

A Bond Forged Later In Life ... How Holy Angels' First Resident Found Her Mother at Last



Maria with her mother, Dorothy Powell, shortly before Powell's death on March 8th.

Powell. And I've seen a photo taken shortly before her death on March 8 at 71.

Beside her sits Morrow, with a big smile. The effects of illness show on Powell's face; she obviously didn't feel well. But looks at peace with the way things turned out.

This unusual mother-daughter story was the one I wanted to hear about when I recently sat down with Morrow, who is a receptionist at Holy Angels.

She didn't meet her mother until age 30. She's spoken little in public about the relationship they developed. But with her mother's passing, Morrow wanted to share some thoughts about a person she came to respect. As we talked, I was reminded that Morrow was the reason the Sisters of Mercy started Holy Angels.

A quick refresher on what's become almost a local legend. In December 1955, when Dorothy Powell was 19, she placed her 3-week-old baby at the Sacred Heart Day Care Nursery. Run by Sister Marie Patrice Manley, it was a program for the children of local

I never knew her name or what she looked like.

The woman who gave her disabled baby to the Sisters of Mercy in Belmont.

I'd always thought of her as a person in the shadows: Maria Morrow's mother.

Now, I know her name: Dorothy

textile workers. (Sister Patrice would later be known as North Carolina's Mother Teresa for children with disabilities.)

The doctor who delivered the baby- T.W. Parkinson of Gastonia- had called Sister Patrice about getting Morrow into the day care. (It was the first pregnancy that Parkinson, a native of Yorkshire, England, had followed the whole nine months in the U.S. In 1964, he moved to Rock Hill and became York County's first anesthesiologist. Parkinson died in April 2007.)

Little baby Maria cried instantly. Her head was enlarged by hydrocephalus. Her back was deformed, her legs twisted and paralyzed. Doctors gave her six months to live. If by some miracle she did survive, she'd be a vegetable, they said.

Morrow wouldn't know this until many years later, but her mother took her home from day care at night for a while. The job got too big for the young mother. She asked the Sisters to keep the baby. Sister Patrice



Maria as a young baby when she first arrived at the Sisters of Mercy in 1956.



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got the OK from Mother Maura, the Mother Superior, in January 1956.

Four years later, Observer columnist Kays Gary wrote about Morrow and dubbed her the “littlest angel.” Gary’s friend, nationally syndicated columnist Jim Bishop, picked up on the story. Money rolled in, along with pleas for help from other parents with children like Morrow. The Sisters use her birthday as the anniversary date for Holy Angels, a center for children and adults with severe disabilities.

Regina Moody, Holy Angels’ President/CEO, said Powell’s decision to part with her baby had a positive impact on the lives of hundreds of children over the years. Moody called Powell a “great lady.”

The older Morrow got, the more she thought about her mother.

“I wondered where she was or if she was even alive,” she told me. “I wondered what she looked like. I wondered about the sound of her voice.”

Morrow didn’t know it, but her mother had been keeping up with her from a distance. Powell had made the decision to back off from her daughter because she didn’t want to cause confusion over where home was. But in her own way she stayed in touch.

Shunning the Spotlight

Relatives eventually helped Morrow connect with her mom. The woman she finally met was quiet and reserved, still working in textiles.

“I was very excited and happy,” Morrow said. “The meeting was easy. It felt natural.”

For years, they got together every Sunday. Powell would fix a big meal with dishes her daughter loved, such as fried chicken. They they’d sit and talk, piecing together the



Maria today continues to live and work at Holy Angels.

past. Morrow learned about being spotted by her mom around town.

“She’d see me in the grocery store, but wouldn’t come over,” Morrow said. “Mom was very shy.

Often during the visits, they didn’t talk at all. They’d sit for hours watching old movies on TV.

One day Powell showed her daughter a thick scrapbook. Inside was a comprehensive collection of newspaper clippings about “the littlest angel.”

The scrapbook helped Morrow understand the depth of her mother’s love and commitment over the years.

The relationship continued to grow.

“Mom was very gentle and kind,” Morrow said. “And she’d give you anything.” Powell sent her daughter jewelry at Christmas and on birthdays. And she was there when Morrow needed support during a double mastectomy while battling breast cancer.

Powell always avoided interviews. She shunned the spotlight, even during Morrow’s public involvement with Holy Angels 50th anniversary observance in 2006. Morrow’s face was on billboards around the region.

Powell watched it all from the sidelines.

I’m Proud of You

As Powell’s health declined, the mother-daughter meetings were less frequent. A few years ago, she moved to Newton and kept in touch with Morrow by phone.

On their last visit, they went out to eat at a steakhouse.

“She had trouble breathing and wasn’t doing too good,” Morrow said. “But she never complained. And she told me, ‘I’m proud of you.’”

The words ring in Morrow’s mind. She hears them on the job and while making daily visits with children at Holy Angels.

Powell and Morrow may not have had the traditional mother-daughter time together. But they made the best of what they had. It showed in their last photo: That in spite of everything, their love for each other had endured.