

Margaret Krell

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Margaret Krell entered the county preventorium as a six-year-old, but she does not remember that event. She arrived two days after Christmas, 1944, and stayed until June 20, 1949.¹

She was born in 1938, the third daughter of Ida Van Heel (1913-1985) and Matt Krell Jr. (1908-2009). The Krell family didn't stay together long. By age three or so, Margaret had been placed in St. Joseph's Catholic Orphanage in St. Paul; years later, her mother told her, "Catholic Charities took you away from me." It was from St. Joseph's that she was moved to the Preventorium. She does not know what prompted the placement at The Preve, but it seems likely that she was exposed to tuberculosis at the orphanage. Two other girls—Petra Medellin and Beatrice Darveaux—also transferred over at year's end. Margaret recalls being unwell when she came in, although she was not sick with TB.²

Margaret confirmed that the routine in the Preventorium had not appreciably changed since its first days. Sunbaths twice daily—on the roof in good weather, under the lamps in cold weather. They slept outdoors or at least on exposed sleeping porches year-round and spent lots of time outside in the big diaper (called a drape)—even in winter. She rode horseback and learned to knit. People were kind to her. She doesn't recall any particular friends, but the kids got along. Boys and girls were kept separate except at school and mealtime and for some sports. Although she could not recall having any chores, she thinks she must have. "Maybe that's where I got to be so fussy."

While at the Preventorium, Margaret had no contact with her family—she never had a visitor, she said. She did spend one summer out of The Preve with a couple of elderly ladies who were kind to her. The end of her time at The Preve came without warning. "One day, they took me to Hastings." She was sent to a farm in southern Dakota County, to a Catholic family,

where she lived the rest of her childhood. The parents there were Thomas Sura, a bridge tender for the Milwaukee Road, and his wife, Sophia. "She told me to call her ma, so I called her ma. She taught me everything." In 1950, the household also included one of the Suras' sons, a granddaughter, and five other boarders.³

Only after her release from the Preventorium did Margaret get reacquainted with her sisters and her mother. In our interview, she said something extraordinary, "My sister [Darlene] introduced me to my mother." Years later, Margaret tended to her mother through her final illness, but there never was any true reconciliation.⁴

Margaret graduated from Hastings High School, attended nursing school on a state scholarship (or loan program) at Little Falls, then transferred to St. John's College in New York. While there, a priest came seeking volunteers to do missionary work in the Bahamas. She signed up for two years. Later, she served as



Margaret Krell in 2022 at her residence. *Courtesy of Paul Nelson.*

a nurse in Haiti and other overseas locations for Catholic Relief Services. She also worked at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester and at Regions Hospital in St. Paul as an intensive care nurse.

Margaret assesses her time at the Preventorium positively, "I liked it there." It was much better than staying with family, she said, which "would have been terrible."

Causes and effects over the course of a lifetime are hard to pin down, but this much about Margaret Krell's life is clear: the Preventorium gave her nearly five years of stability, followed by placement in a stable foster home. From there, on her own, she found a profession and a community and traveled the world helping others.

NOTES

1. "Margaret Krell," interview by author, July 14, 2022. Most of the information in this piece comes from this interview.

2. "Children's Preventorium Record of All Admissions and Discharges, 1915 to 1953," Ramsey County, Minnesota, from the personal collection of Jacci Krebsbach.

3. "Sura," United States Federal Census—1950, Minnesota, Dakota, Marshan, enumeration 1931, sheet 1.

4. "Krell," United States Federal Census—1950, enumeration 89497, sheet 11.