

The exhibit of "the Sisters of Notre Dame was highly commended, and at the close of the Fair," which lasted six months, a diploma and medal were awarded to fifteen of our houses in Massachusetts, Lowell's parish and day schools being among the favored.

Annals from the Archives

Leo XIII., Columbus, Queen Isabella, and

Genevieve Caulfield and the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur



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Statue of Genevieve Caulfield at Bangkok School for the Blind in Thailand

Image from Perkins.org

—When the first six Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur traveled to Okayama, Japan in 1924 to open their mission there, they kept up a frequent correspondence with their families, as well as their Sisters in Massachusetts. Included with these early communications are two letters addressed to Sr. Julia of the Trinity McDonald (1889-1981). Both are from Genevieve Caulfield. Caulfield begins one of her letters with great affection, “My dear, dear Sister Julia of the Trinity: I wonder if Easter in Washington is as beautiful as the one we are having way over here in Japan.” The other letter from Caulfield describes in vivid detail the horrific earthquake that had struck Japan on Sept. 1, 1923.

Genevieve Caulfield seems to have met Edith McDonald, later Sr. Julia of the Trinity at Trinity College, most likely between 1910 and 1911. Edith McDonald graduated from Trinity in 1911, while Genevieve Caulfield arrived there in 1910. McDonald joined the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in 1913, took her first vows in 1915, and returned to Trinity that same year to teach. She eventually served as Trinity College’s president from 1929 to 1932.

Caulfield’s story and journey to Trinity and beyond reveal a life of both great hardship and extraordinary courage. And though she is all but forgotten in the United States, this woman, who was once referred to as a “one woman Peace Corps,” is revered in Southeast Asia, most especially in Thailand.

Genevieve Caulfield was born on May 8, 1888 in Suffolk, Virginia. During a routine medical visit when she was two months old, the doctor accidentally spilled caustic liquid into her eyes, blinding her. Her distraught parents visited doctor after doctor in an attempt to save her sight. When she was seven month’s old, one physician was able to operate and restore Genevieve’s ability to perceive some light in her right eye, but nothing else. The left eye was beyond hope. Despite her blindness, her parents treated her as they did her brother, Henry, reading to her and encouraging her in her education. While Genevieve was close to her brother, she was especially devoted to her aunt, also named Genevieve. Aunt “Ducky,” as Genevieve called her, took her on frequent outings and shopping excursions.

In 1899, Genevieve’s parents brought her to Boston to the Perkins School for the Blind. Genevieve recalled being enthralled by the enormous globe that was positioned in the lobby. She traced the embossed countries with wonder, feeling the intricacies of the world with her fingers. That moment aroused in her a blossoming curiosity about other lands.

After her graduation from Perkins, she attended the Overbrook School for the Blind in Philadelphia, where she studied history, literature, mathematics and music. While she was in Philadelphia, she learned that the state of California was segregating Japanese students in separate schools. This shocking event awakened within her a great interest in Japan and her people. With her expanding awareness of the world, Genevieve grew increasingly determined to become independent. Despite her mother's misgivings, she agreed to allow Genevieve to travel alone from the Overbrook School in Philadelphia to her parents' home in upstate New York. This required Caulfield to board a local streetcar and make three train transfers. Genevieve left on the appointed day, managing her journey with the help of ticket-sellers and the kindness of fellow travelers. When she at last took her seat on the final train of her journey, she felt someone slip into a seat beside her. It was Aunt Ducky, who had been following her the entire time to ensure her safety. They shared a laugh, but the experience solidified in Genevieve her need to become independent.

Upon her graduation from the Overbrook School in 1910, she received a scholarship to Trinity College in Washington DC, becoming the college's first blind student. It was there that she met the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur and became friends with Edith McDonald. Knowing the college did not have Braille textbooks, Genevieve expected to pay fellow students to read her schoolbooks to her. Instead, the young women in her classes were delighted to help without expecting any payment. Genevieve applied herself to her studies, hoping eventually to make the long journey to Japan to become a teacher for the blind. During one summer while at Trinity, she welcomed a Japanese college student in her apartment, which gave her the chance to begin her lessons in Japanese. She remained at Trinity for three years, but decided to transfer to Columbia University in New York for her senior year to focus her studies on teaching. She graduated from Columbia's Teacher's College in 1915.

For the next eight years, she worked in New York City as a private English teacher, primarily for Japanese students living in the city. They encouraged her in her dream to travel to Japan. In 1923, that longed-for hope became a reality. Her Japanese students helped her find host families to live with while she settled into life in a faraway land. After her arrival, she soon found students eager to learn English.

Eventually, she was able to move into her own home. Not long after her arrival, however, disaster struck. On September 1, 1923, the horrific Kanto earthquake struck with a magnitude of 7.9. Genevieve wrote to Sr. Julia of the Trinity that, *"I was having the most beautiful time imaginable . . .when suddenly the terrible thing happened. On the first of September I was staying with a friend in what is called a suburb of Tokyo but which is really a part of the city. I was just on the point of returning to my home in Aoyama when the terrible thing happened and the whole course of our lives was changed. There is no calamity, short of death itself, so absolutely unexpected and terror striking as an earthquake. . . .The first shock was the worst, but not the most terrifying, for it was so unexpected that we were not afraid until it was well underway. It was what followed that was so frightful: shock after shock, all day and all night and all the next day. . . .The horrible thing was that when one [tremor] would begin, we remembered what it could do. . . .For three nights we slept out in the garden . . ."*

Many of her American friends expected after such a terrifying disaster that she would return to the U.S. How wrong they were. Her Japanese friends were such that she wrote, *"If I should begin to tell you of the kindness of everyone to me, I should write so many pages that this letter would never be finished. . . .During the first month things did not look very promising but with the first of October pupils began to come and various kinds of work presented themselves. . ."* After the earthquake, she moved in with another Japanese family and wrote that, *"I am living in pure Japanese way, eating Japanese food, sleeping on a Japanese bed, and doing the other things Japanese people do."*

Though her hopes of opening a school for the blind in Japan didn't come to fruition, she continued to find work as an English teacher in various Japanese schools. In the early 1930s, she adopted a fourteen year old sighted girl named Haruko. About the same time, she began working with soldiers blinded in the recent battles with China, teaching them Braille.

