

# Linda Salvati

## *A Personal Memoir of Xavier's Catcher in the Rye*

by John Sheehan '66

I first encountered Linda in the Spring of 1962 when my brother Anthony, a Senior at Xavier, gave me a tour of the school because it looked like I would be accepted as a freshman for the following fall. He said the students' library was "a good place to know about" and he introduced me to the librarian, "Miss Salvati," a very short and briskly animated lady who called him "Sheehan" (simply reading his nametag) and made a little fuss over me and told me to come see her when I returned in the Fall.

Like many boys who found themselves overwhelmed by the discipline of military routine, I sought a safe place where I might relax my guard a bit and stay a boy a little while longer. The library was such an oasis, not only because of the books but because Linda was the only woman among 1,200 cadets and about 60 priests, scholastics and male lay teachers. And, in a school where no talking was allowed in the hallways, it was a lovely irony that we *could* talk in the library, even though we were supposed to be quiet there too. Linda's desk sat just behind the counter in the small entry hall, separate from the stacks and reading room, and we would often have conversations that routinely escalated above the whisper level. One thing I remember clearly about the library is that the MPs, teachers and even a student or two, were always telling us to keep quiet! Linda would giggle and tell us to "hush," knowing she was just as guilty as the rest of us.

A deeply religious woman all her life, she had considered entering a convent but Linda had her own ideas and, in what I imagine was an extension of her neighborhood's character, having lived all her life in Greenwich Village, she loved the intellectual curiosity, the artistic innovation, and the personal quest for identity and freedom that so many of its residents personified. She also understood human nature from a deep and true empathy, developed over years of experience in her large Italian Catholic family as well as her urban community.

Linda had a confessor, Father Knoepfel, a Jesuit assigned to Xavier and, by all accounts, a remarkably wise and kind man. When she explained her desire to live a spiritual life and devote herself to "God's work" in whatever form that might take, it was he who suggested she might be a perfect fit for the librarian position. Up to that time, there had never been a female on the Xavier faculty.

It's almost impossible, now, for us to remember what life was like in the pre-Vatican II Catholic Church and the pre-Vietnam military establishment. To many American Catholics fifty years ago, the US Army-Society of Jesus alliance at Xavier made it an ideal academic bastion of religious conservatism and national service. Father Knoepfel must have been a visionary with a lot of pull in that school because anyone else would have assumed that between the Jesuits and the Army NCOs, there was certainly no place on the faculty for a woman. Then again, maybe he wasn't thinking so much of Linda as of the students.

“Military School” conjured all sorts of images in the minds of young cadets: for some it was a remedy for repeated infractions, for some it was an outright punishment; for others, it was the continuance of long-held family traditions which fathers and grandfathers, uncles and brothers had previously borne. And for yet others, it was an opportunity to escape class and social constrictions, to prove oneself against the mettle of discipline and learning, and to make connections in the hierarchies of higher education, the church or the military. Some kids had aspirations to West Point or Annapolis while others were headed for the seminary; some were privileged and socially connected while others were disenfranchised and dependent on scholarships. Yet all wore the same uniform, kept the same rules, and were unified in a cohesive student body that presented itself proudly in military formations. Discipline was paramount and we were inspected every morning for shined shoes, polished brass, ironed shirts and clean shaves. Haircuts were always an issue and MPs wrote us up for “jug” for the slightest lapse. The ROTC team showed zero tolerance for wise guys while the Jebbies were never known to spare the rod. It was understood that you entered Xavier as a boy and left it prepared to assume the duties, responsibilities and stature of manhood.

