

Sister Jeanne O’Laughlin, 90, Voice in Cuban Boy’s Custody Fight, Dies

By Sam Roberts

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Sister Jeanne O’Laughlin, who was thrust into national prominence in 2000 during a tumultuous custody battle between the Cuban father of a 6-year-old refugee, Elian Gonzalez, and the boy’s relatives in Miami, died on Tuesday in Adrian, Mich. She was 90.

Her death was confirmed by Sister Peg Albert, the president of Siena Heights University in Adrian. Sister Jeanne, who had had recurring lung cancer since 1996, died at the adjacent Dominican Life Center, where she had been living for several years.

As president of what is now Barry University from 1981 to 2004, Sister Jeanne transformed the school, in Miami Shores, into one of the largest Roman Catholic universities in the Southeast. She became an influential and sometimes maverick figure in South Florida church and civic affairs.

In early 2000 she sought in vain to ensure that Elian could stay temporarily with his Miami relatives instead of being returned to his father, who had remained in Cuba, divorced from his wife, after Elian and his mother fled in a rickety boat on Nov. 21, 1999.

His mother, Elizabeth Brotons Rodriguez, died when the boat capsized in the Atlantic. Elian was found in the water off Fort Lauderdale on Nov. 25 clinging to an inner tube, and his miraculous survival all but elevated him into a religious figure in South Florida’s Cuban-exile community.

Sister Jeanne started off as more or less an innocent bystander, declaring herself neutral in the feud. But in January 2000, after she hosted a meeting at her home with Elian and his grandmothers from Cuba and a separate one with his Miami relatives, she suggested that he not be returned to his father — at least not yet.

In an Op-Ed article for The New York Times, she compared the “strong bond” that had developed between Elian and the Miami cousin who was caring for him with the absence of his father.

“It troubles me that Elian’s father has not come to the United States,” she wrote. “What, if not fear, could keep a person from making a 30-minute trip to reclaim his son? And what might Elian’s father fear, if not the authoritarian Cuban government itself?”

“The final challenge of finding the best way for Elian to heal and be nurtured,” she added, “should lie with a court that has experience in seeking the best interests of children.”

She was lauded and vilified in equal measure, but in the end she failed to persuade her friend, Attorney General Janet Reno, a South Florida native, to let Elian remain. The courts ruled against the Miami relatives, and armed federal agents raided their home before dawn on the day before Easter in 2000 and seized Elian. The boy was returned to Cuba, where he remained, earning a degree in industrial engineering.

Sister Peg, of Siena Heights University, said Sister Jeanne had “always thought he should go back with his father, but her argument was that his mother died in the process of trying to win freedom for them, and he at least deserved a hearing.”

Jeanne Marie O’Laughlin was born on May 4, 1929, in Detroit to Thomas and Mary Margaret O’Laughlin. Her father was a draftsman at Dodge Motor Company. Her mother was warned that another pregnancy would kill her, and it did, when Jeanne was 5, leaving her father a widower with four children.

“The pro-lifers get upset with me, but I’ve lived without a mother, who died at childbirth,” she told The Miami Herald. “It’s been pretty difficult not to look at that experience when people ask me about birth control. But I’m the least qualified to speak about abortion and birth control, having lived a celibate life.”

After graduating from Siena Heights College, she earned a master’s degree in biology and a doctorate in educational administration from the University of Arizona. She taught education at St. Louis University and was superintendent for the Adrian Dominican Independent School System in Michigan, Illinois and Florida.

During her tenure at Barry, enrollment swelled from 1,750 to more than 9,000; the campus expanded from 16 buildings to 55. And the endowment ballooned from \$770,000 to \$24.1 million, after some unconventional fund-raising, including her singing a rendition of “Don’t Cry for Me, Argentina” on a rich benefactor’s yacht and a twirl at the United States Ballroom Championships.

Once asked why she devoted her life to teaching others, Sister Jeanne recalled riding a streetcar in Detroit as a 13-year-old when a black woman boarded with four squirming children. Jeanne volunteered to hold one. As a male passenger left the bus, he spit at her.

“That night I asked, ‘Dad, what causes prejudice?’ ” she recalled. “ ‘Ignorance,’ he said. I said, ‘How do you get rid of it?’ He looked at me and said, ‘Only through education.’ I knew from that moment what I would do.”

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