

Sister Gerry MacNamara, S.N.J.M. (1938–1983)

“Sister Gerry was a good woman. She treated people nice and she didn’t take no crap from no one.” These bold words spoken by Sheila Sunshine, indigenous street child, capture Gerry’s brief, adventuresome life. Geraldine MacNamara, a Sister of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary, was born in 1938, in Toronto, but lived most of her life in Winnipeg. She becomes a teacher and a lawyer. As an educator, she wins students’ hearts by provoking their minds. A powerful speaker, she challenges lawyers, principals, social workers to search out and help those who are oppressed and at risk. An astute and fearless lawyer, she defends those who are disenfranchised. One judge admitted, “She was one tough lady”.



She loved and respected inner city children and youth and called them by name. These young people who had suffered unrelenting pain were her teachers. Sister Gerry decides she will do everything in her power to help them achieve their dreams. Together, in 1976, they found Rossbrook House, a 24 hour 365 days a year alternative to the destructive life of the streets. Forty years later, Rossbrook House remains a place of refuge where “no child who does not want to be alone ever has to be.” Gerry loves to tease the youth. She remembers their birthdays, writes them cards, holidays with them and never asks of them anything that she herself would not do. One child, with tears streaming down his face admitted “She’s the only one who ever loved me.”

Her very presence demanded respect. One school principal attested, “She was the conscience of the inner city.” In 1980, she and the street youth confronted City Hall, organized a public forum and stopped the Sherbrook McGregor Overpass which would have destroyed inner city homes. This monumental achievement empowered the youth. They learned that, united, they could affect positive change for the good of all.

Gerry believed in tomorrow and lived life to the full. Sister Mac died of cancer in February, 1984, at the age of 45. She is the recipient of many awards including the Order of Canada. In June 1998, she was inducted into the Citizens’ Hall of Fame. In 2001, Eleanor Stebner wrote her biography, “GEM, The Life of Sister Mac”.

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