

Sr. Elaine Roulet is seen in this undated photo. The women's prison ministry pioneer died Aug. 13. She was 89. (CNS/Courtesy of Providence House)

by Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Queens, N.Y. — August 27, 2020

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Sr. Elaine Roulet, a Sister of St. Joseph of Brentwood who was an acknowledged pioneer in women's prison ministry, died Aug. 13 of heart failure at the order's Stella Maris Convent in Queens. She was 89 and had been in religious life for 71 years.

Roulet, a native of Queens, was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 1993 for her work in prison ministry.

Her ideas, now commonly accepted, included keeping women prisoners close to their young children.

Roulet founded the Children's Center at a women's maximum-security prison in the Bedford Hills section of Westchester County to support mothers and their children and she created a visitation program to help children stay connected to their mothers.

She also founded Providence House in Brooklyn with other sisters, providing a home for women who had been released from prison and their children, "filled with God's love, respect, companionship, guidance and for some, the first birthday cake they ever had, even as they turned 40 years of age," according to the order's obituary of Roulet.

"Her dream to provide housing for parolees and supportive housing continues to unfold to this day," it added.

Roulet also helped found Mother's House, Hour Children and Our Journey, as well as a second Children's Center. The concept of women being able to care for their children while in prison is now replicated throughout the country.

After taking final vows in 1952, she spent most of the next two decades serving as a teacher or principal at Catholic schools staffed by her order. She also obtained a master's degree in counseling from Bank Street College of Education in Manhattan.

It was not long after she began her prison ministry that she realized the gaping holes that existed in the women's lives. In designing programs for them and their children, Roulet said the programs were not of her own invention but those of the women she served — "the women in green," a nod to the color of their prison garb.

"Her favorite earth sound was laughter, but she spent her life comforting those in pain," read part of a toast to mark her golden anniversary in religious life 21 years ago.

"She loved to watch movies as long as they were not about her, she didn't know what a Metro card was, or the cost of the subway, but rode thousands of buses to bring children to prison to see their mothers. She never learned how to swim but swam every day and was a life saver to women in need. She thought 'too much of a good thing is wonderful' but dreaded the thought of receiving another award."

Moreover, the toast said: "She read obituaries in The New York Times every day to make sure her name was not there."

The Times published its obituary of Roulet Aug. 22.

Advertisement