So it was in this setting that Linda appeared on the scene, alert and forthright, trailing a cloud of Prince Matchabelli perfume and presenting herself, librarian and teacher, as a no-nonsense expert in her field and as strict a member of the faculty as any Jesuit or soldier. Yet she *was* a woman and there was a gentleness, an openness, an attentiveness and, best of all, a sense of humor that was unmistakable whenever she taught her classes. Library Science was a required course for all freshmen, so every student in the school passed through her domain at the start of their Xavier years. She was as basic to the institution and central to the experience of Xavier as anyone could be. And Linda never, for a moment, forgot the Xavier mission; nevertheless, we *were* boys, learning to be men, and Linda was the sole female influence in this virtual penitentiary. *Her* mission was to be as helpful as possible in effecting our transition and her kindness, her playfulness and her femininity were virtues we were equally in need of learning from, and about.

She introduced herself at the start of her first class, entering the library to the click of high heels against the tiled floor as precisely as any military man in cleats. Even if we couldn't see her diminutive frame in that crowded room, we could smell her perfume. She explained that she was “Miss” (it was before Gloria Steinem reinvented social designations of gender) and the name Salvati was “like the Salvation Army, right here on 14<sup>th</sup> Street, except you drop the last two letters.” Her first lesson was how to open a new book and *not* crack the binding. With clear instructions, specific detail and some humorous asides, she demonstrated how a newly glued spine must be eased into use; the book should be opened carefully, from both the front and back covers, its pages turned individually and massaged into place until the spine is gently curled from the edges to the center and bends back to careful but flexible manipulation. It was the perfect introduction to books and, by extension, the library. But she was also teaching her young soldiers a strategy for achieving a goal, which required both precision and care.

Linda had organized the Library Club as an extracurricular for students who wanted to help out, sorting periodicals, re-stacking books, working the desk, etc. Those were joyous afternoons when the laughter was endless. She also had a private office in a storeroom down the hall, next to the Prefect's suite, and she allowed a few of her staff to use it from time to time; it was a place where we could hang out, loosen our ties, take a break from the omnipresent military routine and

... smoke! Yes, Linda was a smoker and she had her cigarette breaks in that office throughout the day. When a kid who shared her vice was really stressed or desperate for a puff, she'd give him the key and say "Honey, I know what it's like. Just don't make any noise in there – and use the ashtray!" Fr. Heavey came by the library one day while she was behind the desk and smoke was seeping out from under the door of the storeroom. He asked her if she had been smoking. "I just this minute finished, Father!" came her obvious little white lie. He glanced around with deep suspicion. Some Jesuits admired her and most respected her ... but nobody was going to take her on. At four-feet-eleven, she was nonetheless formidable.

The other great thing about that office was that Linda had a record player in there so, after school, when any of us were sorting books or on repair detail, we could listen to music – a more unusual treat then, than it is today. We listened to rock-and-roll and Broadway shows, pop hits and classical pieces (I remember hearing *Rhapsody in Blue* for the first time, in that room) and it wasn't just her records that she shared, it was her enthusiasm for all the performing arts. She insisted we see and hear the greats of our time, from Nureyev to Magnani. She had an appreciation for mastery that bordered on reverence and she taught us to treasure those artists who would provide experiences for our lifetimes.

Occasionally, we'd get theatre or opera tickets and she'd join us, all dolled up like a doting den mother, to tag along with her boys. She had no problem hanging out at Nathan's after the show while we gorged on hot dogs and cokes and traded opinions from our newly critical minds, learning how to articulate our convictions. We were a ragtag gang of military don't-wanna-bes, laughing and shouting, but we weren't wimps; Linda encouraged our curiosity and complimented our strengths, even as we struggled to meet our teachers' challenges and our parents' expectations.

I think now, in hindsight, Linda also had a singular empathy for those who didn't quite fit in with the military or social life at Xavier. She knew that some boys were not like others, that some had different kinds of strengths and long before there were hippies or civil libertarians or gay activists, she understood that young people can often see things clearly from a fresh perspective and they are not to be ridiculed or crushed for doing so. She was acutely aware of how family influences weighed on these kids and how outside pressures might easily cause us to develop along very different paths. She encouraged us to speak up, to find ourselves and to pursue our inclinations with industry, integrity and honor. She seemed to know which of us were choosing a difficult path and which were just being difficult; if we were wrong, she corrected us but, if we were original, and marching to a different drummer, she offered compassion and support. She understood far more than she explained but she acted on her impulses and saved many a kid from falling off the proverbial cliff.

