

## From Hollywood to the convent

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CONTRIBUTOR

Fifty years ago, as John F. Kennedy readied his "New Frontier," Hollywood star Dolores Hart was beginning her own meteoric rise, with everyone speculating she was the next Grace Kelly. In five years, she made 10 films, including 1960's teenage cult classic, "Where the Boys Are."

But, in 1963, Hart left glittering Hollywood, seeking instead spiritual gold at the Abbey of Regina Laudis in Bethlehem, Conn.

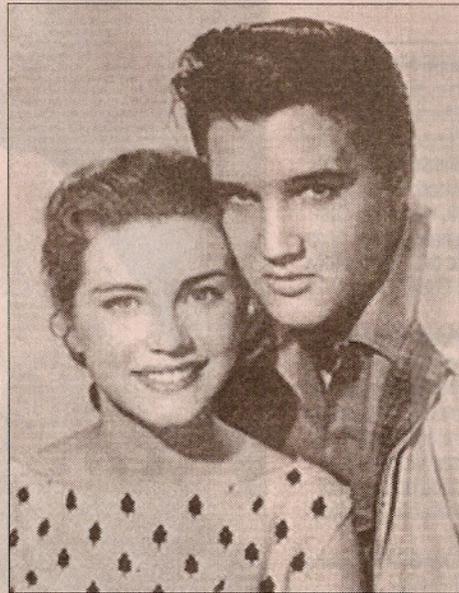
Born Dolores Hicks in Chicago on Oct. 20, 1938, her parents, Bert and Harriet, just 16 and 17, were artists—her father an actor. And, Hollywood soon beckoned.

As a child living in Beverly Hills, she was enamored by Hollywood's bright lights and back lots where dreams came true—convinced that's where her future lay.

From age 5 until age 11, she spent the school year in Chicago with her grandparents, Fred and Esther Kude. Far from a detour, this proved pivotal in her film career.

Her grandfather was the projectionist at the Drake Theater. While he napped, she would watch the films without sound in the booth and absorbed the technique underlying every shot. "I watched the films sometimes 10-15 times," Hart told Catholic New World, and "just loved watching them."

While making her first film, "Loving You," co-starring Elvis Presley, she said, "the director came up to me and said, you really know camera work very well." She thanked him, telling him in response to his questioning she had "never studied anywhere." But, shortly after entering the monastery, she said, "I had this dream (in



Dolores Hart starred with Elvis Presley before she left Hollywood to enter the convent. Courtesy photo

which) my grandfather woke me up and said, 'Dolores, what a rascal you are. That (director) came to you and said, you had all this great technique, (but) you never gave me any credit...'" And, she said, "I woke up absolutely in sweat."

Growing up, Chicago seemed to her "a place of truth," where hard work was valued, in contrast to California's "playland." Her grandmother, she said, was a waitress at The Round Table and taught her the "Gospel message" that "Nobody can be above serving another."

Hart attended St. Gregory's Grade School, a decision her non-practicing Protestant grandparents based on

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safety—she would not have to cross the streetcar tracks—not on religion. St. Gregory's, she said, was "very beautiful;" its "very handsome" pastor, Fr. May, later became archbishop of St. Louis.

In the first inkling of her deeply spiritual nature, at age 10, she asked to become a Catholic and, after studying for a year, with her mother's approval, converted. A "very sweet" nun named Sister Celine, she said, made a particular impression. She taught her class how to sing the Kyrie IX, giving Dolores a "feeling of belonging."

Years later, while acting on Broadway in "The Pleasure of Your Company," a friend suggested she might want to stay at

the Regina Laudis guesthouse to get some rest. From then on, whenever she was on the East Coast, she felt drawn like a magnet to this place of spirituality and solitude.

Mother Dolores said Lisa was a Jewish girl liberated from a concentration camp who, "really helped me to make my decision (to enter the Abbey)." She co-starred in this 1961 film with Stephen Boyd. "It was a shocking thing to discover that someone your own age is going through the essential deprivation" of human rights. And, she wanted to offer sacrifice to bring good to the world.

In June 1963, after completing her promotional tour for "Come Fly with Me," her limousine dropped her off, for good, at The

Abbey of Regina Laudis. "It felt," she said, "like I had come home." Along with Hollywood she left behind her devastated ex-fiancée.

During the next seven years, like Mother Teresa, she struggled with her faith without ever losing the conviction religious life was her calling.

In 2006, 43 years later, she visited Hollywood again, as Prioress of the Abbey, to raise awareness for neuropathy, a debilitating neurological disorder that afflicts many Americans, including herself. Mother Dolores has, in recent years, become an Oscar-voting member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the only nun to hold this distinction.

← should read: "Mother Dolores said Lisa, about a Jewish girl liberated from a concentration camp, "really helped me to make my decision (to enter the Abbey)."