

Save Regina Update, July 4, 2005

Hi, Everybody!

It's important that we keep Regina's story alive because it's going to take a lot of prayer and extensive funds (c \$70,000 more) to help her win asylum.

Her story is also important to many other immigrants struggling through our Draconian and costly bureaucracy for the right to become U.S. citizens. With this in mind, I agreed to be interviewed by Meg Kissinger of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. I was stunned this morning when I saw the headline on today's front page, "Nun adopts role of Lady Liberty" (article below).

Among the side benefits of such exposure, I relish the opportunity to shine a positive, realistic light on the School Sisters of Notre Dame and other Catholic sisters who work in untold ways to empower the poor in the name of Jesus. This is who we really are and what we're about.

While the article mentions that I have been helping with other immigrants, I'm not hanging out my shingle. It's exhausting work and I greatly admire the dedication of the immigration lawyers I know. This week I completed nine years on staff at St. Mary's. While I will not abandon the four immigrant families who entered my life over the past six years, on June 30th I officially left my position on staff.

Thanks to Regina's case, God has shown us an effective way to encourage systemic change on immigration issues. By shining a brilliant light on one beautiful, wronged woman, we can touch the hearts of ordinary Americans. Political change will follow.

I am a writer. My big effort now, with the support of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, is to write Regina's compelling story, get it into print as soon as possible and -- hey, think big! -- a movie. Two weeks ago when I phoned Judy Bridges, the director and writing coach from Redbird Studios, she said, "Josephe, I've been waiting for this call! What took you so long?" Please keep this effort tucked in your prayers, okay?

It's the fourth of July. Today I begin.

Love,  
Josephe

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## **Nun adopts role of Lady Liberty**

### **Devout woman's persistence and pluck helped immigrant fight deportation**

By MEG KISSINGER [mkissinger@journalsentinel.com](mailto:mkissinger@journalsentinel.com) *Posted: July 3, 2005*

With more than 296 million people, this is a big, powerful country. It's nearly impossible for one little person to stop the wheels of the federal bureaucracy once they begin to grind. But don't tell that to anyone who knows Sister Josephe Marie Flynn, 64, of Milwaukee's south side.

"For a skinny, white-haired nun, she packs a wallop," said Darrell Morin, a parishioner at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Hales Corners, where Sister Josephe served as director of Christian formation until last Thursday. Morin has seen Sister Josephe in action, working to save Regina Bakala, a fellow parishioner, from being deported to the Democratic Republic of Congo.

"This case never would have turned out the way it did if it had not been for the strength of character and faith that Sister Josephe Marie displayed," said Morin.

Now, the nun is helping a number of other immigrants in their battles for American citizenship.

How the Milwaukee nun managed to garner the forces of lawmakers and lobbyists from both sides of the political aisle, stand up to the federal government and win - at least temporarily - is a lesson in patience, persistence and pluck. She says that her saga is a timely reminder on this Fourth of July that this country was settled by immigrants fleeing persecution, a haven for those whose governments oppress them.

Everyone who knew of her case said that Bakala, a high school principal who fled the Congo in 1995, was a "goner," certain to be deported back to her homeland where, many feared, she would be tortured and killed for her opposition to the government there. Even the African woman's lawyer had all but abandoned hope.

"We were frantic," said Mary Sfasciotti, Bakala's immigration lawyer. "All of us, we were nearly hysterical. I honestly didn't know on Monday morning if Regina would still be in this country by that Wednesday."

Bakala, 41, now home in Milwaukee with her husband, David, and their two children, Lydia, 5, and Christopher, 4, praises the two most powerful forces she knows for her sudden change in fortune and the fact that she is still alive - God and Sister Josephe.

## **A feisty person**

Sister Josephe, born Mary Therese Flynn, has been raising hell for as long as she, or anyone else, can remember.

"She's feisty all right," said her sister, Ruth Vonderberg of Whitefish Bay. "And she doesn't take 'No' for an answer."

The oldest of three girls of Joseph Flynn, an auto mechanic, and his wife, Mary, Sister Josephe spent much of her middle school years in Monches, Wis., in a most un-nunlike way.

"I liked being liked by the boys," she said with a giggle that is only slightly naughty all these years later. But there was just one love that pulled at her heart, fierce enough to draw her outside at night to stare at the stars and dream.

## **Lady Liberty**



Photo/Sonja Y. Foster

Sister Josephe Marie Flynn (left) sits with Regina Bakala outside Bakala's Milwaukee home on Friday. The Catholic nun was instrumental in preventing Bakala from being deported to the Democratic Republic of Congo, where Bakala fears persecution. Bakala still faces another hearing in the case.

"I wanted to serve God with all my heart," she said. "Even now, it just takes my breath away how much he loves me and I love him."