We knew, even then, it was impossible to measure what an asset she was to our education, what a catalyst she was to our growth and what a joy she was to our developing emotional selves. We counted ourselves damn lucky to have someone so smart and loving as a teacher and a pal. She doted on us fiercely and we returned her love with intense loyalty. Whenever anyone did something for her, brought a present or made a gesture of appreciation, she was always taken aback, as if she had suddenly been awarded some great honor or priceless gift. She would stop still, purse her lips and move them silently for a few seconds before she spoke; then, in a hushed

voice, she would thank us and reassure us that she treasured these expressions of our affection. She wasn't being extravagant; she gave freely to all of us, year after year, without ever weighing her kindness so when someone made the effort to thank her, she was genuinely pleased.

She also set an example, in her own life, of doing one's best: she was unfailing in truthfulness, rigorous in her dealings with others, strictly punctual and old-fashioned in courtesy and protocol – and paid for everything in cash! She prayed daily and often affirmed her belief in its efficacy. Her personal life was private and it wasn't until I was well into adulthood that she shared details of her family with me. She wouldn't hesitate to call out those whom she felt had broken the social contract and had no problem calling a priest “a bum” if, indeed, he warranted the name. Another teacher at Xavier, a fellow Italian who smarmily affected his nationalist connection to her, enraged her with his backstabbing habits and phony smiles. She quite bluntly told us that she considered him a son-of-a-gun and that he was absolutely not to be trusted. If anyone mentioned his heritage, she snapped “Yes, and he gives Italians a bad name!”

There was one Xavier event that she particularly loved: the annual Military Ball. Not unlike a high school Prom, this was *the* social event of the season for all cadets, an opportunity to go formal in our dress uniforms and bring our dates to a fancy hotel ballroom (usually the Commodore) for dining and dancing, just like adults. The lay faculty were invited to attend with their spouses and it was fun to meet our teachers with their wives – not to mention the Jesuits, all spruced up – celebrating our big night on the town. Knowing she wasn't married, we were curious to see whom Miss Salvati would bring; we knew she loved to dance so it was no surprise to see her arrive with an equally short, elegant gentleman who immediately led her onto the floor and set her spinning around him in the most ornate and complicated tangos we had ever seen! It was a revelation to watch her take to the floor with such assurance and flair. This wasn't jitterbugging; she was truly adept at spectacular flings, droops and dives and her date knew just how to throw and catch her as they swept their way across the ballroom floor.

In Senior year, nervously anticipating the Ball as a test of my social graces and romantic imagination, I realized I was hopeless at shuffling two left feet around a dance floor and bemoaned my inadequacy to Linda. That was all she needed to hear; dancing classes were scheduled after school in the library for any cadets who felt the need to develop their footwork. She lined up a dozen of us and instructed us in the fundamentals; embarrassment turned to laughter as we watched her gliding across the library floor, tables and chairs pushed to the walls, partnered with one cadet after another, towering over her, counting “one, two, three” and scuffing his spit-shine against her heels! She made us practice until most of us *did* learn to dance, sort of, at least well enough to get through one night in the Commodore ballroom.

