

OBITUARIES

Gengler was long devoted to St. Joseph hospital

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If a hospital could be a home, Sister M. Jeanne Gengler found hers at St. Joseph Regional Medical Center.

Gengler always knew that she wanted to be a nurse, and she began her training in 1931 at what was then St. Joseph's Hospital. She did not know that she would join the religious life but felt the call as she watched the Wheaton Franciscan Sisters enjoying their work.

She eventually served as president of the hospital where she began. Even after retirement in 1980, she remained a daily presence there, listening to patients and talking with staff members.

Gengler long lived alone at a house across from the hospital. She suffered a fall and finally decided to move to the order's motherhouse in August, and she subsequently was diagnosed with cancer. Gengler died Monday at Our Lady of the Angels Motherhouse Health Center in Wheaton, Ill. She was 90.

"She was quite the lady," said Pat Kaldor, hospital president. "I was so pleased to be able to sit and talk with her a couple weeks ago, when I went to Wheaton to see her. ... And she wanted to

read the book (being produced) on the history of St. Joseph's."

Kaldor also heard a story about Gengler in keeping with her kindness and character. After the move to Wheaton, she helped another sister, also in failing health, who was unsettled about her own terminal condition.

"Just let go and prepare a place for me," Gengler told her, "because I'm not far behind you."

The other nun died peacefully the same night.

Gengler was born and raised in Appleton. Her parents died while she was very young, and she was raised by a grandmother. That early experience left her with strong feelings about the need to help others.

The turning point came soon after she began her nursing studies, when she traveled to St. Louis to watch a friend take her first vows. She asked to be measured for her own robes. She entered the convent in 1932, returning to



Gengler

St. Joseph's to finish her studies there in 1935.

Gengler continued her education, including in hospital management, and also worked at other hospitals. From 1940 to 1950 — war years when staffers were in short supply — she served with St. Mary's Hospital in Racine. In 1953, she began as director for St. Michael Hospital Clinic.

Four years later, she was suddenly told to report back to the motherhouse on the next train.

"I thought I was in hot water," she later said, telling the story. "A nurse had put one of my alcoholic patients into a barred, locked room, and I had protested."

"Do you know why you are here?" asked the provincial directress.

"Yes," Gengler said.

"No, you don't," the directress said. "The decision was just made this morning. As of now, you are the superior and administrator of St. Michael Hospital."

During the next six years, Gengler added inpatient psychiatric and other services. She also paid off all but \$750,000 of the hospital's \$8 million debt.

She next served at a hospital in Missouri. Then she returned to St. Joseph's Hospital in 1965, this time as its chief executive officer.

Gengler saw the hospital grow, including with the expansion of its outpatient and emergency services, and the creation of an inpatient hospice and the neonatal intensive care unit.

After official retirement in 1980, she continued working in health care at the old St. Anthony Hospital in Milwaukee and in programs elsewhere.

In 1993, she again returned to work at St. Joseph's, as a volunteer visitor and gentle advocate.

"I feel at home with patients," Gengler told Journal Sentinel columnist Bill Janz in 1995. "I could not just sit back and not care for people."

She also helped to develop the hospital's archives, digging into its long history.

In her honor, a little park near the hospital was named the Sister Jeanne Gengler Park in 1989.

"Her spiritual presence will always live on in her hospital," Kaldor said. "Because this was her home."

Survivors include brothers Norbert and William, nieces and nephews.

The funeral service will be held at 10 a.m. today at Our Lady of the Angels Convent in Wheaton, Ill.