In 1931, the Okayama Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur reported on Genevieve Caulfield's visit. At first the sisters worried about how they would entertain a blind person, since she could not "see" the school or chapel or garden. On the day of her arrival, the sisters sent two students to greet her train. When they arrived, however, they discovered Caulfield had found a taxi and taken it from the station to the convent. *"Our alarm at entertaining a blind person was indeed vain for our guest proved to be most interesting and helpful as she has a very active interest in education. . . .As we said before Miss Caulfield's object in coming to Japan was to assist the blind but she found that Japan's way of dealing with the blind were a century behind time and feeling unable to do anything under these conditions she gave up this plan to a great extent."*

During those years, Genevieve met many professionals from Siam—now Thailand—who told her with great certainty that there were no blind in their country. Guessing that the blind were as marginalized in Thailand as they were in many other countries, she began to work on a plan to open a school in Thailand. She went first to Bangkok to speak with government officials about the possibility of starting a school for the blind in their land. She was told it would not be possible. Undaunted, she returned to the United States with her daughter, Haruko, to raise funds by conducting a lecture tour on life in Japan. While Genevieve was on tour, Haruko received training at the Overbrook School on methods used for teaching the blind. During this time, Genevieve created a Thai Braille alphabet for her future students. In 1938, with \$800 raised from the tour and donations of supplies from the Perkins School for the Blind, Genevieve and Haruko returned to Bangkok. The Thai government was still not receptive to her plan, insisting that such a school would have to organize a board comprised by local officials. Not ready to abandon her plan, she gave interviews to newspapers and participated in local fairs to demonstrate how Braille gave her the chance to read and learn. Still, it wasn't until the royal family took an interest that she finally was able to open the school. As it turned out, one of Thailand's princesses, Than Ying Lek, was blind, as well as

partially deaf. Under Genevieve's lessons, she began to read and write. This success with the princess prompted other families to send their blind children to Caulfield's school. She was soon able to add a small dormitory and slowly the enrollment grew. Genevieve also began training Thai teachers to assist with the work.

She and Haruko were active in the local Catholic Church and made many new friends. Among them was a Japanese businessman working in Bangkok, named Nobutsugu [Nobu] Utagawa. Nobu and Haruko fell in love and married in 1940.

The following year, 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. Soon after, Japanese troops occupied Bangkok, forcing most Americans to flee. Genevieve now had twenty students and didn't want to abandon them. More than that, her daughter Haruko and her husband were expecting twins. She couldn't bear to leave them either, so after much agony, Genevieve made the decision to remain in Bangkok during the war. The Americans who hadn't been able to escape Thailand were imprisoned in internment camps. Amazingly enough, Genevieve was allowed to stay in Bangkok under house arrest and continue teaching her students. That same month, December of 1941, the Japanese Army sent Nobu to Burma to work for them. And just after that, Haruko died giving birth to her twin children, a boy and a girl.

Overcome by grief at the loss of her daughter, Genevieve hired a nurse to care for the babies. As the war intensified, she feared not only for her grandchildren, but also for her students. Bombings were becoming more intense and frequent and so she moved her students and grandchildren to Hua Hin in southern Thailand. Struggling to keep the school afloat, Genevieve kept any money she had hidden in a trunk, rather than trusting in the local banks. She, her grandchildren and students survived, though there was little food or money. In 1943, a new teacher arrived to assist. Princess Svasti, who had grown up in Malaya and attended a girls convent school had heard of the Genevieve's work and arrived not only to help, but also to recover after suffering under Japanese occupation.

When the war finally ended, Nobu was able to return to Thailand and meet his son and daughter. A few years later, he and Svasti fell in love, married and moved to Tokyo with his children. Genevieve's school began to thrive after the war, now with the full support of the Thai government. The Salesian Order of Catholic Sisters eventually took over management of the school and the enrollment rose to over 200 children. In 1956, the government of South Vietnam, having heard of Genevieve's success, invited her to begin a school for the blind in Saigon. It opened in 1960.

Genevieve Caulfield's work drew the attention of President John F. Kennedy. In July 1963, he announced she would be one of thirty-one people receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom. While Kennedy was assassinated before he could bestow that honor on her, President Lyndon Johnson fulfilled that promise in December 1963.

On December 14, 1972, Genevieve Caulfield died in Bangkok at the age of 84. She is buried in the Samsen Catholic Cemetery in that city. After her death, Genevieve's former students raised funds to have a statue erected in her memory. It was unveiled in 1983. Genevieve Caulfield may be gone, but the Bangkok School for the Blind that she worked so hard to begin is still open and teaching young blind children to see the world as she once had.



Genevieve Caulfield and her daughter, Haruko, in 1937.

Image from *The Observer*, April 8, 1937.

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