But what I remember most about those early years at Xavier is how much laughing we did in the library. We laughed all the time, about everything and while we were trying out our clever, smartass, ribald, or snotty repartee, she arbitrated and challenged our discussions with fairness, taste and grace. She was a wonderful audience, always interested in what we had discovered or were trying to understand. She used to say she got a kick out of us because we kept her young but I think she enjoyed watching us grow up and learn how to think. Controversies over church reform, civil rights, protest marches and the peace movement were just appearing on the horizon; the most daring questions we had in those days were whether Jackie Kennedy might hang a

crucifix in the White House or if Sammy Davis was going to date Kim Novak. I remember graduating to discussions about divorce, birth control and abortion and asking about the inappropriate behavior of one of our teachers. Linda didn't so much share her opinions as she encouraged us to have our own, to think them through and debate them among ourselves. She let us decide values and choices and marveled at how we arrived at them. In the true spirit of colloquy, she was teaching us to articulate what was on our minds. She never lectured or talked down to us and her admonitions were gentle, exact and fair. Above all, she was kind; she nurtured us as much with her humor as with her attention and always, I found out later, with her prayers.

I imagined her, like the mythic guardian from J.D. Salinger's popular novel of teenage angst, an older, female, catcher in the rye. With the eye of an eagle, the talons of a hawk and a heart as big as Manhattan, she guarded us fiercely from anything for which she feared we were unprepared and, from her nest of protection sprang awkward boys on their way to becoming soldiers and men. She supported our efforts at making the transition but allowed us a little extra time to come to terms with the end of childhood.

Surely there must have been a few raised eyebrows on the faculty over the attention Linda enjoyed from us but nobody thought her behavior was anything other than caring, if perhaps proprietary. Her appropriation of students for the Library Club, over the years, was one way of looking after the boys she felt might be falling through the rye; the other was her network with the guidance counselors at Xavier. Tom Connolly and Bill McGowan appreciated her watchful eye and common sense, while John McDonald, our headmaster, also heeded her signals and warnings; when she felt a boy was in need of attention or that extenuating circumstances prevailed, she went right to his office and let him know she expected him to do something about it. The Jebbies knew she meant business and they did not dismiss her concerns. Fr. Yates, that rascally old curmudgeon who spent many of his free hours in the library, thought she was the best thing about Xavier; Ed DeSantis once told me there would be a "huge vacancy" in the school without her; many of the lay faculty as well, like Leo Paquin, Jim McCahery, John Finnegan and the Scott brothers, all held her in high regard. I also found out later that her capacities for nurturing and guidance weren't limited to the students; several of the junior faculty recalled, over the years, how she befriended and assisted them while they adjusted to their teaching responsibilities at the school.

The inevitable collision of Xavier's military personality with its liberal arts leanings became apparent in the Sixties although the actual separation didn't occur until five years after I graduated. By then, the rigor of the Xavier experience had softened, the school was a more relaxed place and, quite possibly, Linda didn't feel as necessary to the boys who might have needed her. She had morphed from teacher to guidance counselor in many subtle ways but she took seriously her responsibilities as librarian throughout her years. When the library was moved to the new building in 1965, she assisted in the design of a greatly improved facility, more efficient than the old rooms but without the privacy and opportunity for personal interaction that she had so enjoyed.

She remained at Xavier into the Eighties and while the school became very different with the advent of more (and younger) lay teachers, suspension of the military requirement and an easing

of religious rigor, she stayed committed to her ideals of long ago: the necessity for a spiritual life, the importance of education, and the usefulness of library skills. I kept in touch during my college years; in the Army, I sent postcards and brought gifts from Vietnam and during my early years of struggling with a career and making my way in the city, she was a touchstone and a confidante, offering suggestions, encouragement and wisdom. When my 15<sup>th</sup> Class Reunion came up, she phoned to be sure I was going to attend; she believed deeply in loyalty, traditions, and in keeping faith with friends from the past.

Some time after that, I got a call from Linda: she was planning to retire and wanted to host a big farewell party. She wanted it to be a joyous occasion for special friends, in gratitude for the part they played in her life at Xavier. She took over Sal Anthony's on Irving Place and threw a cocktail and dinner celebration for nearly a hundred guests. Many of her library club kids were there and, while some of us hadn't seen each other since our years on 16<sup>th</sup> Street, she had kept in touch with all of us. There was a lot of good food and wine and she presided over her festivities with a radiant elegance and down-to-earth charm. There were also toasts and roasts, jokes and stories all night long and much, much laughter. She had retired with style and generosity; the Xavier years were now history but her life was far from over.

