

175 SISTER PROFILES: S. Ruth Anne Brighton

**Rosemary Previte, Advance Associate
Bringing Hope, 2005**

I was struck by two things in particular during my recent conversation with S. Ruth Anne Brighton. First, although we spoke for just one hour, I felt that I could easily have spoken with her for several more hours, as she has so much knowledge and experience to share! Second, I was impressed by her continued interest in her work, despite having spent many years in a field that can be incredibly demanding—both physically and emotionally.

S. Ruth Anne's official title is Therapeutic Respite Provider for Handicapped Children at the Benda/Bridges Homecare Solutions, and Moore Center. Her title, however, does not tell the story of her many years as a teacher, consultant and coordinator



Sister Ruth Anne Brighton

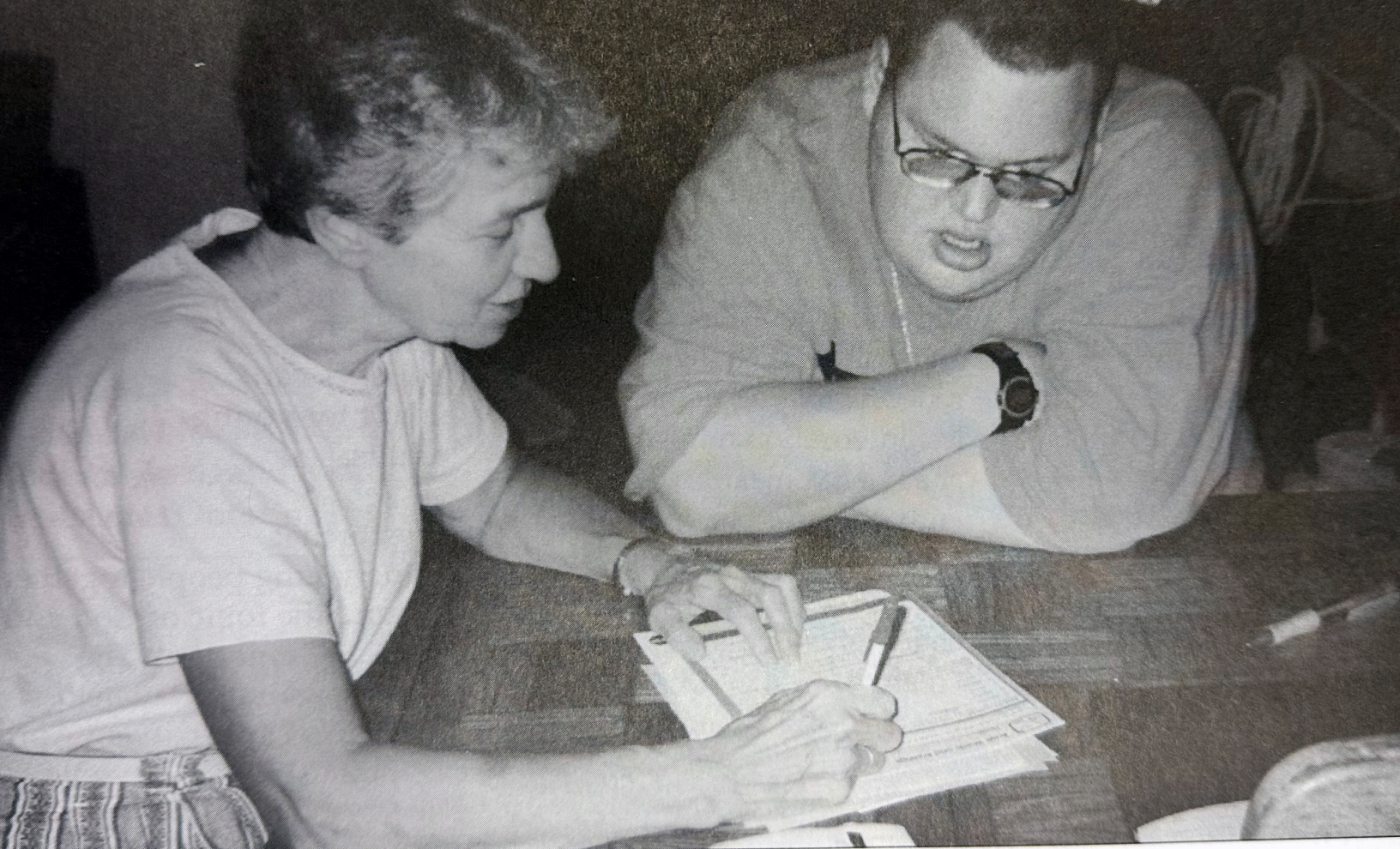


CELEBRATING

175

YEARS OF JOYFUL WITNESS

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Sister Ruth Anne, Therapeutic Respite Provider, Benda/Bridges/Moore Center, Raymond, NH. Here she is shown working on reading skills with Peter, whom she has tutored for several years.

for children with physical and mental handicaps.

A Sister of Charity for 46 years, S. Ruth Anne had an aunt who was a Dominican Sister, and said she herself felt a call to the sisterhood even as a young child. She was taught by the Sisters of Charity at the Academy of the Assumption in

Wellesley, MA, and although many of her fellow students boarded at the school and were from privileged backgrounds, S. Ruth Anne felt lucky to be able to attend the school on scholarship.

