

Arleen Hynes, 90; Bibliotherapy Pioneer

By Yvonne Shinoster Lamb, Washington Post Staff Writer Friday, September 15, 2006; B07

Sister Arleen McCarty Hynes, who pioneered the use of bibliotherapy at St. Elizabeths Hospital by engaging patients in literature as a process of healing and personal growth, died Sept. 5 of liver cancer at the Saint Scholastica Convent nursing home in St. Cloud, Minn. She was 90.

Sister Arleen created the first comprehensive hospital-based training for bibliotherapy and co-wrote with her daughter Mary Hynes-Berry the authoritative book "Biblio-Poetry Therapy: The Interactive Process: A Handbook" in 1994. She joined the Sisters of St. Benedict in 1981, after 10 years at St. Elizabeths in the District.

Hired in 1971 as a patients' librarian at the country's only federal mental hospital, Sister Arleen expanded the library services offered there. She introduced a movie and a lecture series, provided a place where patients could listen to music and lent artwork for display in patients' rooms.

"She made it a service center and a homey place," said Kenneth Gorelick, a psychiatrist who worked with Sister Arleen at St. Elizabeths. "She just had this knack, this talent for enriching the lives of those she touched."

She began exploring more deeply her interest in books as therapy, focusing on literature that stimulated the imagination rather than on didactic books. She discovered the work of New York psychiatrist Jack J. Leedy, who edited the book "Poetry Therapy: The Use of Poetry in the Treatment of Emotional Disorders" (1969). Sister Arleen's attention turned to the fledgling field of poetry therapy, with its use of metaphor, imagery, rhythm and other treatments.

"It began with some drug therapy I was asked to do at the hospital, and I got interested in therapy through reading, something like poetry therapy," she recalled in a 1977 Washington Post article. "There was no place to train for it, so I taught myself. I started running classes in the evenings with maybe seven people, training librarians in the techniques."

A charismatic woman with flashing blue eyes, Sister Arleen was a brilliant teacher, Gorelick said. In group sessions, patients were encouraged to read poems, short stories or essays and to discuss their feelings and maybe write their own responses. Sometimes, she brought in objects -- an autumn leaf or an engineer's cap -- to stimulate the senses.

"It has to be stuff they can relate to, stuff that appeals to their own human experiences," she said. "What happens is that the patients learn to open up to each other, and also they get staff-affirmation from the materials, they respond to it in their own ways."

Sister Arleen became a prime force in establishing the National Association for Poetry Therapy, a leading creative arts therapy professional organization, and she hired the first bibliotherapist at St. Elizabeths. In 1978, she was awarded the Dorothea Dix Award in recognition of her contributions at St. Elizabeths, and in 2002, she was recognized by the poetry therapy association.

Arleen McCarty Hynes was born prematurely May 3, 1916, in Sheldon, Iowa, with an identical twin sister. Her mother died giving birth to the pair. Her father raised their seven older siblings, and the twins were adopted and raised by an aunt.

After graduating with a library science degree from the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minn., she married Emerson Hynes. They built a house they called Kilfenora in the woods in Collegeville, Minn., near Saint John's University, where her husband taught philosophy and sociology.

A steady stream of visitors came to talk and laugh at Kilfenora, including relatives, monks and others associated with the college. The couple also hosted regular gatherings of the "Movement" -- a collection of liberal Catholic artists, writers and thinkers, including activist Dorothy Day and novelist J.F. Powers and his wife, Betty Powers.

In 1959, the family, which included 10 children, moved to Arlington when Emerson Hynes agreed to serve as legislative assistant to his former classmate, Eugene J. "Gene" McCarthy, who had been elected to the U.S. Senate.

Sister Arleen worked with a study group on Vatican II and served on the National Council on Aging.

As the Virginia president of the American Association of University Women, she did a pioneering study of the role of women in 1962.

When McCarthy ran for president in opposition to the Vietnam War in 1968, Sister Arleen served as the head of Volunteers for McCarthy. The campaign took its toll on her husband, said family members, contributing to a stroke and in 1971, a fatal heart attack.

At 55, Sister Arleen went to St. Elizabeths, where her work engaged more than 100 patients a week. By 1981, she felt strongly the need to be a part of a spiritual community. She retired from St. Elizabeths and joined the Sisters of St. Benedict.

A son, Michael Hynes, died in 1970.

In addition to her daughter, of Chicago, survivors include eight children, Denis Hynes of Collegeville, Patrick Hynes of Arlington, Hilary Daley Hynes of Burtonsville, Brigid Hynes-Cherin of Washington, Peter Hynes of Cedar Creek, Tex., T. More Hynes of Winnebago, Minn., and Timothy Hynes and Christopher Hynes, both of Austin; 22 grandchildren; and 10 great-grandchildren.