The AIDS crisis had gained momentum in the Eighties; while many people were fearful of being contaminated by those infected and undertakers were refusing to take bodies for burial, no less a personage than Mother Theresa arrived on our shores in 1985 with a small group of nuns and, under the auspices of the Archdiocese of New York, established a home in Greenwich Village where they would care for dying patients. A true hospice, the Gift of Love house on Washington Street was a very rare place. Men who had no one else to look after them were protected, nursed and consoled until their deaths; it was simple care for the afflicted, a corporal work of mercy.

Linda met with Mother Theresa and volunteered to work four days a week preparing, over a twelve-hour shift, breakfast, lunch and dinner for all the patients and their caregivers. The sisters in residence adored her; she was reliable, funny and a really great cook. Linda loved the place and was pleased to be doing "God's work" once again, making a difference in the lives of others. It was both jarring and reassuring to see her in such a different setting from the library; she was equally at home in this kitchen, prepared and organized and just as confident and accomplished as she had been at Xavier. But when she took me on a tour of the facility, it was as serene as a church; she explained that the men were not to be disturbed because the whole process of dying was sacred and we were not to interfere with their communion with God. Over the next ten years, she maintained it was a privilege to assist these men in a completely practical way; providing their nourishment was prayer for her.

As the years passed, many of us alumni talked about Linda, often remembering her generosity, her caring and her sense of humor. And then, in October 2008, I got a phonecall from Brian Moroney: Linda was at St. Vincent's Hospital in the Village but was not expected to live more than a few days. I rushed over and there, in a small room filled with strangers, I recognized her unmistakable face with the mole on her cheek and that titanic Italian nose. She was not conscious but I was relieved to see her lovingly attended and carefully nursed with the best that kind hearts and modern technology could provide. I returned a few days later with a priest friend who administered the last rites. My final visit was a vigil with her relatives and caregivers

gathered. We all told stories, recalling her laughter, intelligence, manners and good taste. I thought about how much she had helped the men at Gift of Love through their passages and how, now, it was our turn to pray for her.

The following weekend, there was a viewing at the funeral home on Bleecker Street, just around the corner from where she'd lived her whole life. A few aging Jesuits and alums of the Library Club showed up, as well as her niece Mitzie with her family from Maine. I was cheered to see photos of Linda as we remember her, working at her desk, dancing at the Military Ball, laughing with Mother Theresa and beaming, from pre-Xavier days, her girlish, radiant but unmistakable smile a lifetime away from that body in the casket.

Her funeral was held, of course, at Xavier. It was ironic to hear the school bell ringing through the walls of the church as it did so many years ago when we'd have to stop laughing in the library and go back to class. It was unsettling to witness the cadets assigned to her color guard, born long after she had left the school; none of these kids could possibly know who she was, let alone how important a role she had played in this institution in which they, now, were maturing. Nor could they see their future selves in the few aging and stooped former students who straggled in and sat in the outer reaches of the pews. Fr. Peter Fink, who had been a scholastic during my years at Xavier, said the Mass and, happily, he was someone who could speak from the heart in his eulogy about Linda's significance to Xavier.

Yet, every time I tried to sum up Linda in my brain, to remember her face and frame her in my mind's eye, all that came to me was her laughter. We prayed, we sang, we stood up, kneeled down, took communion and wept silently for this tiny woman who was so huge an influence on all of us. We followed her coffin out of the church into the sunlight and said good bye and thank you to each other, then returned to our big-city lives, lives indelibly shaped and immeasurably blessed by this extraordinary woman, librarian, teacher, guidance counselor, dancing instructor, volunteer, cook, and catcher in the rye.