Remembering

Sister Joel Read, S.S.S.F.

December 30, 1925 - May 25, 2017

Alverno College President
1968 – 2003
Alverno College President Emerita
Take risks.  
Don’t ever think that something can’t be done.  
It can.  
Opportunity is everywhere.

Sister Joel Read
Former Alverno College President Sister Joel Read, SSSF, Class of 1948, died on May 25, 2017 at the age of 91. Read, Alverno’s President Emerita, was one of the nation’s longest-serving college presidents and a renowned advocate for education reform.

Born on December 30, 1925 to parents Joseph and Ellen Read, Janice Anne Read grew up in Chicago, Illinois. While attending Roman Catholic elementary and high school, she was taught by nuns who inspired her to heed the call to religious life. "The School Sisters of St. Francis taught at the elementary school which I attended from fifth grade on. They wouldn’t fuss about little things, trivia. They were very good to one another and when I saw them together, they were a very joyful group. So in that sense, it was attractive," Sister Joel once told Alverno Magazine. Janice Read later took the religious name of Sister Joel in honor of her parents Joseph and Ellen.

Sister Joel took her first vows with the School Sisters in 1945 and earned her bachelor’s degree in education from Alverno in 1948. She spent several years teaching at the Our Lady of Good Counsel parish school in Aurora, Illinois. Sister Joel completed a master’s degree in history from Fordham University in New York, where she also pursued doctoral-level work.
This is the graduation photo for the Alverno College and College of Music Class of July 1948. Sister Joel Read is identified in the second row from the top, the third sister from the left.
Alverno welcomed Sister Joel back to campus in 1955 to chair its history department, offering her a chance to return to her ultimate love of teaching. “When you decide in life that you are going to be a teacher — and by joining the SSSF that decision was made for me — I began to understand what a teacher can do for someone if she is effective as a teacher,” she told Alverno Magazine. “And I think, that when I was a teacher, that was the most exciting part.”

In 1967 Sister Joel and Father Raymond Parr were honored as the first recipients of Alverno Teacher of the Year awards.
Sister Joel Read was named Acting President of Alverno College on July 1, 1968. She served as the acting president from July 1968 to December 1968. Read was named the sixth President of the college by the Board of Trustees in November of 1968. The formal announcement to the faculty and students came on December 13, 1968. Sister Joel continued to serve the college as President until her retirement on June 30, 2003.
After more than a decade of teaching, Sister Joel was appointed President of Alverno College in 1968 by Alverno’s first lay Board of Trustees.

The photo above is of the February 1968 Inauguration of Alverno College Lay Trustees: (left to right) Sister Samuel Nalefski, Sister Maureen Hartnett, Dr. Barbara Ramusack, Dr. Robert Byrnes, Mr. John Sisk, Sister Joel Read, Mr. Frank Zeidler, Dr. Kathryn F. Clarenbach, Sister Augustine Scheele, Judge Leo Hanley, Father William LaDue, Dr. Edward Bachhuber and Sister Francis Borgia Rothluebber.
On July 1, 1968, with the retirement of Sister Augustine Scheele, the Board of Trustees appointed Sister Joel Read as Acting President of Alverno College.

As described in the holiday issue of Alverno Campus News (right), Sister Joel's appointment as Alverno College President became permanent on Friday December 13, 1968 when it was formally announced to the Alverno community.
During her 35 years at Alverno’s helm, Sister Joel grew her alma mater into the internationally renowned educational institution it is today. She led the development of Alverno’s 8 Abilities and assessment-based learning model, which has produced legions of successful graduates and inspired educators around the globe.

The "September '69" program came about as a forum for discussion between students, faculty and administration to effect beneficial changes in the Alverno learning process. Ideas that sprang forth from these dialogues eventually became the framework for Alverno's Ability-based curriculum.
At a critical juncture for the College, President Joel Read worked with faculty to carry out a new vision for education. Those efforts bore fruit in 1973, when Alverno introduced its distinctive abilities-based curriculum and assessment-as-learning approach, a hallmark that continues to distinguish Alverno graduates today. Educators from around the world continue to visit Alverno to study this unique approach to education.
Other achievements under Sister Joel’s visionary leadership include the introduction of one of the first college internship programs in the country (1971); the launch of the Weekend College (1977), targeted at working women; and the creation of the Digital Diagnostic Portfolio (1999), which allowed students to follow their learning progress online.

