

*Mary K. O'Brien, BVM (Jean Catherine)*  
*Wake Stories/Reflections*  
*Marian Hall Chapel, Dec. 4, 2017*

**Katelyn Kelliher, Great Niece (Read by Roger O'Brien, Cousin)**

When my brothers, Kevin and Connor, and I were texting back and forth about all of our memories of Auntie Mary K., I realized they were almost all related to Christmas and our celebrations. While we were very sad to see her pass, I'm glad we can use this holiday season to remember some of these times: breakfast with Santa, Christmas Eve Mass at her church, and watching the play. I always wished my school would do something similar so that I could recognize my true potential as a stage actress. Connor thought Christmas Eve at her house was always so hot. Probably because we would run down the hallways playing and then be forced into fleece pajamas at 7 p.m.

On Christmas Eve at her new apartment with Sister Marion Pasdiora, she would make us chicken nuggets for dinner even as we approached our 20s and should have been eating real food. One year Kevin tried quietly to tell me that the Christmas Eve ham looked gross and Mary K. leaned over and said, "I think so too." While playing spoons at Nanna's, I will always remember her sly smile as she quietly took the first spoon. It is with heavy hearts we say goodbye to our great aunt. I am grateful that we have so many fun and funny memories to look back on. I don't know many people my age who can say they grew up close to one of their great aunts. We were certainly lucky.

**Maureen Kelliher, Niece (Read by Roger O'Brien)**

Many here and at Mary K.'s school will recall her lifelong service, her steadfast belief in Christ, her talents as an educator and principal. To me and to the rest of the family, she was Auntie Mary K. Being a child and having a nun as an aunt and close family member is a rare experience. Mary K. was a regular person with many gifts and a few flaws. I think some of the nuns at Queen of the Rosary GS in Elk Grove Village would have preferred that my siblings and I did not have this level of personal experience with the humanness of nuns and priests. I like knowing that they were real people with families and other interests.

Mary K. read the newspaper, watched the news every day and expected everyone to be ready to discuss current events. She had a great sense of humor and she liked a good story. Some of my earliest memories include Mary K. at weekend meals, and she like the occasional beer with her pizza or spaghetti, playing cards and games and watching college football games, especially Notre Dame. In fact, it was through her connection to Bishop McManus that I attended the first of many Notre Dame games. We sat in the bishop's box at the 50-yard line about 10 rows up. I've never come close to those seats at any other game.

Mary K. also liked to win. My daughter Katelyn noticed Mary K.'s sly smile when she won at cards and that is a perfect description. When she played games with us as kids, she never let us win. If we won fair and square, we were proud of ourselves. She played a mean game of spoons and was ruthless at cards.

One of my fondest memories was visiting St. Ferdinand School when our school had a scheduled day off. Jay (Connolly), Kathleen (Brown) and I would hang out in the learning center and her office. I don't remember a single holiday without Mary K. We had a tradition of celebrating with the whole family Thanksgiving on Wednesday evening or Friday afternoon. I remember pizza dinner with the nuns of St. Ferdinand and having free reign of the convent. Looking back, I didn't realize how unusual that was.

One Thanksgiving Eve when I was about 13, it snowed while we were visiting. Mary K. was worried that I would fall or freeze in my shoes. She brought down the coolest navy blue hiking boots and told me they were mine to keep. I loved those boots and felt very grown up. It was that night I realized that I was taller than her. It was a big rite of passage for me, maybe because I never got much taller. Christmas Eve locations changed over the years from our house in Elk Grove to the convent at St. Francis Xavier to her apartment in Mundelein. The evening always started with Mass and ended with a home-cooked meal. I loved that my children share the memory of some of those nights. We all enjoyed the saved seats at St. Francis Xavier with a close-up view of the Christmas pageant.

Mary K. inspired many of my family's Christmas traditions. She also always included an ornament with her Christmas gift every year. She started with the Marshall Field's annual Chicago landmark ornament and then Irish ornaments. I now have two trees filled with these ornaments. I think of her when lighting the trees every night in December. Mary K. collected Celtic Santas. My husband admired these and we began collecting one per year ourselves. Now we'll probably display some of her Irish Santas with ours throughout the first floor of our house. Mary K. also generously gave us her Waterford Nativity set. This is one of my most favorite things ever! I can't look at it without thinking of her. I'm so grateful that my children were able to have many of the same experiences in their childhoods with Mary K. that I did in mine.

