

Stephens Was Early COPS Organizer

By John MacCormack Thursday, July 25, 2019

When the news of Sister Christine Stephens' recent death reached the Sisters of Divine Providence Convent on San Antonio's West Side, one of the grieving nuns offered a poignant assessment.

"She said, 'We will never be the same. We have lost someone who pushed us, who challenged us and who would be our conscience. That was Sister Christine,'" recalled Sister Pearl Ceasar, the superior general of the order.

Stephens, 78, an early organizer for COPS in San Antonio, died July 18 in Austin.

"She never retired. The day before her stroke we had a full day of meetings with Texas organizers, and she was still at the top of her game," said Ernie Cortes, co-director of the Industrial Areas Foundation, with which COPS is affiliated.

Stephens' journey began back in 1962 while attending St. Thomas University in Houston, when she decided to join the religious order.

"My mother cried tears of sorrow," recalled her older sister Sarah Howell, "It was hard to lose her, but we all accepted it."

Over the decades, fears of losing her proved misplaced.

"She was a huge part of our family. She's always been there. Every Christmas, every holiday," said her niece, Angela Duhon.

Stephens also thrived in her chosen life of service.

First a teacher, then a social worker, Stephens found her personal ministry in 1979 when she became an organizer for the IAF in Houston.



Sister Christine Stephens, 78, died in Austin on July 18. Stephens was a key organizer for COPS in San Antonio in the 1980s. Photo: Courtesy Photo

Two years later, she arrived in San Antonio as lead organizer for COPS, which was shaking up the political order and giving a voice to long-ignored minority communities. The battles ranged from getting adequate drainage on the West Side to creating single member districts on the City Council.

Four decades later, Stephens' presence is still felt here by old friends and the leaders she mentored.

"It's that one person who comes into your life. When Sister Christine came, she turned me around," recalls Beatriz Cortez, 81, an early COPS president.

Cortez, who had grown up poor and only graduated from high school, said, "I knew I had worth as a person, and I knew I had energy and natural intelligence. She was like my compass. She gave me focus," she added.

As an organizer and mentor, Stephens was tough but reasonable. In negotiations, she was politically astute and open to compromise, but never surrender.

"She had the generous heart of a teacher and the generous anger of someone who hungered and thirsted for justice. Her anger came from thousands of one-on-one meetings with people, listening to their stories," said Cortez, who first worked with her in Houston.

"She believed in people's capacity for transformation, and her forte was identifying and training leaders," he added.

Even he was not spared her pointed critiques, which, as one COPS organizer said, could draw blood but did not maim.

"She helped me think out a lot of strategies, and she had my back. But if I stepped out of line, she would always take me on," he said.

Over the course of her four-decade career, Stephens worked in Houston, San Antonio, the Rio Grande Valley, Dallas and Austin. At the time of her death, she was living in Austin and working with IAF.

Father Mike DeGerolami, 71, the former pastor at St. Timothy Catholic Church on the West Side, recalls her as a good listener with a brilliant mind.

Sister Christine Stephens

Born: Dec. 22, 1940, in Austin

Died: July 18, 2019, in Austin

Preceded by: Parents Walter and Frances Stephens

Survived by: Sister Sarah Howell; all her Sisters of Divine Providence; niece Angela Duhon and her two children, Emma and Nathaniel

Services: Funeral Mass at 10:30 a.m. Friday at Sacred Heart Chapel, next to Our Lady of the Lake Convent Center, 515 S.W. 24th St.

“It was more than a career for her. She saw community organizing as a great avenue for people who had no voice, who needed the tools to stand up to the powerful interests that were keeping them down,” he said.

“And before COPS came on the scene, I think the majority of the people on the South, West and East sides felt like they were not looked after by the city government,” he said.

Walker Moore, 38, the current lead organizer for the COPS/Metro Alliance in San Antonio, was one of the last she mentored.

“She taught me how to be a better person, a better organizer,” he said.

“She hasn’t been in San Antonio since the 1980s, but her influence was always here, whether people knew it or not,” he added.

After Stephens had her incapacitating stroke, Moore said he spoke about her to his three young daughters.

“I told them, ‘Sister Christine was one of the most important people in my life. I hope and pray that you have a mentor like Sister Christine some day,’” he added.

John MacCormack is a staff writer in the San Antonio and Bexar County area.