

Sister Florence Speth, SC

Sister Florence Speth was born in Brooklyn, New York. Her favorite sports growing up were speed skating and bike racing, which may have been early evidence of the pace she would set in her life's work. Her first connection with the Sisters of Charity of New York was at Bishop McDonnell High School, where students were invited to volunteer at Saint Joseph Hall, a child service facility in Brooklyn run by the Sisters. Florence was moved and affected by the kindness and dedication shown by the Sisters in St. Joseph. In her own words, she met "beautiful, hardworking Sisters who lovingly served the girls in this home. A mother could not be kinder to her children than the Sisters who attended to the little girls." Three years after graduating from Bishop McDonnell, Florence entered the Sisters of Charity of New York. She earned a BA in History from the College of Mount Saint Vincent and an MA in Administration and Supervision from Bank Street College.

After professing first vows, Sister Florence was missioned to teach first grade at Saint Paul School, East Harlem, New York, a ministry that would influence the rest of her life. Through a program initiated by the Sisters of Charity in 1968, Sister Florence would serve the community not only as a teacher and principal of Saint Paul, but also as a community organizer. In the East Harlem of the late sixties, she witnessed extreme poverty, unrest, and riots in the streets. She joined with other community leaders and together they gradually helped effect change in the neighborhood. She was active in "Summer in the City," a community action program originated by Monsignor Robert Fox. This initiative was responsible for the creation of an after-school center, a teen center, and many other programs to aid East Harlem residents.

Sister Florence also joined the East Harlem Interfaith Group, which labored tirelessly with and for the community to help generate systemic change programs through the city and state, and through the courts when necessary. In the years following, Sister Florence served on several boards including Homeless Services United, The New York Foundling Hospital, neighborhood corporations, and the community school board. In 1975 she was elected to the Executive Council of the Sisters of Charity, a position she held until 1983.

Her ministry life would change significantly in 1984 when a fire in her East Harlem neighborhood displaced sixty families. The victims of the fire were given temporary shelter in the basement of Saint Paul Church and then placed in notorious welfare hotels. Sister Florence met with these families for nine months, visited them often, and witnessed firsthand the deplorable living conditions of the city's homeless population. A year later she applied for and received a grant from New York City to renovate an abandoned building adjacent to Saint Paul Church into a temporary shelter for homeless women and their children. She oversaw the

construction and practically every other detail involved, and in 1989 the Monsignor Robert Fox House was opened with Sister Florence serving as director.

Today Fox House provides emergency housing for homeless women and their children in an atmosphere of love and compassion. Hundreds of families have been helped to self-sufficiency over the past twenty-five years at Fox House, a Sponsored Work of the Sisters of Charity. Former Fox House residents have gone on to earn GEDs and even college degrees as they begin new careers, creating new opportunities not only for themselves but for their families. In her own words, Sister Florence Speth summarizes her life: "It truly is my privilege to live and work with those living in poverty as a Sister of Charity."

Entrance: September 8, 1959

Final Profession: March 11, 1967

Ministries:

1962–68	St. Paul School, Manhattan, Gr. 1
1968–71	St. Paul School, Manhattan, PT, Neighborhood Children Center
1968–72	East Harlem, Neighborhood work
1972–73	Bank Street College, Follow Through Program
1973–77	St. Paul School, Manhattan, Principal
1975–83	Sisters of Charity Regional Coordinator
1985–89	St. Paul School, Associate Pastor, Development of Fox House
1989–present	Fox House, Director