

Mary Ellen Caldwell, BVM (Eugenio)
Wake Stories/Reflections
Marian Hall Chapel, Aug. 28, 2017

Sister Mary Anne Hoop, BVM (Bernarde Marie) (Read by Sister Diane Forster, BVM)

Mary Ellen was very special to me. When I was a young sister, she encouraged me. She was with me when I received word my father had died and she touched me deeply when she asked about coming to Ghana so I wouldn't be the only BVM there. She is still remembered by former students and workers. A favorite story about Mary Ellen: When she went to Rome for her sabbatical, she signed up for biblical Greek for credit, at the Biblicum. The teacher, a Jesuit, suggested Mary Ellen switch to audit because "the best minds from all over the world would be in the class." No, Mary Ellen insisted, she wanted to do the course for credit. Well, Mary Ellen came out first! And later, when the Jesuit took Mary Ellen to supper at the Biblicum, he announced she was the first American to come out first in his class.

Father Michael Target (Read by Sister Diane Forster, BVM)

When I think of Mary Ellen, I picture her twinkling blue eyes and cheerful face and I think of her adventurous spirit ready to explore and serve in new lands with her many gifts. When she stayed with us at the Centre for Spiritual Renewal in Kumasi, Ghana, she readily offered to join our rotation for giving the homily at Mass. I was always impressed by her homilies. They were like jewels carefully crafted, clear, well focused, and concise, no superfluous word, and always inspiring. Her spirit of faith and prayer came through effortlessly.

She taught religion at the high school junior seminary next door and must have made a big impression on the young students. She never walked back to the Centre without being accompanied by two or three students carrying her books and in an animated discussion with her. I am sure that she opened their minds and hearts to new horizons. Now she has endless horizons to continue exploring.

My most precious memory of her is celebrating Mass with her in her room in Marian Hall on the Feast of St. Ignatius on July 31 of this year. The altar was her little bedside table. I wore a Ghana stole that Sister Therese Jacobs, BVM had brought back. A wonderful surprise as we were about to begin Mass: Cory, a man whom she had prepared for baptism on Skype, walked in. He read the first reading and she was delighted. As she lay in bed, I felt she was concelebrating with me throughout. I thank God for this graced experience. When I went to say goodbye, she asked for a blessing and then she blessed me. I thank God for Mary Ellen.

Shirley Young O'Reilly, Former BVM (Read by Sister Diane Forster, BVM)

I was just out of the novitiate when I met Sister Mary Ellen, my first superior at St. Patrick in Dubuque. What a wonderful Godsend that was for me. The house where we lived was a holy place led by a truly holy woman. All rules were kept with joy. All the sisters there were models of goodness and love of the Lord, but she was the leader. As a newly professed sister, she had to meet with me every Sunday, which was the rule in those days. Later she told me she was not at ease with that as she did not feel she could give spiritual guidance to anyone, so she just taught me what she had learned in her theology classes that summer. What a marvelous thing that was for me.

Later, as my life changed, she never stopped giving her love and guidance. I always knew that it was coming from someone close to the Lord. After I left the community, I lived a very different life, which included earning a master's degree in education from Loyola University. I can honestly say everything

Mary Ellen taught me about teaching was taught all over again at Loyola and in educational conferences I attended as a public school principal. "Always have a reason for what you are doing" was her rule. "Have a behavioral objective, the aim of the lesson." Then she followed that with all the steps of a good lesson that they are still teaching today. Discipline was the same. Things she taught me were still being taught to teachers even as I retired from the profession, and those speakers are making big money teaching it. Intuitively, she was way ahead of her time in the art of teaching. Think of how far her influence has gone as I taught teachers what she taught me. But mostly, it was her simple holiness that was the most wonderful thing to know. She will be missed.

Sister Diane Forster, BVM

We have heard brief comments from several people stating what a blessing Mary Ellen has been, what a wonderful teacher she has been. Kathleen Jackson, a former BVM, Nancy Witlow, who lives in India and graduated from Clarke University, Maureen Quinn Olson, who was here visiting this month, now leads a Bible study at her parish because of Mary Ellen's excellent Old Testament class. The other person was Sharon Schulte, also a Clarke graduate.

Associate Norm Freund

Three quick snapshots of Mary Ellen, all from the past, but they congealed my relationship of 36 years with her.

First was March 1981. I was just out of graduate school and was interviewing for a job in philosophy at Clarke and she was chair of the department. She and Tom McCarver, a BVM associate, saw something in me that they favored. Today, I start my 37th year of service, thanks to her.

