

WISCONSIN WOMEN MAKING HISTORY

THEIR STORIES OUR LEGACY

www.womeninwisconsin.org

SISTER MARY KENNETH KELLER

Born: 1913-1985

City: Madison

County: Dane

Sister Mary Kenneth Keller was the first U.S. woman to earn a Ph.D. in computer sciences and worked to expand access to computers in education.

Sister Mary Kenneth Keller was born Evelyn Marie Keller on December 17, 1913, in Cleveland, Ohio. In 1932, when she was 18 years old, she began the process of becoming a Roman Catholic nun, or “sister,” in a religious order (a community whose members take particular vows) called the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVM). As part of that process, in 1933 she took the name Mary Kenneth. Keller took classes at two schools founded by BVM: Clarke College (now Clarke University) in Dubuque, Iowa, and Mundelein College in Chicago, Illinois. In 1935, she professed her first religious vows, meaning that she made a temporary commitment to live as a nun in the BVM community. She also began teaching elementary school at this time. She professed her final vows in 1940, committing herself permanently to BVM. In 1943, Keller graduated from DePaul University, in Chicago, Illinois, with a B.S. in mathematical sciences, which allowed her to begin teaching high school.

Keller started working toward an M.S. in mathematics in 1946, taking classes at DePaul when her teaching schedule allowed it, and graduated in 1952. She went on to study at more colleges across the Midwest, including Edgewood College, Loyola University, Iowa State Teachers College, and Purdue University. In 1961, Keller attended a summer program for high school teachers at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, where she learned to use a computer and write simple programs. Dartmouth had very few female graduate students — and no female undergraduates — at the time, so Keller’s presence there was unusual. There is a popular myth that Keller helped develop the BASIC programming language during her time at Dartmouth. Although that is not accurate, she did go on to coauthor a well-known textbook titled *Mathematical Logic and Probability with BASIC Programming*, which was published in 1973.

In the early 1960s the president of Clarke College wanted the college to add a course of study in computer science, to be directed by a BVM sister. Keller, who already taught summer math classes at Clarke, was sent to study at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. In 1965, when she was 51, she became the second person and first woman in the United States to earn a Ph.D. in computer sciences. She became a faculty member at Clarke College that same year.

Keller founded Clarke’s computer science department and served as its chair (person in charge) for 18 years. In the late 1960s, she often worked as a computing consultant for local government and businesses in Dubuque and, during a few summers, in Chicago. She also gave lectures on computing whenever and wherever she could. The money she earned and the connections she made from this work helped Clarke College get the equipment it needed to run a successful computer science department and more. By 1982, there were 21 Apple computers on Clarke’s campus, and the college offered both a B.A. and a B.S. degree in computer science as well as a summer master’s program for computer applications in education.

Keller was committed to making computers more accessible, especially for use in education. She was a strong advocate for women in the computer science field and for working mothers. When teaching at Clarke, she was known to encourage student parents to bring their babies along to class, and to provide nursing and play space for faculty parents and their children. In addition to her work at Clarke, Keller taught evening classes for adults in certain computer programming languages. She also helped found the College and University Eleven-Thirty Users Group, which was later renamed the Association of Small Computer Users in Education (ASCUE), an organization that is still working to bring together people and resources from universities and other institutions to work together in finding new uses for technology in education. Keller was an ASCUE board member from 1974 to 1976 and served as public relations director from 1977 to 1984. In 1980, she even testified before certain Congressional subcommittees on the importance of information technology use in education.

Keller died on January 10, 1985, at the age of 71. Her legacy is very much present at Clarke University, where the computer lab is called the Keller Computer Center and a computer science scholarship is named for her.

To learn more, visit <https://womeninwisconsin.org/profile/francesca-hong/>