

Sister (St.) Edith Dunn, BVM
Wake Stories/Reflections
Marian Hall Chapel, June 12, 2014

Sister Jean Monica Lanahan, BVM

In the past couple of weeks, people have asked me so many times, “How long have you known Edith?” I’m quick to tell them that we climbed the front steps of Mount Carmel together 67 years ago. We had met at Clarke that very day for the first time through influential mutual friends.

Through these 67 years I have written, talked to Edith, met with her, visited her and lived with her as recently as a week ago. When she taught music, I liked to hear about her shows, the productions she put on. How much she put into it I well know. When she taught commercial courses at both the Immaculata HS and Wahlert HS, I saw the signs of the great work she did in the commercial department. When she was at Wahlert, she took a trip with a group of students, companioned by Sister Barbara Cerny. That gave her a taste for travel; she really loved that trip.

When she left Wahlert, she didn’t really want to be a teacher anymore; she wanted to be a secretary. Fortunately, our community had a new system called TOPA and we could do something besides teaching school. This was Edith’s opportunity and she was overjoyed that she could be a secretary. Sister Joan Newhart and I were happy that the opportunity was open to all, especially because of Edith. When she lived at Wright Hall, she worked for Dr. Visotsky. She was his administrative assistant and he was the chief psychiatrist at Northwestern University Hospital. From what he said about Edith, we knew that he liked her very much and appreciated all she did.

Before coming to Mount Carmel to retire and while she was in retirement at Wright Hall, she loved the area, Lake Michigan, and all the things about Chicago. She said to me, “Jean, I know that the Mississippi isn’t going to take the place of Lake Michigan.” But when she got here, she liked it very much. Nobody took more tours around our property or enjoyed the Mississippi any more than Edith Dunn. She loved the beauty of it and appreciated the caregiver she had here and her many friends. I myself will miss Edith.

Sister Monica M. Seelman, BVM

I had lived with Doris Walsh and she was at Wright Hall when she and Edith celebrated their 50th jubilee together. As part of the celebration, when we were in the dining room, the nieces and nephews got up and sang a song. They had Edith’s picture in front of them. I’m sure that some of you were part of that because my family, my brothers and sisters, were so impressed. They thought it was just a great idea and at least twice more it was adapted. When I had my 50th birthday, they got pictures of me and made me the pope. It was all because of the great celebration on her 50th.

Sister Kathleen Spurlin, BVM

My community number is 3392 and Edith’s was 3393. We were ordered by height as postulants. There are a couple of things that Edith got me into the habit of doing. One of them is listening to Guy Lombardo on Saturday evenings. She loved him. When I first came here in 2012 from Mississippi, I was sitting at the table with Edith and she mentioned that Saturday program. She also expressed her pleasure that the Stations of the Cross here in Marian Hall Chapel were

brought from Wright Hall. She was so happy that happened. One of the things that I remember so much about Edith was her joy and her laughter. She could make you laugh if something tickled her. She was a real joy in writing up things for our set. I have such pleasant memories of her that I have her picture on my bulletin board right now. God bless you, Edith!

Sister Anne Buckley, BVM

As we all know, Edith was very organized and very articulate. I remember one particular night at Wright Hall. She was giving one of her travelogues. I forget the actual country, but she was ready with all the slides and everything. She was into it about ten or fifteen minutes when suddenly every light and all the electricity went out. Well, it didn't stop Edith. She just went on as though nothing had happened. In the pitch black, we heard all about this country and her great stories and all of her wonderful humor. I never had such a wonderful time. I will never forget it; she was just terrific! The electricity wasn't important.

Sister Katherine Heffernan, BVM

Edith and I lived together at Wright Hall on the seventh floor for 13 years. We were both leaving for work at the same time in the morning so we had breakfast together and discussed the problems that we were going to confront during the day. We were both in psychiatric settings. Edith was downtown with Dr. Visotsky and I worked in clinical services at a psychiatric hospital. We had all of that and when everything else failed, we turned to travel. We both did a lot of that.