One of my favorite memories was Breakfast with Santa at St. Francis Xavier. The people were so kind and welcoming. We loved going and we loved having a nice Santa for our kids to visit. Some of the pictures are classics. We gratefully escaped the dreaded mall Santa experience. My most lasting memory occurred while visiting St. Francis. I overheard Mary K. having a "talk" with a boy of 10 or 12. She said to him, "Let's celebrate the good."

That phrase profoundly affected me. Our family was young and busy and there were little frustrations every day. Keeping this phrase in mind, or at least trying to, helped me every single day, especially when three kids needed to be somewhere at the same time and all the stoplights were red. She was right to focus on the good and the blessings in life and not dwell on the negative. Through the years, there has been much to celebrate in our family. This phrase helps me remember to appreciate the good every day. Today is a day to celebrate the good in Mary K.'s life. It's so sad to have lost her, but we will dwell on the good memories and teaching she left in our lives.

#### **Sister Bernadette McManigal, BVM**

We all know Mary K. was a great educator. I had the privilege of being her partner teaching seventh grade in Bellerose, N.Y. If you knew anything about St. Gregory in Bellerose, you knew that when you were assigned there, you were not only given a grade, but you were given a band instrument to teach. Mary K. and I taught clarinet. She knew a little bit about the clarinet, and I didn't. I was always very grateful to her because she taught me how to teach clarinet without playing it myself. Mary K., you were a fun person to be with, a great educator, and I thank you for your generosity.

#### **Kathleen Brown, Niece (Read by Carrie, Grand Niece)**

I remember pizza at the convent at St. Ferdinand and spinning on the footstools until we were totally dizzy. I remember watching filmstrips and making crafts with Mary K.'s dear friend S.M. Emmelia Hunt. I remember being on vacation in Boston and laughing in the van and at dinner and getting the look from my mom. I remember wrapping Christmas presents at St. Francis Xavier convent and taking my kids to the St. Patrick's Day parties. My children remember visiting her and Sister Marion at their apartment and were so excited that there was always candy on the coffee table, which was something they were

not used to. They also remember visiting her here and making cupcakes. Mary K. would steal the peeps and eat them when she thought we weren't looking. I remember visiting here at Thanksgiving and watching the parade and the dog show on TV. As more Thanksgivings passed, we talked less and napped more, but still were able to spend quality times together. Mary K. taught me about faith and family. She taught me about social justice and the importance of education. She taught me that we were put here to serve without ever saying a word.

### **Carrie, Grand Niece**

I experience this personally. Mary K. showed us love without saying a word. She made my veil for my first communion and it's so beautiful.

### **Sister Mary Ellen Zimmermann, BVM**

Mary K. and I are in the same set; we entered the same day. My overall remembrance of being with her is that I always enjoyed the time with her. We were very comfortable, friendly, enjoyed our conversations. My eyes would light up when I saw her and we would visit and chat. I think of Mary K. as loving person.

### **Ann Rabe**

I'm from St. Francis Xavier Parish in Wilmette, Ill. Sister Mary K. had five of my children, four of them boys, for nine years, kindergarten through eighth grade, at St. Francis Xavier. God love her! She taught our children that first we pray then we play. That was something that was so ingrained in them and so important. When we were having a party celebrating Sister Mary K., which she did not want, I asked my son, the oldest who is now in high school, "Tell me your memory of Sister Mary K." He said, "Mom, she stood at the top of the stairs. If your shirt wasn't tucked in, or if you were running, or if you were loud, you got called out." And he said, "She loved every single one of us." Yes, she did and they knew it. God bless Sister Mary K.

### **Helen Donohue**

I'm also from St. Francis Xavier. I first sent my children to Sister and then I taught for her. I was dropping off the youngest for kindergarten and, of course, I was teary. She said, "Oh, don't carry on. Go in there and teach!" I said, "Until you find someone else." Well, it was 15 years.

I have a son who is seriously mentally ill. It took a long time for us to figure that out. For many years, Sister Mary K. was our total support with him. When he was little, he got into trouble, which he always did. She said, "Sit in this chair and do not move." She got busy, forgot about him, and went off to the convent for lunch. She found my son on the little first grade chair, holding onto each side of it, and bouncing through the parking lot. She said, "And where are you going?" He said, "I'm not having a good day. I'll see you tomorrow."