Weekend College (later known as Alverno on the Weekend), another pioneering effort by Alverno College, opened its doors in August 1977. It was announced in the February 25, 1977 press release below. The response to Weekend College was phenomenal with close to 350 inquiries within 48 hours of its announcement.
Sister Joel’s many achievements weren’t confined to Alverno — she also left her mark on the Milwaukee community, as well as throughout the state of Wisconsin and the United States. In the 1960s, Sister Joel was one of several Alverno women at the forefront of advocating for women’s rights, and the National Organization for Women honors her on its website as being among NOW’s founders and pioneers.

Sister Mary Joel Read

Sister Mary Joel Read Sr. Mary Joel Read was one of the NOW founders who participated in the weekend of meetings in June, 1966, and was one of the 28 who signed the initial telegram to the EEOC Commissioners: “We respectfully urge the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to rescind its ruling permitting employment advertisements in newspapers under separate Help Wanted Male and Help Wanted Female column headings and to adopt in its place the language recommended by Representative Martha Griffiths, which appears in the Congressional Record for June 20, 1966.” She was also on the first NOW national board. Sr. Joel Reed served as President of Alverno College in Milwaukee from 1968 to 2003, making her, at the time, the nation’s longest sitting college president. During her thirty-five year tenure she earned a well-justified reputation as a notable educational reform advocate and a woman who has dedicated her life to the advancement of women. She received an honorary doctorate from Marquette University in 2003.

http://now.org/about/history/honoring-our-founders-pioneers/
Sister Joel Read attended the first organizing meeting of the National Organization for Women (NOW) held in Washington D.C. on October 30, 1966. Sister Joel, wearing her SSSF habit, is seated in the second row of attendees. She was the President of the Milwaukee Chapter of NOW from 1967-1968.

The plaque to the right was awarded to Sister Joel during the 20th anniversary celebration of NOW, July 18, 1986.
“Pioneer” is an apt word to describe Sister Joel Read’s status among educators...

In 1986, the book The Many Lives of Academic Presidents called Sister Joel “one of a handful of college presidents who have broken new educational ground in the past 100 years.” She shared her boundless wisdom as a member of the boards of numerous local, state and national education organizations as well as with two U.S. presidents, who invited her to the White House to discuss educational policy.

Some of her many and varied honors include:

- Appointment to the Wisconsin Governor’s Commission on the Status of Women, 1971
- Alverno Alumnae Association National Board’s first Outstanding Alumna Award, 1971
- Presidential appointee to the U.S. Commission for the Celebration of International Women’s Year, 1975
- First recipient of the Harvard University Graduate School of Education’s Anne Roe Award, 1980
- Wisconsin Women in Higher Education Leadership’s Lifetime Leadership Award
- Presidential Appointee to the National Council on the Humanities, 1984
- Midwestern Leaders of the Modern Women’s Movement Bridges that Carry Us Over Award, 1992
- Fellowship and induction to The American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1993
- Vatican II Award for Service in Education, 2001

President Read was awarded honorary degrees from several esteemed institutions of higher education including:

- Wittenberg University Springfield, Ohio 1976
- Harvard University Cambridge, Massachusetts 1980
- Marymount Manhattan College, New York, New York 1981
- DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois 1985
- Lawrence University Appleton, Wisconsin 1997

Sister Joel retired as Alverno’s president in 2003, but her legacy lives on. The Sister Joel Read Conference Center and Sister Joel Read Outstanding Educator Award ensure that her name is known to a new generation of Alverno women, a generation whose education still bears Sister Joel’s indelible stamp.
"...To Form a More Perfect Union..." justice for American women is the Report of the National Commission on the Observance of International Women’s Year issued to members of the presidential commission to which Alverno’s then president, Sister Joel Read, was a member.