One of the trips we took together was to the Canadian Rockies. Dorine and Virginia, didn't your parents go there on their honeymoon? She would recall all the things her parents did during their trip. As Anne mentioned, Edith always did a lot with her trips; I came home and didn't do anything but talk about the next one. She put on these great dialogues and she brought things back to show. It was beautiful; she really made it come alive! Her travel books are here in the library. They would be a wonderful thing to see.

Cathy Fernan, Oldest Niece

I'm a teacher so I feel very comfortable behind this podium. I brought a Bible to read a couple of passages that remind me of Sister and all of you—Luke 11:9-10: “So I say to you, ask it and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.” That ties in with all of you because whenever we had a need in our lives, Sister would put our petition on the board. You probably know more of our problems than we do! We've received many blessing because of your prayers for our family. I want to thank you.

Another is—Matthew 18:19-20: “Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree upon anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them.” So, thank you for being with us on our journey through life. Thank you for praying for us through all our trials and tribulations. Thank you for taking such good care of Sister and being her family. We really appreciate all that you have done.

Judy Sell, Niece

(Judy begins to sing and is joined by Cathy.)

Here we are, all together, as we sing our song joyfully.

Here we are, all together, as we pray we will always be.
Join we now as friends and celebrate
The brotherhood we share all as one.
Keep the fire burning, kindle it with care
And we'll all join in and sing.
Here we are, all together, as we sing our song joyfully.
Here we are, all together, as we pray we will always be.

Sister was good with music with us. Sister also brought us a lot of treasure when she traveled. We may not have appreciated them when we got them as surly teenagers, but now as fashionistas, we do. I am wearing three of her necklaces from who knows where. My mother and my sister and I are very into coordinating outfits. Sister Edith was right in there; she always looked so snappy—just a snappy dresser. Like my sister Cathy, I appreciate all of your love and support for her.

Steve Sell, Nephew-in-law

My quick story is an opportunity to thank Sister Edith and especially all of you folks. It's a Wright Hall memory. For a number of years, I came to Wright Hall. Cathy's husband and I would come to Wright Hall and then attend the Big Ten college tournaments that were held in Chicago. I used to think that we were kind of frugal, but I think there is another reason—we couldn't find any other lodging. You folks were very welcoming and I'll always remember that.

One memory is of coming back at about 2 o'clock in the morning. Both of us, kind of shady characters, were wearing black leather jackets; it was in the middle of the winter and cold. Sister gave us a key to come in through one of the utility entrances in the back, but we couldn't get it to work. I said, "If we get in before the cops get here in about 10 seconds, I'll be shocked." I have such great memories of all you. One year it was my 50th birthday. A nice bonus was that you folks sang "Happy Birthday" to me and I never had it sung so beautifully! I will always remember that and great memories of all of you. Thank you.

John Brockhaus, Nephew

My story ties into Judy's. I helped to bring all those trinkets back because I was the taxi ride for Sister from Wright Hall to Janesville when she came home for Christmas, holidays, parties and in the summer. I got to spend quite a bit of time with her. I usually spent some time at Wright Hall to have lunch with her. I got to meet many of you who were at Wright Hall. I got to hear all her stories about whatever trip she just got back from, and to bring home suitcases of clothes she wasn't using any more and wanted to give to the family, along with all of her trinkets that she picked up on her trips.

She also had another distinction. My name is John and I'm 54 years old. From as far back as I can remember until last December when I saw her last, she has called me Johnny. She is the only one who has ever been able to call me that since I was eight years old. She takes that with her.

Sister Margaret Zimmermann, BVM

I have wonderful memories of when I was at Wright Hall with Edith and the parodies she would write for celebrations, whether for an individual or something for the community. It might be a special holiday or someone leaving or coming, but she would write a parody with music and

teach everybody ahead of time. We were just fascinated by the work that she did in writing them. It was wonderful.

Sister Mary Jo Keane, BVM

I had the pleasure of being a practice teacher with Edith at Wahlert HS. She tolerated me very well and I learned a lot from her. But there was one point where I had to have so many hours of bulletin boards, and she looked at me and said, "Now, Sister, I will do the bulletin board and you hand me the pins."

