

Mother Dolores

Contemplating Peripheral Neuropathy

By Dick Sheridan

"I'm never without pain," says Mother Dolores Hart, OSB, sitting at a long table in an alcove off the main waiting room at her neurologist's crowded office overlooking Madison Avenue. "It's like two hot iron rods are wrapped around my feet."

Mother Dolores, 67, suffers from a condition called inflammatory sensory neuropathy. It started with a botched root canal in 1997 that triggered an autoimmune reaction against her peripheral nerves. After making the rounds of multiple medical specialties, all with varying opinions about how to relieve her pain—from steroids to surgery—a process that may be all too familiar to many neuropathy sufferers, she finally arrived at her current physician.

Despite her acknowledgment of pain, Mother Dolores' expression is calm and carefree. The skin of her face is smooth and pink. Only her eyes, which are big and blue, occasionally betray her discomfort. Her hands rest easily on the tabletop in front of her. A needle is stuck into a large vein on the back of one hand and is attached to a long tube that runs up to a large plastic intravenous bag hanging from an aluminum tree behind her chair.

"It's not excruciating pain," adds Mother Dolores, ignoring the apparatus that looms over her shoulder. "It's just the kind that keeps you from thinking about anything else."

The plastic bag holds 30 grams of immune globulin in solution. It will take more than two hours for all the contents to drip down into Mother Dolores' vein. The immune globulin treatment, repeated every two weeks, is meant to prevent the inflammation that invades the nerves in her arms and legs and to keep it from spreading up along her neural pathway to other parts of her body, explains Mother Dolores' physician, Norman Latov, MD, PhD. Latov is professor of neurology and neuroscience and director of the Peripheral Neuropathy Clinical and Research Center at the Weill Medical College of Cornell University.

"Gamma globulin is frequently prescribed in small amounts to fight off infections, and in larger doses to prevent autoimmunity," he explains. "Mother Dolores was severely disabled and confined to a wheelchair before the



treatments, but with them, she is now able to function almost normally."

There are other patients attached to similar aluminum trees sitting in nooks and crannies scattered throughout the office. Most of them appear to be middle-aged to elderly. The thing that sets Mother Dolores apart from all the others is the fact that she is wearing the black-and-white habit that marks her as a nun.

Mother Dolores is a member of the Roman Catholic Order of Saint Benedict, one of the oldest, strictest and most revered bodies in the Church. The order got its start back in the mid-sixth century, when Benedict established the so-called Benedictine Rule to govern the operation of his own abbey at Monte Cassino in Italy. The Benedictine Rule proved popular and the order proliferated rapidly across northern and western Europe. By the seventh century, the Benedictine Rule had been extended to houses of nuns as well.

As a member of this contemplative order, Mother Dolores lives a largely peaceful and secluded life devoted to prayer and manual labor, with about 40 of her sisters who live together on the 400 acres of farm fields and woodland in western Connecticut that comprise the Abbey of Regina Laudis. The name is Latin and translates as "Queen of Praise." The abbey, which was established in 1947, lies nestled in the hilly terrain on the outskirts of the town of Bethlehem in Litchfield County, roughly a two-hour drive north of Manhattan.

"Our main duty is to recite the Divine Office," she explains, referring to the so-called Liturgy of the Hours. The liturgy consists of a series of eight sets of psalms and prayers that form the Catholic Church's main ritual of prayer other than the Mass. They must be recited or sung at specified times of the day, starting with "Matins," at 1:50 a.m. The other daily prayers are "Lauds" (sung at dawn), "Prime" (6 a.m.), "Terce" (9 a.m.), "Sext" (noon), "None" (3 p.m.), "Vespers" (dusk) and "Compline" (before retiring for the night).

"We follow the strict traditional way of our order and chant the Divine Office in Latin," says Mother Dolores. The nuns of Regina Laudis have recorded a CD of their Gregorian chanting, or plainsong, which they sell through their website and to visitors to the abbey.

When not engaged in prayer, the nuns of Regina Laudis work to maintain the abbey and themselves. They grow

much of their own food and raise cattle, swine and other livestock. Mother Dolores ran the abbey's carpenter shop for a while. She is now prioress of the abbey, which is the second highest ranking nun in Regina Laudis after the abbess.

People who knew Mother Dolores growing up probably never imagined her wearing the habit of a contemplative nun nor wielding a hammer and saw in an abbey carpenter shop. Not unless doing so was written for her in a Hollywood movie script. Because, until 1963, when she suddenly disappeared behind abbey walls, Mother Dolores was one of Hollywood's biggest, most beautiful and most successful stars. It was something she almost had seemed destined for from birth.