S. Ruth Anne's education includes a B.S. in Elementary Education from Mount Saint Vincent Vincent



With a little help from Sister Ruth Anne, Cody (left) dances with one of his friends in pre-school, Mont Blanc Academy, NH

University, a Master's in Special Education from Boston College, a Sixth-Year Certificate (CAGS) in Special Education from the University of Connecticut and certification as a Licensed Nursing Assistant.

Upon graduating from Mount Saint Vincent University, S. Ruth Anne's first ministry was teaching first graders in Lawrence, MA, where she continued for the next eight years. She had up to 56 students at a time, and of those students, some were slow learners who needed to repeat the year. Her supervisor, having noticed S. Ruth Anne's special interest in the slower learners, asked her if she would be interested in teaching them exclusively, and she readily agreed. And so, while still teaching full-time, S. Ruth Anne pursued graduate studies in special education at Boston College.

I asked S. Ruth Anne why she had such a strong interest in working with children with special needs. She recalled spending summers with her family at the beach, and observing one particular child—the only one on the beach with an umbrella. She was advised to “keep away” from the

child, a common attitude then—and now—possibly because we are often afraid to seek out those who are different from ourselves, or because we are unsure how to act with those who have special needs. She also recalls a classmate who had polio, and visiting the “Iron Lung” kids who had been paralyzed by the disease.

S. Ruth Anne is equally committed to the parents of children with disabilities, who are often exhausted from the demands placed upon them. She recalled a time when she needed to spend a full week in the hospital with a 15-year-old autistic girl who was under her care. During the week, she was only able to take one hour off to shower, rest and regain some of her strength. “I’ve got to do this for others, and I’ve got to help the parents keep their marriages together,” noted

S. Ruth Anne after her experience.

After teaching in Lawrence and Wellesley, S. Ruth Anne went on to become a learning disabilities educator and consultant at various places, including Acton, MA and Manchester, CT. She subsequently spent three years as a Child Development Specialist at the May Institute for Autistic Children, a residential facility in Chatham, MA where she worked with autistic children between the ages of six and 12. S. Ruth Anne then moved to Raymond, NH, and worked with handicapped preschoolers in the public school system for several years. Next came a position with the Easter Seals, where S. Ruth Anne helped multihandicapped school-age children transition into public schools.

After working at the Easter Seals for three years, the transition program

was phased out, whereupon S. Ruth Anne was asked to work with several severely handicapped students at the Brock Home. There she worked with four students ranging in age from three to 20 years old. The students, said S. Ruth Anne, were functioning at about the level of a three-month old: Two were blind, one had little movement, and one had no movement. Besides trying to meet their physical requirements and teaching such basic tasks as sitting and eating, S. Ruth Anne strove to “give them a happy, joyful environment; one in which they were capable of interacting.” What was fulfilling, she says, was “the glimmer you got from the smiles on their faces.” Looking back, S. Ruth Anne describes the year as the “happiest and healthiest” for them. Since then, three of the youths have died. S. Ruth

Anne continued working with the youngest child at home for six years, and gradually integrated him into a kindergarten class.

From there S. Ruth Anne became an Inclusion Specialist at the elementary school in Pittsfield, NH, where she worked with blind, multihandicapped and severely autistic children, all of whom required one-on-one paraprofessionals. After seven years there, S. Ruth Anne spent a year on sabbatical in California. During that time, the children who had died over the years kept coming to mind, as if to say, “Don’t forget us.” And so, upon her return to New Hampshire, S. Ruth Anne agreed to work primarily in therapeutic day care with a 17-month-old child with Angelman’s Syndrome—a congenital disorder characterized by severe developmental delays in all areas.

S. Ruth Anne subsequently got referrals to other children—including one child with Rett’s Syndrome, another with cerebral palsy, and others with autism.

Eventually, S. Ruth Anne became trained as a Licensed Nurse Assistant, enabling her to provide both respite care and therapeutic day care. Today, S. Ruth Anne works four days a week, 10 hours a day, plus tutoring and some weekend respite hours. Although she said it can be physically tiring, she does not find it psychologically tiring. It is inspiring, S. Ruth Anne says, “to see these little ones do all they can do with the challenges they have.”

A major influence on S. Ruth Anne has been the Option Institute, a program in Sheffield, MA, that was founded by Barry Kaufman, whose motto is: “to love is to be happy with.” The father of a once autistic

child who graduated from Brown University, Kaufman believes that these children are doing the best that they possibly can, and that they need to be told, “You’re OK as you are, and we love you.” At the Option Institute, the goal is to shift from the negative to the positive, to eliminate as much negative as possible, and to find a way to “make it OK.”

I came that they may have life and have it to the full. This passage from the New Testament has been S. Ruth Anne’s special inspiration in her ministry as a Sister of Charity, and “giving joyful witness to love ... striving to show forth the love of God by serving those in need in the spirit of humility, simplicity and charity ... and according to the circumstances of the time.”

As long as she is healthy, she is committed to continuing in her



Sister Ruth Anne , 2013

ministry, where her rewards are the “smiles of the kids, when they are able to make eye contact with you. There is nothing like it; it is as if you are looking into God.”

In today’s super-rushed, electronic world of cell phones, iPods and palm pilots; of instantaneous gratification and materialism, there are so many lessons to be learned from S. Ruth Anne: humility, unconditional love and self-sacrifice; caring for—and learning from—those who need it the most, yet are the least able to show their appreciation; finding joy in the simplest of gifts from God. This quote from the Old Testament selected by S. Ruth Anne, says it all: *Yahweh asks of you only this: To act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God.* (Micah 6)