

Sister John Karen Frei, O.P., Ph.D.

September 30, 1936 – October 19, 2012

November 2012

Special Edition MARC/RISE Newsletter



Sister John Karen Frei, OP, PhD passed away in her home October 19, 2012 surrounded by friends and loved ones. She was born Karen Rosa Frei on September 30, 1936 in Jersey City, NJ. She graduated from Emerson High School in Union City, NJ before earning a BA in Botany from Douglass College, and a MS in Botany from Rutgers University. She joined Barry University as a faculty member in 1964. She was so moved by her interactions with the Adrian Dominican sisters with whom she worked that she took a leave of absence from her position at Barry and traveled to Adrian, MI entering the convent to train to become a Dominican sister herself. After joining the Adrian Dominican Congregation, she returned to Barry College rejoining the Department of Biology as a faculty member.



She continued her education at the University of Miami earning her PhD in Biology in 1972. She completed her formal education with a MBA from Barry University in 1982. She spent the last 46 years of her life ministering at Barry College/University. Sister John Karen held numerous positions in her time at Barry College and University, Professor, Department Chair, Dean, Associate Vice President, Vice President, and Assistant to the Provost.

Transforming Students

Sister John Karen was a very dedicated educator. She had the vision of improving the educational outcomes of underrepresented minorities and bringing research into the undergraduate curriculum. In 1983, Barry received the first NIH funded Minority Access to Research Careers (MARC) grant under Sister John Karen's direction. This grant has been continuously funded since then, and has brought over \$12 million to the institution. The MARC program provides support to students underrepresented in biomedical and behavioral sciences to improve their preparation for PhD programs. The grant has provided tuition, and a monthly stipend for 147 students of which 56% have entered or completed their PhD.

In 1991, through Sister John Karen's efforts, Barry also received its first NIH funded Minority Biomedical Research Support (MBRS) grant to strengthen the research competitiveness of faculty. Over the 15 years of continuous funding 10 faculty and 62 students benefited from the \$6.5 million funding received. The funds allowed faculty to purchase equipment, receive release time to conduct research, attend professional meetings and workshops, and employ research technicians/assistants.



Sister John Karen also realized the need to add a global dimension to the research agenda. In 1993, through FIC/NIH funded Minority International Research Training (MIRT) four students and one faculty member carried out research in Jamaica and Italy; between 1993-2004 an additional four faculty and 54 graduate and undergraduate students participated in research at international sites including Argentina and Korea. The grant provided \$1.5 million for this program.

Drs. Ana Jimenez, Laura Ferrer-Wreder, Joel Rodriquez, and Stephanie Bingham are successful graduates of these programs who returned to Barry as faculty.



Sister John Karen also spearheaded the EPA funded Research Internship for Students in Environmental Ecology (RISEE) program for high school and Barry undergraduate students (2004-2008).

The \$697,500 received from the grant, provided assistance in developing and implementing environmental training of 73 Barry and high school students from Miami-Dade and Broward counties. Students participated in summer workshops and conducted research with faculty. Between 2003-2006, Barry through Sister John Karen received National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) funding to enhance Barry's ability to train students in NOAA related disciplines including environmental and marine biology. Five Barry Students and 45 high school students participated in this program funded at \$250,000.

Contribution to Grant Support



In 2006, Sister John Karen secured funds from the Department of Energy Research Facilities and Instrumentation Initiative to build the core aquarium in the School of Natural and

Sciences (SNHS), to the amount of \$289,000. The environmentally-controlled aquarium facility equipped with an Aquatic Habitats Accelerated Bioresearch (AHAB) Fish Rearing System maintains research animals for faculty and student research as well as supporting classroom projects. Sister John Karen was also the principal investigator for the USF-McNair Dissemination Partnership and National Cancer Institute grants totaling \$87,908.



In 1999, Sister John Karen developed the Research Scholarship Fund using indirect money received from federal grants to fund faculty research on campus. The Fund supported faculty from Arts and Sciences, Human Performance and Leisure Sciences, Graduate Medical Sciences and Natural and Health Sciences over the course of its existence. Other earlier achievements include the five year Florida Higher Education project to educate minority elementary school teachers and their students in “hands-on” science.



Sister John Karen was also a vocal spokeswoman at Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) to advance biomedical science students academically. Sister John Karen served as a NIH grant reviewer for MIRT, NCOP, and the Undergraduate and Graduate Scholarship program.



