

SISTER ELSIE FIELDS



~~Yes. And then I would say, "Sister, we've got to go up. Otherwise, we've got to go up all those stairs." And we'd both be tired but we've have to go up all those stairs. Night after night.~~

Why couldn't you use the elevator?

It was so noisy and all the older Sisters were asleep where the elevator was. And if a youngster needed the elevator, then a Sister went with them.

I'm just looking at the floor plan here. The older Sisters were-

I think on the second floor.

On the second floor.

And I think on the third floor was chapel, wasn't it?

Right. The third floor was chapel. And there were some dorms up there? Right next to the chapel? The girls' dorms?

Right.

And the older Sisters lived on the second floor?

I think, most of them. I remember the chapel and I think there were guest quarters there outside of the chapel.

What was the procedure when a girl first arrived?

Usually, Sister Valerie had known contact, the social worker would have talked to the parents or the caseworkers of the youngster that would be coming. And we would know the name and some basic things about the youngster and something about the family. They were given a big sister to kind of help them get acquainted and it was a girl that had been in the group long enough and had some stability and some friends.

Did she meet you right away?

The girl?

If you were her house mother. Were you a house mother? Was that the same as a directress?

I was second. Yes, like a group or house mother. Depending if she was in my group or if she was in the dining room. And usually, either Sr. Valerie or the big sister or the family or the caseworker would go through and meet everybody. And I would be someplace there and usually meet her.

Sr. Valerie, who was she?

She was the directress most of the time when I was there.

So there's a Mother Superior and then -

The directress of the girls and an assistant of the girls. And then there was a Sister in charge of the kitchen and I think there was a former student that was in charge of the Sisters' kitchen which was easier to run and operate.

Was the laundry still running when you were there?

Yes, Sr. Michael was in charge of that. And then there was a bakery that was so special. Maydele. She had two children who lived in the house there on the grounds. And she just baked marvelous...

Did she bake things that were sold or did she bake-

No, for the institution. I think it was for both the Sisters and the students. And I don't remember about where the staff ate. I think they had a staff dining room. Yes, I'm sure of that.

What were some of the rules and privileges?

Back in those days, we were stricter than we were later on. I was group mother up until '78 and then I went back to school....

But you were only in Seattle until 1961?

Yes. This is at other institutions.

Was the Seattle Home different from other institutions you were at?

No, not much.

Were the buildings different?

They were all different but they had kind of the same layout. Seattle had a pool and alot....like in Helena, Spokane, now they have one but they didn't.

Was that pool built while you were there? Or was it already built when you got there?

I think it was built while I was there, around that time anyway. But I don't know. It seems to me that they really worked....and the auxiliary helped or something. And...

You were going to tell me some of the rules and privileges.....or how you interacted with the girls.

They weren't supposed to be rowdy. And they weren't supposed to hit each other. And they weren't supposed to mouth off.

What happened if they did?

Not much [laughter]. Well, sometimes. I don't remember if they would have to sit outside of Sr. Valerie's office until they calmed down or something. Then sometimes they would sit with another staff person. We also tried to negotiate and work out things, like if it was usually another student - that something was going on....or they got bad news from home, a rejecting letter, and that kind of stuff. Or if their behavior was really atrocious, then they might not get their home visit when they were supposed to. Or I don't know - different houses had different regulations. I know in Portland, they couldn't see their movie.

Were you ever frightened? Of the girls?

In Seattle? I don't think so. I was not a disciplinarian but I just know God was with me really.... I usually went with my heart and I was gifted with a love no matter what they'd got into. Sometimes I'd really get hurt though if they lied to me, or misspoke something but they'd usually behave and I didn't have much authority but somehow I didn't have much trouble. And I knew that if you get a group of girls together, no way one person there would be able to control anything. But I really had some wonderful experiences and one of the things in my older years - three of the former students looked me up after 40 years. And one of them, I remembered and the other one I couldn't. I just faintly remembered. And the other one I think was later. But those relationships have been very rewarding.

Do you remember the Seattle building and grounds very well?

I remember the grounds and the orchard and the way over to the laundry. And there was a nurse's station off of the dorm. We used to have a nurse.

Where was the nurse's station?

I think it was on the second floor. It wasn't the basement. I think it was on the second floor or someplace.

When you say second floor, are you saying the main floor or above?

Above the main floor. If I'm not mistaken, that's where it was.

That's where the clinic was? That's where girls would be seen by doctors or dentists?

You know I get some places mixed up. Do you have a-

I have some floor plans.

Does it have a clinic room?

These are floor plans from now so they don't tell me things, only the layout. This would be the second floor. This is the front of the building. These are the stairways. So this is one of the wings. There were double doors here.

Going over to the girls' place and then that's where the opera, I mean the dancing people, is where we used to have our recreation room when we were all together.

Oh, where Pacific Northwest Ballet went in. I don't know where that is.

That was right outside of the directress' office.

On the main floor?

I can't figure out where the school was.

I know where the school was. The school was, this is the main floor, you'd come in the front door and the school was here to the right in the north wing. And then they had an addition to the building so the school extended back to here. I don't know if there were other classrooms in other parts of the building or not.

I can just remember the school was off where...the Superior's office was close and then the principal's office and that was Sr. William, I think, most of the time I was there.

