

In Memory of Sister Berta Sailer

December 10, 1936 – January 25, 2024

Sister Berta Sailer, once hailed as the “Mother Teresa of Kansas City,” passed away peacefully Jan. 25, 2024, in Kansas City, at the age of 87. Sister Berta, who co-founded Operation Breakthrough, devoted her life and her voice to children and parents in poverty.

She was born Judith Felice on Dec. 10, 1936, in Chicago, the only child of Cecelia Sailer. Raised by her grandmother, Bertha Sailer, young Judy spent time in the convent where her grandmother worked as a cook. She graduated high school in 1954, with dreams of serving the poor in Africa. Money was tight, and becoming a nun looked like the most feasible route to the life of service she envisioned. She entered Mount Carmel Convent in Dubuque, IA, where she took the name “Sister Berta,” to honor her grandmother. In 1957, she became a professed member of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, commonly known as “the BVMs.” She completed degrees in education and history at Mundelein College in Chicago and taught in Chicago Catholic schools. It was there that she encountered the forces that defined her life's work.

In 1958, Sister Berta's order sent her to Our Lady of Angels School, where 92 children had just died in a fire. There she learned on the fly how to comfort and teach traumatized children. She also met a fellow BVM, Sister Corita Bussanmas. The pair bonded while running a club for wayward teens, gang members who called themselves “The West Side Jokers.” The nuns confiscated the flasks of whiskey boys tried to sneak in and, believing the boys would behave better if they had something to do, Sister Berta helped them form a softball team and once took them to rent motorcycles – a move that cemented her reputation as a loose cannon in the parish.

Sister Berta followed her friend Sister Corita to Kansas City in 1968 to teach at St. Vincent's School at 31st and Flora, where she let live chickens roam the school after her students finished their project on egg incubation. Her punishment for a kid shooting spit wads? She threw 100 beans down a flight of stairs and told him he could not go home until he found them all. Students who had been thrown out of public schools learned at St. Vincent's – and adored Sister Berta! Along the way, Sister Berta and Sister Corita opened a daycare center in the convent living room, so mothers with young children could work and support their families.

When the nuns learned the diocese might shut down St. Vincent's because, as white families left the neighborhood the school was no longer serving Catholic children, Sister Berta led the charge to keep it open, ultimately deciding with Sister Corita to forge on without church backing. They incorporated the school and childcare program as a not-for-profit called Operation Breakthrough in 1971. There, Sister Berta worked 365 days a year for 44 years, until a broken hip and shoulder sidelined her in 2015.

A tireless advocate for children in poverty, Sister Berta was the go-to person for three generations of families in the urban core. She stood up for them in court, in Jefferson City and

Washington DC. She helped them bury their dead, diaper their babies and keep going when it seemed like the whole world was against them.

Operation Breakthrough grew to serve more than 700 children each weekday, offering on-site medical and dental care, occupational, speech and play therapy, and a host of family services, in addition to educational enrichment. With a two-generation approach to helping children reach their potential, Sister Berta spent as many hours uplifting – and scolding – parents as she did children. She took every opportunity to put Operation Breakthrough parents and potential supporters on common ground, battering away at the mindset of “us” and “them.” She created the “City You Never See” bus tour – a trip through the urban core, narrated by parents of children at Operation Breakthrough – to educate the public about the challenges of families in need. Her “100 Jobs for 100 Moms” program entreated employers to give struggling mothers a chance to support their children.

With her devotion and irreverent wit, she inspired hundreds, perhaps thousands, of volunteers, donors and advocates to join her in serving children in need. She adopted this saying as her motto, frequently handing out copies of it: “Be the kind of woman that when your feet hit the floor every morning, the devil says, ‘Oh, crap! She’s up!’ ”

Sister Berta received many honors, including the Kindest Kansas Citian Award in 2001 and, along with Sister Corita, the Community Service Award from the Women’s Political Caucus in 2007, the Marion and John Kreamer Award for Social Entrepreneurship from the University of Missouri-Kansas City in 2014. She and Sister Corita were inducted into UMKC’s Starr Women’s Hall of Fame in 2021.

No honor was more important to Sister Berta, though, than being “Mom” to the four children she and Sister Corita adopted: Yauti, Ronnie, Vanshay and Tyrez. An infamous worrywart, she was likely to call them a dozen times an hour if they weren’t home by 10 p.m., but they never doubted how much she cared.

Sister Corita passed away in 2021. Sister Berta’s survivors include her daughters, Kenyauta Sailer and Vanshay Purnell; sons Ronald Sailer and Tyrez Scott; honorary sons Myles Cason and Chris Waxter, along with his children Lailani and Christian; and four grandsons: Kyler, Mylo and Kamdyn Sailer and Roderick Ryles Jr. Also surviving are more than 70 young people who spent some part of their childhood living under Sister Berta and Corita’s roof, including Darius and Jaya Phillips.

The family would like to express their thanks to Sister Berta’s devoted care team: Paige, Johnetta, Terry, Tami, Yolanda, C’Ashinae and Lana.

A rosary will be prayed at 6 p.m. Wednesday, January 31st at St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church, 1001 E 52nd St, Kansas City, MO 64110, followed by a visitation. Mass of Christian Burial will be 6 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 1st at the church; private family burial. In lieu of flowers, please consider memorial contributions to The Sister Corita and Sister Berta Irrevocable Trust (for the care of their family) in care of Country Club Bank, One Ward Parkway, Kansas City MO 64112

or to Operation Breakthrough, 3039 Troost Avenue, Kansas City MO 64109.
(operationbreakthrough.org)

Former Senator Claire McCaskill once called Sister Berta "the Mother Teresa of Kansas City." Mayor Sly James gave her his cell phone number – and answered her calls. The Obamas invited her to the White House. But for Sister Berta, it was always the children who belonged in the spotlight. "The child who will grow up to cure cancer might be here in our Center today," she frequently said in the halls of Operation Breakthrough, "and we better make sure they have what they need to succeed."