At 14, she entered the convent in Prairie du Chien to study to become a School Sister of Notre Dame.

"A lot of people think we have a lonely life," she said. "But there are advantages to being a nun. We are on the cutting edge of social justice. We work for the poor. I wouldn't have the time or energy to do that if I had a family. Or the trust. When you're a nun, people give you a lot of trust."

After teaching stints in Beaver Dam, West Bend, Messmer High School in Milwaukee and schools in Marshfield, Wis., and Escanaba, Mich., Sister Josephe turned her attention to the charismatic movement of the Catholic Church. Never stopping long enough to get a driver's license, she traveled the country by Greyhound bus, putting on retreats for those who sought to deepen their faith with what she calls more "right brain" activities, such as dream analysis, art therapy, music, dance and speaking in tongues.

Seven years ago, she took the job at St. Mary's, one of the largest parishes in the Milwaukee Archdiocese, directing the adult religious education and formation programs. That's where she met Bakala in 2000. The Congolese woman had just moved to Milwaukee from Atlanta and was working at a nursing home nearby.

"She told me that she dreamed that she would have a black friend," Bakala recalled. "And when I told her that my late mother was named Josephine, we both knew that it was meant to be. From then on, she was like my mother, or my best friend."

### **Lawyer persuaded to take case**

The two became fast friends, spending holidays together, confiding in one another.

Bakala had been denied her petition for asylum, and the case was on appeal. Or, so she thought. Last fall, when the Bakalas applied for a mortgage, they learned that the appeals court had denied her again, years earlier, noting that she had entered the country in 1995 using false documents. Bakala's original lawyer moved to New Jersey while the case was on appeal and says now that she was never notified of the decision. Panicked, Bakala asked Sister Josephe what to do next.

"I told her not to make a big case out of it. No news was good news," Sister Josephe said.

But on March 22, federal agents showed up at Bakala's door and took her to a detention facility in Kenosha, where she was locked up in a small, windowless cell. The next day, she was transported to Milwaukee, where she was fingerprinted and the paperwork was begun to have Bakala sent back to the Congo.

Sister Josephe got the call that night and went right to work, assembling a team of professionals from the parish that would get the word out about this mother of two small children and the very real threat that she faced. People of the parish joined forces to help, regardless of age, race or political party.

"We attacked this as Americans," said Morin.

That was the only way, said Sister Josephe.

"This parish is something like 97 percent Republicans," the nun said. "One woman told me, 'Sister, I have a shrine to George W. Bush in every room of my house.' I told her, 'Well, I have a dartboard with his picture on it.' But that wasn't the point. I knew that if we focused on the plight of one woman, one lovely woman, that the politics and politicians would follow."

And they did.

Ultimately, her list of supporters read like a Who's Who of the powerful. Her team got commitments of support from Republican congressman Paul Ryan, his Democratic colleague Gwen Moore and the two U.S. senators from Wisconsin, Russ Feingold and Herb Kohl. Catholic Archbishop Timothy Dolan wrote a letter of support.

Still, no lawyer would take the case.

"They kept saying it was too late," Sister Josephe said.

After being turned down by three lawyers in Milwaukee, the nun finally talked Sfasciotti, a lawyer in Chicago who has worked in immigration law for many years, into working on the case.

For the next few weeks, Sister Josephe and her team followed every order that Sfasciotti gave them, orchestrating a letter-writing campaign and traveling to Washington to lobby on Bakala's behalf. The lawyer was impressed. Sister Josephe, she said, was a powerful ally.

"She understood what needed to be done," Sfasciotti said. "She did not go off on tangents, this one."

The lawyer filed three motions, noting that her original lawyer had not included a number of factors - including the torture and rape - in the original petition. Most people figured it was too late when Bakala's new passport arrived, and she was told that she would be leaving in two days. These last-minute petitions are almost never successful, Sfasciotti said.

"There were many tears that day," Sister Josephe said. "And prayers."

To everyone's surprise, the day before Bakala was to be deported, the Board of Immigration Appeals voted to reopen her case.

Bakala is not free to stay indefinitely. There will be a new hearing on the merits of her case, probably later this summer in Atlanta. So far, her legal bills top \$25,000.

Sister Josephe, who followed through on plans made in January to retire from St. Mary's, is now working full-time on writing about Bakala's case. She is helping others with immigration matters, including people from Indonesia, Nigeria and another person from the Congo.

"I know. I know. I'm this nun with a mission. Have mouth, will travel," she said. "But I really believe that if we look at one another as human beings, we'll see the justice. This country was founded on those principles. So much of our discussion about immigration today is based on fear," Sister Josephe said in reference to changes in immigration policy that focus on terrorism. "This is not the America that we want to be part of."

From the July 4, 2005, editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel  
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