Second was January 1982. Between semesters and in below-zero weather, Marabeth and I decided to go play cards with the sisters in Margaret Mann Hall. Mary Ellen put together a group of BVMs and we played four hours of a game called Tripoley, also called Michigan Rummy. To spice it up, we played for money—pennies. One of the participants was Sister Colette Ayer, BVM. About halfway through the evening, she said, "I don't know if I should play anymore. I've lost 75 cents. Mary Ellen turned to her, gave a sideways glance and said, "Are you having fun or not?" Sister Colette said, "Yeah, I am." "Then ante up." And ante up she did. She had more fun, but poor Sister Colette's luck didn't improve.

The last is October 1982. We asked Paul Fuerst and Sister Mary Ellen Caldwell to be the godparents for our newborn son, Joshua Thomas Freund. He is here with our granddaughter Lennon. He will be 35 this fall and was baptized in October of 1982 in Sacred Heart Chapel at Clarke with Mary Ellen as the godmother. God bless you, Mary Ellen. We miss you, but we cherish our memories.

Tim Tyson, Nephew

My mom and Aunt Mary Ellen were sisters. My mom told me a story from about 50 years ago when Aunt Mary Ellen babysat for us one day. When my mom got home, I told her, "I don't like that mean old nun." I came to realize over the intervening years, that she was neither mean nor old. In fact, she was so nice that she and her BVM sisters are in a large part responsible for me having a college education, despite my best efforts not to get one.

When I was at Clarke University, she was determined not to play the role of *loci parentes*. She did a pretty good job of that. When my mom passed away 25 years ago, I sort of forced the job on her. Over the past 25 years, she has been my theological go-to gal, she's been my moral compass, she's been my mentor and she's been my friend. I really, really want to be sad today, but I don't know anybody who

loved her life in its entirety as much as Aunt Mary Ellen did and, in the end, was so contented to leave it behind. I comfort myself knowing that while I'm here saying goodbye, on the other side of that door are Franny, Sarah, Jim, Rosebud, Francis and Helen saying, "Welcome home" to this very joyful and eternally young nun.

Sister Carol Marie Baum, BVM (Joseph Louis)

Two phrases remind me of Mary Ellen. One is the tremendous zest for life and the other is a lifelong learner. Some of you know that Father Tom Toale tapped Mary Ellen a couple of years ago and asked if she would help prepare a gentleman to be brought into the church. Mary Ellen said, "How is that all going to work?" He said, "Well, he lives in Texas. I thought maybe you could Skype and help him prepare. They will be coming back here because his wife is from Dubuque to have their newborn baptized. He would like both to enter the church at that time." Mary Ellen did all of her work. She was able to prepare him to come into the church and the newborn was baptized. They visited her a couple of times while she was ill.

Mary Ellen had a wide range of reading and a voracious appetite for learning new things. However, she wasn't the best when it came to cooking. She was part of my group that went to the Spiders in northern Wisconsin. Of course, we each took a turn cooking the evening meal. Mary Ellen did not do well with portions; her signature casserole was able to feed six for the next week. She loved the north woods and she certainly loved getting herself into the lake there. Mary Ellen, we thank you for the gift you have been for each of us, for your zest for life and your lifelong learning. Keep us in mind.

Terrence Tyson, Nephew

I'm Tim's brother and also a proud graduate of Clarke College. I wanted to add to what Tim said. When we lost our parents, we lost a lot. But what we got was that we really had to start communicating with Father Caldwell and Sister Mary Ellen and Sister Mary Remi. That was the tender mercy of it all. They became friends of ours and added a lot to our lives. If my parents were around, they would have communicated what was up in my life. Once they were gone, we communicated with Father Caldwell and Sister Mary Ellen directly. Ultimately, it was a great tender mercy, which we still have because Father Caldwell is still here. Like Tim, I want to be sad today, and I am, but it's a complex sadness that we feel.

Father Tom Caldwell, SJ, Brother

I'm Mary Ellen's little brother. I was one of her first students. She was already 5 ½ years old when I was born and she started teaching me the next day, but I don't remember that part of it. I'm not going to say much about her. I never saw her angry. I grew up in a family that fought tooth and nail all the time, but not Mary Ellen. She calmed us down.

I've got too many stories to tell. I have one nobody else would tell and she would tell me not to tell it, so I'm going to. The dean of our graduate school told me that she has the highest record in Marquette University's history on the analogy test. She was the smartest girl who ever went through that place. How do you like that? All you guys who think you are smarter than she was, she beat you on one test anyway. She beat me too. I've got a few thousand stories about her, but I'll save them. She was great.

One more thing. She kept asking me, "What are you reading?" I was embarrassed to tell her what I was reading because she was always reading something heavier, something more thorough and, most of the time, something I hadn't read yet. I had to scramble to keep up. I'm not going to be sad today; I am going to be stinking proud.

