

Baking helps Rochester theology teacher share delicious gift

Since she was a little girl, Sister Karlien Bach loved to bake.

Her mother didn't bake. It was Karlien and her childhood friend, Karen Stainton, who spent hours mixing dough for cookies, pies and cakes. When she was 13, the two used their skills to bake applesauce and angel food cakes, apple and chocolate cream pies, and spice and chocolate chip cookies to sell in their Rochester neighborhood. The money went to the starving children in Biafra, today part of Nigeria in Africa.

"We raised \$36.18 and our parents doubled that," said Karlien, a theology teacher at Our Lady of Mercy High School, Rochester, since 2005.

The rule in the Bach home was that children who turned 16 had to get an outside job. No surprise, Karlien went to work at the nearby Johnson French Road Bakery. Starting as a clerk, she in time came under the watchful eye of an elderly co-worker who learned how to decorate cakes in her native Germany.

"I was really intrigued by cake decorating," said Karlien in a recent cell phone interview as she was being driven to Philadelphia to – what else – visit her four-year-old great niece, Rhyse Mahony, and bake her a birthday cake.



The two bakers take a moment for a photo.



Sister Karlien Bach enjoys baking a cake with Rhyse Mahony, her four-year-old great niece. Karlien has been baking since she was a child growing up in Rochester.

Her German mentor taught her – among other things – the fine points of creating roses, petal by petal, a process that required the ingredients of a steady hand and patience.

"I would go into the backroom and practice during my lunch hour," Karlien said.

When she was a freshman at Nazareth College, Pittsford, her mentor left the bakery and Karlien became the "professional" cake decorator for the bakery. And, from trial and error, she learned the art of making cakes for a variety of special occasions.

She loved the job, riding her bicycle three miles from the college to the bakery each day. And she enjoyed the solitude of baking and decorating cakes at the bakery mornings from two until nine.

A perk from working at the bakery: you were encouraged to eat the merchandise so that you could make recommendations to customers, she said.

"It's a good thing I rode my bike," Karlien laughed.

Her bakery career came to an end when she graduated from college with a degree in theological studies. The

example of the Sisters of Mercy who taught her at Our Lady of Mercy High stayed with her, and she entered the Community in 1979.

“I saw their passion and energy, and I wanted to live my life with that kind of Mercy,” she said.

And as much as she enjoyed baking, teaching became her passion. She taught for 25 years in Rochester-area Catholic schools and today at her alma mater.

“Kids are good,” she said. “I love them, and I want to help them become the best of themselves.”

Serving at Rochester’s St. Regis Food Cupboard in Rochester’s inner city, she still finds time to keep an active life. From 2003-04, Karlien found time to hike incrementally 624 miles across the state of New York. In 2010, she bought a used bicycle and with a group of people biked 500 miles across the state of Iowa.

“I rode to Catholic and Mercy convents and ministries and stayed with people there. It was a great experience,” said Karlien, who one day wants to bike around the entire perimeter of Lake Ontario.

And while she enjoyed many different experiences, it is baking – her hobby – that is a consistent thread through her life’s tapestry.

“I love to bake because I am good at it,” she said.

Over the years she has baked and decorated wedding cakes for her brothers and sisters. There have been the birthday cakes for nieces and nephews with a Teenage Ninja Turtle theme and others in the shape of a three-dimensional soccer ball and Teddy Bear.

“My niece liked the Teddy Bear cake so much she didn’t want to cut into it,” Karlien chuckled.

And Karlien has been the baking artist for cakes celebrating professions of Mercy Sisters and birthdays for sisters marking their 90 and 100 birthdays.

“If you live to be 100, you get 100 roses on your cake, and I make them all,” she said.

And this is a busy time of the year for Karlien as she will bake between 30-40 dozen Christmas cookies.

But while she enjoys sharing her gift of baked good with others, it is Mercy that flows from her heart. Recently, she said, she watched a film about the contributions of women religious in the United States and was so impressed with what these women accomplished.

“I just want to be counted in that number,” she said.



Sister Karlien Bach and her four year old great niece, Rhyse Mahony, enjoy decorating Rhyse's birthday cake.

Thanks to Robin Mahony for her photograph.