



Annie's story



Bethesda first opened its doors at a time when little was understood about people with disabilities—when those with intellectual and developmental disabilities were neglected, resented or considered a burden on families and society.

And so it was for Annie Heyer, one of the first people Bethesda supported. After her mother died when Annie was a child, she was raised in Milwaukee by her father—a man who, by all accounts, neglected her at best, and abused her at worst.

But Annie's story is not one of heartbreak. It's one of joy. Of finding one's true family. And of finding faith.

Annie came to Bethesda in 1904 at the age of 13, undernourished, unskilled and with a hot temper—and given her upbringing, who could blame her? But with time, patience and love, Annie began to transform, and her inner light started to shine through.

She couldn't read, but she could memorize, and she took immense pleasure in hearing and learning Bible verses. She initially lacked dexterity, but through dedication and practice, she learned to do intricate tasks like sewing, braiding and weaving. She struggled with nervousness and would often drop dishes during meal times, but eventually grew to love working in the dining room, deftly bringing plates of food to visitors and making friends with all whom she served before handily whisking their empty dishes away.

Annie lived with Bethesda for almost 60 years, up until her death in 1962 at the age of the 71. During her time, she graced the home with her singing (hymns were her favorite) and her cheerful spirit, which had long ago earned her the nickname "Sunshine." She learned about Jesus, was confirmed in her faith and devotedly studied her Bible and the catechism.

Annie's story perfectly illustrates the mission of Bethesda and all we strive to achieve, from helping people with intellectual and developmental disabilities learn new skills to encouraging them to explore their faith to helping them find a place to call home—a place where they belong.

By honoring Annie and her story, we hope to share the word of Bethesda and bring others into our family. Because together, we can help the people we support live their best lives possible.