Maria Teresa Ferrer, Friend

I have been a friend of Mary Ellen's for over 17 years and I graduated from Clarke thanks to Mary Ellen. When I came here with my family, Sister Mary Martens, BVM and Sister Mary Ellen Caldwell helped us to start our lives. I started working here at Mount Carmel. One day I was walking through the hall and she saw my name. She said, "Maria Teresa Ferrer." I got so excited because her accent was Hispanic. I said, "Oh, my goodness, you speak Spanish!" She said, "No, no hablo espanol. Lo ciento. That's it. But I can teach you English." "Really?" "Yes, I can teach you English." I said, "How much would it cost?" She said, "Just remember the BVMs when you get wage."

She started teaching me English every day after work. For a while, she was mentoring everything I wanted to do to gain my degree here. With the help of Sister Mary Martens, I was accepted into Clarke. I remember I came crying to Mary Ellen and said, "I'm not doing it. It's too expensive and I'm going to be too old when I get done." She said, "Really? How old are you now?" I said, "I'm 38." "How old are you going to be when you get done?" "Forty-one." "How old are you going to be with a degree or without a degree? Same age. You better do it." So I did all the process. I always told Sister Mary Ellen, "You are a physical therapist." Because she did every single assignment with me, studied for every single exam, and I practiced therapy all the time.

We have what we have right now and our lives are the way they are thanks to Sister Mary Ellen. The last thing she did for us before she got sick was to prepare my grandson for First Communion via Skype. That was the last contact I had with her. When I came back from the celebration of his First Communion, I came to visit Mary Ellen with photos, but we found she was at the hospital. Thanks to Mary Ellen this has been a wonderful life. Something funny that I always remember is that I'm a rather old-fashioned person and Sister Mary Ellen said, "You are too old-fashioned." She was the best mentor and she really touched our lives.

Margaret Caldwell, Niece (Read by Sister LaDonna Manternach, BVM)

I'm very far away from home visiting my sister and her family in Europe and just learned that my Aunt Mary Ellen Caldwell has died. She was a BVM sister who taught theology at the small Catholic liberal arts college I attended. Women religious, the best-educated, most progressive, feisty group of broads on the planet. Her life was lived with so much love and generosity, grace and wit. In my mind, she was like Mary Poppins—practically perfect—if Mary Poppins had spent time in jail with Dorothy Day after protesting with Cesar Chavez.

I am so grateful for her example of a life well lived. She was at different times a teacher, a principal, a missionary. She worked on her religious community's constitutions, as was required after the Second Vatican Council, going to and from Rome a few times. After retirement, she worked with underserved women in Kenya. As recently as this spring at age 96, she was a catechist in the RCIA process via Skype. She once told me that if she could do it all over again, she would like to be a dancer. That perfectly captures her energy and her enthusiasm, which were both constitutional and a commitment she seemed to have made to life as the best way to approach things. She had a prickly allergy to complaining, an easy hardy laugh. She was famous in our extended family for sending birthday cards to *everyone*. Quite a feat, honestly. You could always count on at least one card. I love you Aunt Mary Ellen. I will miss you.

Sister Paulette Skiba, BVM

Mary Ellen and I have been discussing theology and especially Karl Rahner and all things Vatican II since I was a novice. Since I moved here some 20 years ago, I've shared my library with her. I know that one thing she absolutely delighted in was reading all six volumes of the history of the Second Vatican Council. I've always enjoyed those discussions and I'm going to miss them. On a little note, a little over 10 years ago, she said to me, "You know, I've just been to the doctor and the doctor told me that now I am old old. Up to now, I've been young old." I think she always was young old.

Sister Karen Conover, BVM

I moved to Dubuque from San Francisco two years ago and experienced the Iowa caucuses for the first time that next February. Of course, Mary Ellen was there. I knew that she was the go-to person for anyone who needed political advice. It was delightful to see her there. A reporter from one of the area television stations wanted to interview somebody and everyone pointed to Mary Ellen. The interviewer was appropriately surprised that at 95 she was spry and present and said, "Of course I would be here. Where else would I be?"

When securing Mary Ellen's purse, which is part of my job in Support Services following a sister's death, I discovered it contained this pink 3 x 5" card with two pennies scotch taped to the front. It is not uncommon to find some bills or coins in a sister's purse. However, on the back of the card was a handwritten message from Katie, who is a relative by marriage. It is undated. This is what she wrote:

Dear Mary Ellen,

On the back of this card is a gift for you. One day in about October, Daniel had had a bad day at school. He was on a field trip to the Milwaukee Zoo. It was cold and rainy. I decided to treat him to McDonald's and I went to one on Ohio Avenue in Racine where we usually don't go. My change back was the 1920 penny!!! I thought of you right away and bet that that was your birth year. I got home, checked the timeline and knew this gift was for you. I can't remember when I found the 1919 penny, but I now know that's your parents' wedding year.