One other time when I was teaching there, I went to the Xerox machine and she was copying something, which she covered up. I said, "I'm sorry. Am I intruding?" She said, "It's all the apology notes that your son has ever written to anyone in this school. I just love them and someday I'll write a book." She helped with my own children and she was the best principal for whom I've ever worked. We loved her very much.

### **Sister Joan Newhart, BVM**

My life intersected many times with Mary K.'s, but we had one unique relationship. When she first arrived here, I was asked if I would take care of the mail she received because she was not able to

answer the very many cards and letters that she received. One thing that was present in every card and letter was how much she had meant to the families. It was written over and over and over again. That's important to me.

#### **Father Wayne Watts**

I am a priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago. Sister Mary K., and I never called her anything but Sister Mary K., taught me how to be a priest. I have one story that I remember distinctly and has lasting memories for me.

It was in September of 1990. I was a newly ordained priest still getting used to the role and these clothes we have to wear. I was sitting in the office in shorts and a t-shirt. Sister Mary K. came in and said, "You have to go to Evanston Hospital. One of the O'Connor girls has a baby who's sick." I didn't know who the O'Connor girls were and I knew nothing about the situation. I said, "Me? What about the pastor? He knows what he's doing." She said, "Go to the hospital."

Because Sister told me to go to the hospital, I went to the hospital. Two days later, that baby was dying and I had the opportunity to be with and pray with and pray for the family. Some of the photos of the family members are displayed around in this chapel. I've been a priest for nearly 28 years. All of those O'Connor girls and boys and the 50-plus cousins of Patrick who died are still my friends. Because of Sister Mary K., I have great friends, one of whom is here today; she drove up from Chicago. I met her when she was six and her brother died. Maureen is here paying respect to Sister Mary K. as well. Sister Mary K. taught me how to be a priest.

#### **Sister Elaine Campbell, BVM**

Mary K. and I have been friends since 1967 when both of us became principals. We worked together in the Archdiocese of Chicago where Mary K. is very well-known and loved. My association with Mary K. is more personal. Even though she held her cards close to her chest, she had a heart that was always reaching out and always wanted everyone to be a better person.

#### **Sister Ann Kathleen McDonnell, BVM**

When St. Francis Xavier was looking for a new principal, I happened to be working at the archdiocesan school office and had that area of the city. I knew from Mary K.'s previous experience that she would be wonderful at St. Francis. They needed a good leadership person at that time. To this day, whenever I see some of the board members, they still thank me for encouraging Mary K. to go to St. Francis. I've had many interactions with school boards and pastors, but in the 20-plus years that Mary K. was principal, St. Francis was the only school that a call never come down to the archdiocesan school office. It emphasizes what a great administrator she was.

#### **Sister Jean Beste, BVM**

I did not know Mary K., but I was working here as a community representative when Mary K. and Marion Pasdiora moved to Mount Carmel. I happened to be the contact person for them. I remember the twinkle in Mary K.'s eyes when you would say, "Hi, Mary K.!" Mary K. and Marion were always together. When Mary K. moved to the fourth floor, Marion would go up after lunch and they would sit next to each other. They were together and it was a beautiful picture. They supported each other.

#### **Sister Terese Shinnors, BVM**

Although Mary K. and I were in the novitiate together, we did not become friends until we were both in the Lake County, Ill., cluster. We became very good friends and were often on the same page. We also

got together at times other than cluster meetings. Even after I moved to Milwaukee, we would arrange the occasionally rendezvous at halfway points. I came to treasure Mary K.'s skill at listening and her wisdom. I know I will always miss that. I thank her for her skill at listening and her wisdom and being there to listen to me run off at the mouth on many occasions. Thanks, Mary K.

**Mary Rita Francis**

I have known Sister Mary K. since I was 10 years old. I'm 85 now, so do the math. My latest memory is from October. Mary K.'s birthday is Oct. 31 and I was looking for a birthday card. None of the cards I was looking at made any sense. Finally, I did find one that I think is most appropriate. It said, "Any day that celebrates you is a good day." I think that of today as well. Mary K., any day that celebrates you is a good day.

**Sister Mary Diane Forster, BVM**

I did not know Mary K. either, but something that was said to me about her was quite important. When she was in a school where there were children from families that were not well to do, but certainly comfortable, she made the effort to keep the children aware that other children were not so fortunate nor as comfortable as they were. That kind of awareness is an important piece of our world today. For her contribution to that awareness, I would thank Mary K.