farming families – maybe because I grew up on a farm myself! The farming families would come and socialize with the resident pregnant girls if the Sisters had to go out. The girls learned a lot about farming!

One farmer asked, ``Sister Adrienne, what can I do to help the residents? This farmer had a strawberry farm. I suggested fresh strawberries. The third time I went to collect the strawberries, the girls wanted to come. A partnership was formed, with the girls helping the farmer pick the fruit. I didn`t imagine it was very comfortable being quite pregnant and picking strawberries but the girls enjoyed it and the farmer paid them; it was a way for the residents to earn money.

I remember another time a farmer was killing a cow and asked the residents what meat they would like best. Some said tongue, others heart and kidneys. The cook agreed to prepare the delicacies if the girls were in the kitchen and helped. The residents were always learning life skills in Chatham.

While I wasn`t shy to ask for strawberries, I was grateful I didn`t have to ask for money. Money was always a problem, that`s for sure.

In Winnipeg, for 17 years, I was fairly renowned at Villa Rosa for my practicality – if I saw something not right or something that needed to be cleaned, I did it. I was also known for my love for the mothers and their babies. My happiest Villa Rosa moments came when the toddlers would run across to the clothing depot, where I was sorting clothes, to visit.

I enjoyed being a mother to the girls; so many said, `You are like our mother!` Some residents who came through Villa Rosa came back to work at the centre, which makes me proud. Many continued to write me thank you notes for years to come as well!

I saw a lot of changes over the years at Villa Rosa. I`m pleased mothers can now give birth and return to Villa Rosa so they can continue going to school while caring for their babies, eventually moving to the post-natal house before reintegrating into society.

I was also cherished for being the `keeper of history` - always knowing which bowl was for Thanksgiving mashed potatoes, where the Christmas Advent wreath was stored and many other small details. After my departure, Villa Rosa staff sometimes had to call the Motherhouse to ask the whereabouts of the Easter candle!

Throughout my Ministry work I noticed a difference between how the girls were cared for in America and Canada. In America, it bothered me the girls didn`t receive as much education. I soldiered on, thinking, ``This is my work: to love the girls.` I was non-judgmental - a girl was a girl and not a `pregnant girl` - and I did my best.

Even though the girls weren`t getting a formal education, I made sure they learned as much as they could. And I was very strict about making sure they completed all their pregnancy breathing exercises. I didn`t even mind the residents laughing at me while I was demonstrating. I certainly didn`t ever picture myself growing up and doing pregnancy exercises wearing a habit with a veil!

I feel strongly I made a wise choice to serve. Being a Misericordia Sister was a very, very rewarding vocation and I was extremely happy working 40 years with mothers and babies.

*Adrienne Courchesne*