

Sister Dorothy Stang SNDdeN

Biography



Dorothy Mae Stang grew up in a large family on a farm in Dayton. It's where she was taught how to live from the land — and where she learned to have reverence for the precious natural resources given to us. They were lessons she would later share with people half a world away.

From the first moment she met the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur at Julianne High School, there was never a doubt in her mind. She knew she was called to religious life. And she felt the pull of the educational mission of Notre Dame and the commitment to the poor, especially women and children in the most abandoned places.

Dorothy joined the Sisters of Notre Dame at the age of 17 years and one month -- the absolute earliest the congregation would accept her. From the start she made her interests quite clear.

In big bold letters across the top of the application page she

wrote: "I would like to volunteer for the Chinese mission." Unfortunately, the Sisters were forced to withdraw from China just as she was beginning her novice years.

She took the religious name of Sister Mary Joachim. While still a novice, she taught in two Chicago area parish schools -- St. Victor in Calumet City and St. Alexander in Villa Park. Then, at the age of 22, Sister Mary Joachim and two other Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur were sent to Arizona to start a school in Phoenix.

This is when her missionary heart began to take over.

In 1966, Sister volunteered to

join our Sisters in Brazil. By then she had returned to her baptismal name as she headed to a community in the northeast of Brazil.

She and the other Sisters set up a mission, working with more than 100,000 parishioners, preparing them for sacraments, teaching religion in schools, helping the people with spiritual growth.

On weekends, Sister Dorothy and the Sisters would head into rural villages to bring the people together -- giving adults religious instructions and training lay catechists. It was during these visits when the reality of oppression and poverty struck Sister Dorothy, and she began teaching the people about their rights as human beings.

In the 70s, the Brazilian government offered property in the Amazon interior to farmers

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if they would move there and develop the land in a sustainable way. It was the beginning of a new life the poor farmers embraced. And as ranchers grabbed the farmer's land they were forced to move deeper into the rainforest. Sister Dorothy went with them.

She taught the farmers how to work the land in sustainable ways, without depleting rich natural resources. And she helped the families live in peace and with dignity. Together they began opening schools in the hills and villages surrounding the farms. The men taught others how to grow sustainable crops and the women began small businesses to help support their families. It was a life and culture based on strong Christian spirituality and values.

This did not go over well with the wealthy landowners, speculators and loggers in Brazil. They didn't want subsistence farmers living on the land. They wanted the land for their own use — to harvest the trees and sell the wood for large profits. And they were ruthless.

They burned the settlers' homes. Families were routinely forced out and left to search for safe places to live further and further into the interior.

Sister Dorothy worked with the authorities and tried to stop the ranchers, but the attacks on the farmers continued. The night

before her death she brought food and clothing to a family whose home had been burned to the ground.

The next morning it was raining. As she began walking down the muddy road to meet with some farmers, two hired gunmen stepped into Sister Dorothy's path and raised their guns.

As they took aim, she reached into a simple cloth bag, pulled out her bible and began reading, "Blessed are the peacemakers..."

They fired six shots. Sister Dorothy fell to the ground. Her body lay in the mud for the rest of the day.

The gunmen and the ranchers who hired them thought it was over. They figured they'd finally stopped the tireless advocate for the poor.

...they'd done away with that annoying fighter for land rights.

And they thought they'd certainly silenced that voice that always spoke of basic human rights for all and the goodness of God.

They thought they had put an end to Sister Dorothy and her mission.

But they were wrong.

They didn't count on her being named a martyr by the Vatican, and being posthumously awarded the United Nations Peace Prize.

They didn't know schools and programs throughout the world

would be named for her, and curriculum would be changed to reflect her teaching on justice, peace and human rights.

They had no idea how she would continue to inspire the people in the Brazilian rainforest, and how they would carry on the fight. They didn't expect there to be 1,200 families in 85 Base Christian Communities who would all live cooperatively and self-sufficiently a decade after her murder.

And they didn't think the people would continue to build schools — more than 115 throughout the rainforest, with one that just graduated its first class of 8th graders — 17 adults and children who are the first in their families to be educated

The hired gunmen and the ranchers had no idea that former students of Sister Dorothy, Sisters of Notre Dame around the world and their friends and families in Brazil had no plans to stop Sister Dorothy's work.

They just didn't know that her missionary heart would carry on through the hearts of others.

As we celebrate her life, Sister Dorothy has become a symbol for those who believe in the Gospel message of Jesus by loving poor and oppressed people, and by caring for our beautiful Earth. Her strength continues to embolden us. Her dream lives on in us.