Mother Dolores Hart was born Dolores Hicks on October 20, 1938, in Chicago. She was the only child of an Irish father, Hollywood character actor Bert Hicks, and an Italian mother. "My parents were a real-life Romeo-and-Juliet couple," says Mother Dolores. "They were very young when they got married, and their parents were very much against the marriage."

The marriage ended in divorce, and at age 3, Dolores went to live with her grandparents. "My grandfather was a movie theater projectionist," she says. "He used to take me to work and had me sit up in the booth with him. I used to look out at the big screen for my daddy to appear. That's how I came to dream of becoming an actor."

Little Dolores made so many trips back and forth between Chicago and Hollywood by the age of 10 that "I started to call both places home," she recalls. Dolores finally moved to Southern California at age 11, after her mother remarried. "I became a real Hollywood brat," she says. "I spent a lot of time when I was young with my cousins, the Lanza girls. Their father was actor and singer Mario Lanza. He was my dad's old Army buddy."

Dolores' first taste of acting came at the age of 9, when she won a bit part playing a child in the 1947 release of "Forever Amber." Ten years later she skipped out on her ➤



freshman drama class final exam at Marymount College in Westwood to audition for Hollywood producer Hal Wallis. Her teacher gave her an F, but Dolores (now named Hart) had gained a seven-year contract.

She appeared in a series of films in quick succession: "Loving You," starring Elvis Presley, and "Wild Is the Wind" in 1957; "Lonelyhearts" and "King Creole," her second appearance opposite Presley, in 1958; "The Plunderers" and the teen classic "Where the Boys Are" in 1960; "Francis of Assisi" and "Sail a Crooked Ship" in 1961; "Lisa," her personal favorite, in 1962; and finally "Come Fly With Me" in 1963.

However, Dolores' talents were not limited to the big screen. In 1959, she appeared on Broadway with Cyril Ritchard, who also directed, and Charlie Ruggles in "The Pleasure of His Company." For her work onstage she received a Theatre World Award and a Tony Award nomination as Best Featured Actress. She also appeared on network television, accepting roles in popular series of the time such as "Alfred Hitchcock Presents," "Schlitz Playhouse of Stars," "The June Allison Show," "Playhouse 90," and "The Virginian." By 1963, Dolores was at the top of her profession. She had been Hollywood's top-grossing actress the previous year. Her agent, Harry Bernsen, boasted that she was going to be "the next Grace Kelly."

Dolores' personal life also seemed to be going swimmingly. Though the movie-town rumor mill had linked her off-screen with two-time co-star Elvis Presley, a story that she always denied, she had in actuality maintained a long-term relationship with wealthy Los Angeles businessman Don Robinson. He even proposed marriage.

But Dolores Hart had a secret desire. As a child living in her grandmother's house she had observed the values of love of God and love of peace by which the older woman lived, and had heard these values reflected in the religious instruction that her classmates were given as they studied to receive their First Holy Communion. "I wanted to be



like them," Mother Dolores says now. "I wanted to receive my First Holy Communion."

Her grandmother had given her permission, and little Dolores had become a Catholic, a faith she would hold to throughout her life.

Harry Bernsen inadvertently rekindled Dolores' love of the simple faith that she had experienced in her grand-

mother's home by introducing her to the Abbey of Regina Laudis.

"He sent me up there as a kind of retreat where I could rest up between projects," Mother Dolores says.

After several visits to the bucolic abbey and plenty of time to think about her future, she told Don Robinson she could not marry him. Then she left Hollywood and all its promise and joined the nuns of Regina Laudis.

Over the 43 years that have passed since she first entered the cloistered life, Mother Dolores has only occasionally left the confines of the abbey. One of the remaining ties she maintains with her previous life—besides unbroken friendships with Don Robinson and with Maria Cooper Janis, the daughter of Hollywood legend Gary Cooper—is the Screen Actors Guild membership card that she holds onto so that each year she can cast her ballot for the Oscars.

Now she has traveled to Washington, D.C., to testify before the House Labor Health and Human Services Committee, as national spokesperson for The Neuropathy Association, to urge lawmakers to increase support for neuropathy research. She has also made a trip back to Hollywood to take part in a fundraiser.

Regardless of her years out of the spotlight, Mother Dolores says, "I am still a public person. I receive a hundred letters a month.

"I have an obligation to do whatever I can so that the will of the Lord is done, to do whatever he wants," she says. "If I can promote some good for somebody, I will. ... A community at prayer has as much power as a community in Washington," she says. ■