To the right is a photo of the members of the National Commission on the Observance of International Women’s Year that appeared in the Women in Action summer 1975 publication. Sister Joel is seen in the front row, third from the left.
International Women's Year
1975-1976

"...TO FORM A MORE PERFECT UNION..."
Justice for American Women

Additional pages from the commission's report, “...To Form a More Perfect Union...” Justice for American Women shows the title page (above) and page 133 (right) which features photos of some of the commission members. Alverno's then president, Sister Joel Read, was a member of the commission.
Sister Joel received this signed presidential dictum dated April 14, 1975 as a member of the National Commission on the Observance of International Women’s Year, 1975 by President Gerald R. Ford. The official certificate, which measures 17 inches by 21 inches bears an official embossed presidential seal and the signatures of the thirty-eighth President of the United States Gerald R. Ford and Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger.
The Alverno Alumnae Association awarded Sister Joel Read with its first Outstanding Alumna Award dated May 8, 1971.
On September 29, 1980 Sister Joel Read accepted the very first Anne Roe Award from Harvard University honoring Sister Joel’s life and work in education. As part of her acceptance speech Sister Joel remarked,

“At Alverno, what our life history shows is that we take women seriously. That we educate them to educate themselves. That is, to think.”

Just a few of the Honorary Degrees bestowed upon Sister Joel Read.
The Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU) awarded Sister Joel Read, President Emerita of Alverno College with the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C. Award for outstanding contributions to Catholic higher education. The award, the oldest award given by the association, was presented to Sister Joel during the association’s annual meeting in Washington D.C. on January 28, 2012. The photo to the left shows Sister Joel Read with Alverno President Mary J. Meehan and ACCU President Michael Galligan-Stierle.

Photo ©Peter Cutts Photography, used by permission of the ACCU.
Ever the historian and ardent researcher, Sister Joel recognized the importance of preserving the institutional history of Alverno College and its founders. On January 13, 1976, she officially introduced the Alverno College Archives and Archivist Sister Joanne Barras.

This image of the Office Memorandum sent by Sister Joel to administrators, faculty and staff outlines the establishment, policy and mission of the Alverno College Archives.
Exploring and developing international ties was always important to President Read from the time she was a history instructor at Alverno through her presidency. Exchanging knowledge and information through educational outreach programs and conferences was a natural extension of the Alverno curriculum and Alverno’s philosophy of experiential learning.

In the photos clockwise: (top right) Sisters J. Dolores Brunner and Joel Read meet with Olivette Stuart Caulker and Lettie Stuart from Sierra Leone June 5-6, 1964; (bottom right) President Joel Read meets with visiting educators from the Netherlands; (bottom center) President Read speaks at a conference at Nijenrode Universiteit (Neyenrode University) in 1988; and (bottom left) President Read presents Fullbright Visiting Professor Sufia Ahmed with an appreciation award from Alverno College in 1985.
President Read also oversaw multimillion-dollar fundraising campaigns that expanded the physical campus, as well as scholarship and academic offerings. “I don’t have any problem raising money,” she once said. “If I were asking for myself, forget it. When you’ve got something very worthwhile and you see what it means to individual students, you see them transformed; you go for it.”

Sister Joel Read stands in the rotunda of the Teaching Learning and Technology Center which was completed during her presidency in 1999. The building was later renamed in her honor, the Sister Joel Read Center (RC) in 2012. (Photo bottom left shows the Read Center exterior).
Images from the groundbreaking ceremony for the Teaching Learning and Technology Center, October 15, 1997. The building would later be renamed the Sister Joel Read Center in 2012.
School Sisters of Saint Francis Community

The School Sisters of Saint Francis and community life was deeply woven into the tapestry of Sister Joel’s life. As a child in catholic grade school, she recognized the communal bonds the sisters had with one another and the joyfulness with which they served others. In 1943 Sister Joel took her vows with the School Sisters of Saint Francis becoming a member of the community she so admired.

Sister Joel was once asked in a profile article written in 2000 by Alan Borsuk, an education journalist, friend, and senior law fellow at Marquette University, why she became a nun. She responded, “I really wanted to know if you could know God in this life.” Borsuk then asked if she had succeeded, to which she replied, “I think I have.”

Through the School Sisters of Saint Francis as Sister Joel Read so came to know God, she was able to touch the lives of thousands. Helping others to lift themselves up as they sought knowledge, self-discovery and the ability to set and attain unimaginable goals.

“In education, I think that making people as independent as you can, giving them the tools to handle their own life, is the most fundamental gift you can give.”