Overall, Sister John Karen’s vision of improving the educational outcomes of our students and cultivating professional development for faculty became a reality. She brought in over \$21 million of federally funded grants to Barry.



Other Contributions

Anonymous Benefactor

During her deanship, Sister John Karen donated her salary to SNHS and was the anonymous benefactor, who provided funding for faculty to attend meetings, purchase supplies and equipment, and conduct research. She organized the annual Poinsettia Plant Sale from which the proceeds went towards the Biology Student Loan Fund that she started at Barry; this Fund helped students who needed financial assistance. One such beneficiary was Miami Dade County Public Schools Superintendent, Alberto Carvalho. To him Sister John Karen was an “example of the spirit of giving found throughout Miami. At one point, as many other working students do, I faced a shortage of funds. Sister Frei lent me \$2,000, giving me the opportunity to complete my degree” (Miami Herald, Sept 27, 2009). Sister John Karen also helped women and children living in shelters who suffered from domestic abuse.

She collected toiletries for them; she would ask fellow colleagues and students to contribute by bringing back their hotel toiletries when they travelled. What might have appeared as small offerings to others was clearly seen as a significant, kind gesture to those who needed it.

We will always remember Sister John Karen at Barry, especially when we see the statue of Mary, Bearer of Good News, on the Garner quadrangle. This was the last of the special projects she completed and “without her efforts this sculpture would not have come to be” (Jordan Warner, Sculptor).



Student Quotes

My memories of Sr. John were truly great. As an educator, she brought out the best in her students. I remember her always being firm yet encouraging. As a Dean, she would make me feel like she cared and I would find myself wanting to make her proud of me. As a person, she knew when I needed a hug or an ear to talk to. She is one of the reasons why I am where I am today. I am saddened not only by this news but by the fact that I never told her this. This is the Sr. John Karen Frei I will always remember.

Diego T. Torres II, M.D. (MBRS '93)

I remember Sister John Karen Frei very well...her dedication to teaching, to all the MARC and MBRS students, her botany class ☺...I also remember how she helped me to find paying jobs as a TA or tutor for several classes for my last semester when I no longer had the MARC scholarship ☺ She was truly a wonderful and caring woman.

Ana Marie Landin, MS (MARC '97)



I am even more saddened not to be able to physically attend the service. I am sorry that it has taken so long for me to express my condolences. I have to say that to some of us, Sister John was a true agent of positive change and a visionary. I am where I am today because of her vision. Through the MARC program she pioneered something that gave most of us, minorities, the best way to explore research as a career goal and provided us with the research experience necessary to be competitive for graduate programs as well as for life.

Frantz Moise, PhD (MARC '06)

As I remember my courses and professors at Barry University, Sr. Frei always stands out as the faculty member that instilled in me the notion of "always be prepared." Her insights and demand for excellence truly helped form the professional I am today Lenore P. Rodicio, PhD (MARC '94)



She will be in our thoughts and prayers, after being part of my life and my family for so many years. She gave me strength and an opportunity at the school of natural health sciences and will always be part of my development.

Maria Pineda, PhD (MARC '07)

As a young teenager away at college on my own for the first time, I remember being in awe of her nurturing yet strong demeanor. She was a role model to me as a person and in my career as a scientist.

Dania Alarcon, PhD (MBRS '95)

Sr. John had a leadership style which resonated down through her team of professors and research students, a clear vision, and a warm smile. She was detail oriented and required preparation from the quality of student research to the millimeter-precise layout of their slides on poster board. I will miss Sr. John and am comforted that her positive influence continues in the lives that she has touched.

Wendell Saintval, PhD (MARC '01)

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May she always be remembered

*Special Edition MARC/RISE Newsletter
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MARC/MBRS/RISE is supported by NIH



*I first met Sister John as an undergraduate MARC student majoring in psychology. I recall the MARC program's organizational culture as being marked by high expectations with a good dose of true concern or care for students. I am now a supervisor of students and continued in an academic career, and now better appreciate how difficult it is to foster a learning and professional training environment that is both challenging as well as caring. These values in education are part of Barry University's wider culture, and I remember these ideals being actualized in practice during my time at Barry as a student. To me, Sr. John was instrumental in setting this tone, in putting good ideals into everyday practice. I am grateful to have known her, and have personally benefited tremendously from the program that she championed for so many years. Thank you Sr. John.
Laura Ferrer-Wreder, PhD (MARC '93)*

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