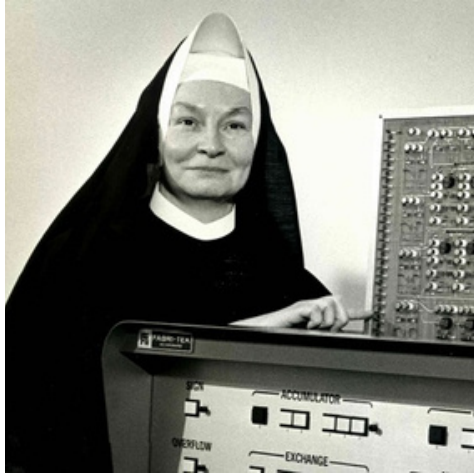


WISCONSIN WOMEN MAKING HISTORY

THEIR STORIES OUR LEGACY

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SISTER MARY KENNETH KELLER

1913–1985

City: Madison

County: Dane

Sister Mary Kenneth Keller was the first woman in the US to earn a PhD in computer sciences and spent her life working 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, she began the process of becoming a Roman Catholic nun of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. She took her religious name the following year. Keller made her first profession of vows, meaning she made a public commitment to live as a nun, in 1935. She also began teaching elementary school. She professed her final vows in 1940, making a lifelong commitment to her religious community. In 1943, Keller graduated from DePaul University, in Chicago, Illinois, with a bachelor's of science in mathematical sciences, which allowed her to begin teaching high school.

Keller continued her education at DePaul University, beginning a master's degree in mathematics and physics in 1946; she graduated in 1952. She pursued further graduate studies in computer science from Purdue University and the University of Michigan. In 1961, Keller attended a summer program for high school teachers at Dartmouth College in 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. In the early 1960s, Keller started her doctoral studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. In 1965, when she was 51, she became the first woman and second person overall in the United States to earn a PhD in computer sciences. That same year, she became a faculty member at Clarke College in Iowa (now Clarke University).

Keller founded Clarke's computer science department and served as its chair (person in charge) for 18 years. She was committed to making computers more accessible, especially for use in education. She was a strong advocate for women in the computer science field, especially mothers. At Clarke, she often encouraged student parents to bring their babies to class. She also worked 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 learning computer programming languages. She also helped found the College and University Eleven-Thirty Users Group (now the Association of Small Computer Users in Education (ASCUE)). This organization works to bring together people and resources from universities and other institutions to find 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 testified before Congressional subcommittees on the importance of information technology use in education.

Keller died on January 10, 1985, at the age of 71. Her legacy lives on at Clarke University through the Keller Computer Center and a computer science scholarship named after her.

To learn more, visit womeninwisconsin.org/profile/sister-mary-kenneth-keller