But you do remember the orchard.

And Maydele's house was in there, close by. And I went back just once to tour and I was so pleased at the.....

The house is not there anymore but the orchard-

I think it was when I was there.

There are still some apple trees. When you were there, were apples picked?

They were picked, yes, by the kitchen people and maybe the men helped, I don't know. But I don't think that we used as much as there could have been but I'm sure a lot of it got in apple pies and stuff.

Do you have any other memories that you'd like to share?

Something came to mind. Sr. Valerie was petrified of mice. We didn't have mice but we had a gerbil. I mean, one of the girls in my group had a gerbil. Oh, she was so angry at me. And I just giggled. And of course, the girl put it in a shoebox and it chewed its way out. Oh, she was so angry and she says, "now

it's probably in the wall having babies." Then we put some oatmeal down and caught it again but then we put it - not in the House anymore - in case it got out again, and of course, it did, and we couldn't find it. But I just remember how I was in the doghouse with Valerie for awhile.

And the kids - I have such wonderful memories of them tellin' jokes and they had wonderful... A man and his wife were Jewish, Armstrong, I think, and they taught our little kids like they were concert pianists and did anyone tell you about the Armstrongs?

No.

They used to teach voice and piano and -

So they were a lay couple?

Yes. I'm sure they got some money but nothing for what they they were very cultured people. I remember once one of my students was the drummer boy in the - they played the drummer boy at Christmastime. And I think they came in second. But Mrs. Armstrong said that they should have been first, that the one that got first was a fourth of a tone off or something.

Was this within the school? Or competing with other schools?

Chosen from our school and they competed with other schools. There must have been an orchestra. Yes, I remember more than the drummer girl.

There was lots of heartaches, lots of things. One time, I saw something really negative about myself. There was a student whose boyfriend said that he would get her out and so we had a private detective who came and would be on the bottom floor. And this was the first night that the detective wasn't there, and Sister and I were in her office working on the books or something. I was in the doorway and she was closer to the files. And a BANG happened and I shoved her like that and I ran off. [laughter].

It was the lock had broke on the window in our office.

And you were afraid -

The both of us thought. We laugh about it today. Really brave.

How did you hear about the boyfriend?

We knew when the girl came in and it was a tough case, whatever it was. And he'd been involved in some really negative behavior.

Another time on the Sisters' side, one of our Sisters, Sr. Annunciata was sound asleep and there was, in her room, a stairway, a fire escape. She woke up listening to "Judy, Judy, I'm coming to get you", this voice. And so she came out

and this was like 9:30 at night. Sister and I hadn't gone up to bed yet. And it was so funny. We saw all these nuns with all this different regalia on and of course, Sister closed the window and locked it. But it probably was around that time too so. Somebody's boyfriend was in the wrong part of the building really.

Someone's boyfriend had gotten in?

Oh, he didn't get in. No.

He was on the grounds?

Yes, he was on the stairway, on the nun's side.

What kind of regalia were the nuns wearing?

[laughter]. In those days, they'd have nightcaps and nightgowns and bathrobes. I'll probably get killed for this. But the thing that surprised me the most - they all just came really quick. Sister screamed or something. And then they called over to us and we came over. Sister and I just howled, it was so funny. The Superior, Visitation, had this white stuff on - she had some skin problem or something. She always had beautiful complexion and she was just like a ghost, you know. We just laughed and laughed.

There was always funny things with the kids too.

What happened to Judy that night?

To what?

To Judy? Where was Judy?

She never knew about it. Well, maybe when she went for her home visit, she did. But I think he got scared too! I'm not sure that Judy was it but it could possibly have been Judy that he was calling.

Were you going to tell me some funny stories about the girls?

I would be so happy when they would learn how to play the piano. Or the violin or the drums or something. But they were always playing tricks, especially.....

What kind of tricks?

Oh, put a box and have a toad in it or something, you know. Or changing their name. Or convincing me about something that was really farfetched - I was gullible, and then find out there was nothing to it. And there was always jokes and stuff. And alot of tears too, alot of pain. I'll always be grateful to them. I think they...the young girls... women - the gift to me, I think, was to keep me honest because I could never manipulate or anything. They always kept me honest about my own feelings and I know I always had to work at trying to be

just with everybody because there was some that you only knew some of the history. A lot of times I wouldn't read the files because I just wanted to come to my own conclusions.

One of my students, I can remember, there was a dog. I don't know if it got "fixed" or something. Anyway, it used to be in the girls' yard but then it was kept in a pen while it was recuperating and we had to bring it food every night. And we'd sing - might sometimes be after dinner - and I remember the song "Have I Told You Lately That I Love You". That's been with me all my life - and I sing it to the Lord and I always think of that beautiful woman who later died of an aneurism. Her kids called me and they said, "tell me about my mom when she was a little girl or a teenager" and stuff and they were crying and things. But they lived a long way away. But I was intending to go see her because she was such a caring, beautiful, talented, artistic person, and a good mother and much more organized than I was. She accomplished a lot more than she thought. She worked in the school and was loved by all.

I was going to give you this - where I am now.

Okay.

I'll put my name on it. Is that okay?

That's fine. Thank you.

END OF TRANSCRIPT.