Sister Joel’s SSSF 25th Jubilee celebration photo from 1968.
Featured in the photo above were honored members of the School Sisters of Saint Francis following an awards ceremony highlighting their dedicated service to their community. Seated from left to right are: Sisters Laura Lampe, Helena Steffens-meier, Joann Posch, and Armella Weibel; standing are Gratia Gross, Johanela Fiecke, Elizabeth McCourt, Elizabeth Grosse Rhode, Solano Granger, Mary Simec, Dorothy Adler, Elena Kollenbroich, and Seraphim Stoecker. Standing to the far right is Sister Joel Read who made the presentations. *Alverno Today, Fall 1977, page 4*
In the photo upper right, Sister Joel attends a special jubilee liturgy, dinner, and reception held at the St. Joseph Center located in the School Sisters of St. Francis motherhouse. The event honored the milestone anniversaries of service as religious women. Sister Joel receives a framed photo of Archbishop Rembert Weakland from Bishop Sklba in the lower left photo and the photo lower right shows Sister Joel seated beside Archbishop Rembert Weakland.
This photo was taken during Sister Joel’s 90th birthday celebration held at Alverno College on April 7, 2016. The celebration commemorating Sister Joel’s 90th birthday which was actually on December 30, 2015 was among the last gatherings at the college that Sister Joel attended.

As news of Sister Joel Read’s death arrived on campus, Alverno President Andrea Lee, IHM sent word to the Alverno Community in a heartfelt letter:

Dear Alverno Community,

It is with a heavy heart that I inform you that our revered President Emerita, Sister Joel Read, died last night, May 25. She had suffered several medical complications during the past few weeks, and passed peacefully surrounded by family and sisters who loved her.

Services are being scheduled and I will share information as soon as it is available. Surely we at Alverno will want to honor Sister Joel’s life and her extraordinary contributions to our College, to our city and to higher education and the advancement of women nationally.

In her retirement letter to the Alverno community in 2003, Sister Joel said, “It has only been with the strong commitment of a highly dedicated faculty, staff, administration and board of trustees that Alverno College has been able to achieve its distinctive standing.”

So as she leaves us in body—but never in spirit—to encounter the God she served through her incredible life work, we all stand to honor and further her legacy of developing strong, independent, educated women. Women ready to take risks and to impact our world for the better. Women who will make us and her forever proud. Alverno women.

May Sister Joel’s life call us all to be more and better than we imagine ourselves capable of being - as individuals and as members of the strong Alverno community. May we know peace and serenity as we grieve Sister Joel’s loss. May we find inspiration in sharing our memories and the many lessons she taught us. In a special way, we extend our deep sympathy and promise of prayer to Sister Joel’s School Sisters of St. Francis family and to her family of birth.
“Sister Joel devoted her incredible talents to building a revolutionary educational institution that has thrived for decades,” said Mary Meehan, PhD, who succeeded Sister Joel as president and served in that role from 2004-16.

“Sister was a colleague, mentor and friend to me, and I will forever be grateful to her for her constant support and encouragement. Anyone who knew her would agree that she was a teacher from whom we all learned so much.”

Mary J. Meehan

During the funeral liturgy for Sister Joel on June 1, 2017, her longtime friend, fellow school sister, colleague, and advisee Sister Kathleen O’Brien said of Sister Joel:

“Of all my memories, her courageous tenacity stands out. We all know of her many accomplishments as we look back over her life. Yet success is never for certain...”

O’Brien went on to explain the many challenges and obstacles that Sister Joel faced as a new college president of a women’s college facing a serious financial crisis.

“Despite these hurdles she assured the faculty as she wrote to them in 1968, ‘I would like you to know that I have the utmost confidence in each of you.’ To the Alverno students she proclaimed using a particularly favorite Broadway line: ‘Stick with me baby and you will see your name in lights!!’ I have often wondered what kind of internal stamina and fortitude and faith it took to continue in those adverse conditions. We see her accomplishments now, but often don’t realize what courage and tenacity it took and what these cost her personally.”

Sister Kathleen O’Brien
“At Alverno we believe that the most important development each day on campus is the dynamic interaction of the minds of faculty and students, faculty and faculty, and students and students. The whole administrative organization of the college is oriented to support this relationship. It is my purpose, in the capacity of acting president, to lend every possible encouragement and aid.”

Sister Joel Read, S.S.S.F.

Those words were spoken near the beginning of Sister Joel’s 35 year presidency at Alverno College in 1968. Her mission of dynamic interaction of minds was realized daily throughout her presidency and beyond.
To learn more about Sister Joel Read and the history of Alverno College visit the Alverno College Archives website: http://www.alverno.edu/archives/

For more information on the history of the School Sisters of Saint Francis visit their website at: http://www.sssf.org/

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