

Sister Majella Berg

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The year is 1918. You're on a road trip through Virginia with your family, but need help finding Alexandria county. After asking for directions, you're unknowingly directed to the city of Alexandria. Now you and your family are in Alexandria miles away from your desired destination. This scenario likely played out countless times until 1920, when the Virginia General Assembly re-named Alexandria County, Arlington. Arlington honored Robert E. Lee, by paying homage to his former home, "The Arlington House", which is currently located in Arlington National Cemetery. This year, Arlington residents celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Arlington's name by recognizing individuals and groups who made significant community contributions. One of Arlington's most influential people is Sister Majella Berg, a nun and president of Marymount University from 1960 to 1993. She offered women of her time the opportunity to pursue higher education and grew Marymount University to its current stature.

Sister Majella Berg was born as Mae Katherine Berg in Brooklyn, New York in 1917. In 1934, At the age of 18, she became a member of the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary (RSHM) in Tarrytown, New York. RSHM is a global community of Roman Catholic women called to share in the life-giving mission of Jesus Christ. She received a Latin degree from Marymount College in Tarrytown and a Master's Degree in Classics from Fordham University. She started teaching Latin, English, and Mathematics at Marymount School in New York City where she continued to teach for twelve years. In 1948, She started working as a registrar and professor of classics at Marymount Manhattan College and later was registrar at Marymount College in Tarrytown. Sister Majella moved into the Washington D.C area in 1960, so that she could become the president of Marymount University, which at the time was known as Marymount College of Virginia. She promised the public that there will be small classes and

strong support at Marymount University in hopes of bringing more students to the school. She began her career as president by searching for students. She started seeking out young women who couldn't get into college because of their low high school grades and test scores. She also reached out to older women who wanted to take classes before re-entering the workforce. Her outreach efforts to these groups eventually worked and many women had enrolled in Marymount classes. Throughout her career, Sister Majella used her impressive fundraising and relationship-building skills to attract sizable endowments which allowed the school to build many new buildings and two new campuses in Ballston and Sterling, Virginia. Becoming a member of the Arlington Community and Education board also helped her fundraise money for the school. She became known as an innovative educator and administrator in the Arlington community. In 1970, Sister Majella received an honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from Georgetown University. She later obtained another honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from Marymount Manhattan College in 1983. In 1972, men were permitted to enroll in the nursing program at Marymount. In 1973, the institution started offering bachelor's degrees. Only three years later, in 1975, would Marymount become a senior college offering bachelor's degrees in over 20 different fields. They started offering master's degrees in 1979. In 1986, the college finally achieved university status and was completely coeducational. She also assisted the university by obtaining an endowment from the Clare Boothe Luce Fund of the Henry Luce Foundation in 1988. The money from that endowment was used to pay tuition, room and board for women seeking degrees in math and sciences. When Sister Majella retired in 1993 from Marymount University, she became a Presidential Emerita of the university, and continued her work in community relations, fundraising for the school, and served a term as a Chairman of the Consortium of Universities of the Washington Metropolitan Area(CUWMA). CUWMA is a

committee of presidents from several area colleges and universities that serves as an intellectual resource for the students and faculty of the member universities in the greater Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. At the time of her retirement, Marymount University offered 23 graduate degree programs and 38 undergraduate programs and there were nearly 4000 students enrolled at the school. At the time of her death in 2004, she was the longest-serving women college president in the United States.

To truly understand what an imperative part Sister Majella played in the Arlington community we need to take a look into what Marymount University was like before she was president. The school was initially founded by RSHM, in 1948. Marymount initially started as an all-girls' high school. The classrooms were located in a fieldstone guest house which had previously been a private estate. In 1950, Marymount Junior College was founded by Mother Gerard Phelan, RSHM. The school was opened as a two-year, all-women's college because of a suggestion made by Bishop Peter I. Ireton of Richmond. They expanded the original property by adding a mansion and two cottages, which were formerly the residence of Rear Admiral Presley M. Rixey. When it opened to the public it had 13 students. Sister Elizabeth Gallagher became Marymount Junior College's first president in 1950 and served until 1955. The next school president was Sister Berchmans Walsh, who served until 1960. By the end of Sister Berchmans's career as president, the school had 240 students and was incorporated as Marymount College of Virginia. In 1960, Marymount College of Virginia became an independent college that was governed by an autonomous board of directors.

Sister Majella Berg was a woman who had been very involved in the Arlington community. Not only was she the president of Marymount University, but she also was a member of the Arlington Community and Education board. A woman who devoted so much of her time to making a way for women and men in Arlington to go to college and obtain a degree even with low high school grades and test scores. She helped elevate the quality of education that people in Arlington could receive. Sister Majella succeeded in turning a single campus, all-female, two-year junior college with 204 students into a four-year, co-ed university with 3,400 students and several campuses. For all these reasons Sister Majella Berg is one of Arlington's most influential people.

## References

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