Enjoy and God's blessing to you.

Love, Katie

Sister Catherine Dunn, BVM

Mary Ellen was a brilliant teacher, brilliant. Students would tell you that at the time they were studying with her. I sent out a message to hundreds of her classes and I got back a message, I think from each person, saying how much they had learned from her, how brilliant she was, and how much they admired her for the life that she lived. A number of them said, "You know, I had to get a little older to really appreciate all that Mary Ellen had done." I thought that was really dear and true. They knew of her marches with Dorothy Day. They knew of her time of being in prison. They admired that in her. Those women today are probably living examples. Almost all of them referred to her as a mentor. She was a great, great woman.

Sister Amy Golm, BVM

When people ask me about my Clarke years, I often quipped, "I majored in Sara McAlpin and minored in Mary Ellen Caldwell." That was in the day when classes were very, very small and I often had those two women especially, among many wonderful, wonderful BVM teachers. My freshman year, when I knew I was doing at least a minor in religious studies, Mary Ellen was away on sabbatical. Throughout the year, I kept hearing about Mary Ellen Caldwell so I had this image of very large presence—tall and broad and brunette. When I met Mary Ellen in my sophomore year, needless to say, I was a little surprised by her

diminutive statue. I shared that with Mary Ellen later in life and she chuckled and said, "I hope you weren't disappointed." Of course I wasn't, because throughout those years, Mary Ellen not only laid the foundation of a fine theological education, which I later developed in my graduate studies, but more importantly, she became a very dear friend, a person who supported me in some of the most difficult times. I'm pleased to call her teacher and friend and sister.

Father Tom Caldwell, SJ, Brother

Some of you obviously have been her students and so was I long before that. This was kind of a secret. She once took a graduate course at Marquette University. I asked her, "How was it?" She said, "I teach my freshmen more than that!" She probably did!

Christine Olsem, BVM Associate

I first met Mary Ellen as a student at Clarke and eventually took her New Testament class. I enjoyed it so much that I kept all the class materials, which would turn out to be providential. After graduating in 1983, I was hired to teach math and computers at Marquette HS in Bellevue, Iowa, just south of Dubuque.

Several years later, when the parish lost its associate pastor, Marquette lost its theology teacher and I was "asked" to teach New Testament. I agreed and only later discovered that there was nothing with which to plan the class—not even a course outline. After purchasing a good study Bible and some reference materials, I had to figure out where to begin and what to include in the course. That's when I remembered the materials from Mary Ellen's class. They became the basis for a course I taught for six years.

A few weeks after I started working in the BVM Center six years ago, I ran into Mary Ellen. She hadn't changed a bit—the same big smile, sharp as ever, and not even using a cane at that time. I am so glad that I had the opportunity tell her how grateful I was to have taken New Testament and how much I enjoyed her as a teacher.

One of my duties in the Secretary's office is to arrange the contents of sisters' files into a set order. A few years ago, I was working on Mary Ellen's file. As I read articles about her work in Ghana, Kenya and Hungary, I became more and more impressed. Then I found the article about her experiences picketing on behalf of farm workers. When I read about her arrest, I blurted out, "Mary Ellen is a jailbird!" I was stunned and in awe. There she was mingling with the likes of Dorothy Day and Cesar Chavez, people I talked about when I taught church history. Mary Ellen was truly amazing. I will never forget her zest for life and the joy that radiated from her beautiful smile. Stella Marie Swakoski was a member of Mary Ellen's set. If Stella were here, we know what she would say, "God bless her beautiful soul."

Father Tom Toale, Former Motherhouse Chaplain

Two things about Mary Ellen. You already heard about the Skype class. Her work was not totally finished. I had already lined her up in June to do another set of instructions. She very readily agreed, but when she started to weaken, she said, "I don't think I can do this one." The legacy of the Skype continues because Maria Teresa's daughter is getting married in Columbia and her husband-to-be is not yet baptized. So the Skype tradition has been passed on to Sister Mary Martens, BVM and he will be baptized at the Cathedral in October. Mary Ellen has truly started a tradition that passes on the Word of God.

Sister Diane Forster, BVM

I have often thought of Mary Ellen as a renaissance woman. Some of you may know that she sewed rather difficult construction clothing very well. She and her sister, Sister Remi, took on making a large quilt at one time and did very well with it. I have been amazed by Mary Ellen's encyclopedic knowledge of opera. She went to many operas when they became available by theatre projection and read and listened and knew things that those teaching opera could have learned from her. Her appreciation for music was wide and deep. There was a time when I practiced organ early in the morning. She said, "I want to know when you are going to practice." I teased her, "It's going to cost you." To this day, I have five dollars in my organ bag.