Deb Doyle, Pastoral Services

I just wanted to share my last interaction with Sister Edith. It was about a week before her death. She was sitting outside and I just went out to chat with her. She said, “Deb, you know what I would really like is to walk these grounds one more time.” I said, “I would be happy to be your driver.” So we walked all around the campus. Then she asked if we could go down the Pine Walk so we did do that. She really enjoyed that time. On the way back she said, “Can we please stop at the entrance where we entered?” Of course she was referring to those beautiful front steps. She said, “Can we stop here for a few minutes?” I said, “Certainly. Would you like me to take you up closer?” She said, “No. You know this is where it all began, Deb, and I just want to thank you.” She really gave me a gift that day.

Sister Kathryn Lawlor, BVM

I also lived with Edith at Wright Hall. I want to testify that indeed Edith had a great friendship with Jean Monica. It told me how sensitive Edith was to other people. Jean Monica had a cousin who died and Edith came to me and said, “Let’s go to the wake of Jean Monica’s cousin.” I said, “Oh, no. It’s just a cousin and besides it’s way out of town. No, we don’t need to go to that.” She said, “Now Jean Monica has no brothers and sisters, no immediate family. We will be the only ones at that wake, so we must go.” Well, we went. I would say there were about eight hundred people at that wake.

Sister Joan Newhart, BVM

I go back to the Immaculata days with Edith. I particularly remember the trips to visit her family at Christmas time because we sang Christmas carols in the back seat all the way up to Janesville. That seems to be my overriding memory. One other observation though, I was able to be with the family the day before Edith died. She died during the night and I was a little surprised about that with the mystery of death and how you can’t predict death. The next day I did imagine that she was saying, “You know, this is the best trip I ever took.”

Pat McCarthy, Nephew

I have a couple of recollections. When I was young, every holiday season we would have these big productions when we would have slide presentations from her trips. It was a big deal. We had to get out the big slide projector and the carousel in which she loaded up the slides. And she practiced. I was amazed at the production of it all. She had all the seating set up in the living and everybody had to sit in a certain area. My dad and uncle Bill had a great time, “Here we come; the big production’s coming!” The first one to fall asleep got pulled out. I can still hear the clicking of the carousel. The other thing is when something was going on in my life, like illness, I would get a little card from Sister in the mail. It would say, “We are saying a Triduum of Masses for you.” This didn’t happen just one time; it happened every time there was a situation when there was a tough time for the family. We are going to say a Triduum of Masses and prayers for you, Sister, too.

Janet Durham, Friend and Former Student

I’m here with Mary Ann Schreiber. We met at St. Joseph’s Academy here in Dubuque. We’ve known Sister ever since then and have visited with her and exchanged Christmas cards. We would even receive written synopses of her trips. I still have some of them at home. I want to thank the BVM sisters. They were wonderful teachers. I went to St. Anthony School, St. Joseph Academy and Clarke College. The nuns are just such wonderful teachers and I appreciate it so

much. I don't think we will ever forget Sister trying to teach us to act in "Miss Coruthers Returns." I also had typing and musical things with her. She was always a joy.

Mary Ann Schreiber, Friend and Former Student

Believe me; none of use went on to careers in theater. We have visited her on a regular basis since she has been back here. She always referred to us as "her girls." What does that do for somebody our age! I'm not sure if it was us that she liked or the chocolates that we always brought. She did have a sweet tooth. I, too, would like to thank the BVMs because I was at St. Raphael's, her very first assignment. I don't think she was thrilled to death to only go down the hill! I still have a big connection with the BVMs. My daughter has taught in a BVM all-girls high school in Phoenix for the last 28 years. So my connection with the BVMs is strong.

Bill Brennan, First Cousin

You know that Sister Edith had two sisters, Virginia and Dorine. I would like to let you know that, according to her, she did have a brother. One time I was picking her up at Wright Hall she was introducing me to some of the other sisters. She said, "Here's my little brother Bill." So, as you may know, she did try to change the course of history a little bit. That's not quite the way it is down. But one way she did change history, and many of you are still part of that, and it has been reference by some of the people – the joy, the laughter in this particular community and how real that is. She worked so many years at a secular place, Northwestern Hospital. She felt her church was outside the walls of a church. That is so true about the BVMs. I'm BVM educated, and despite of it, I didn't turn out too badly! This is a comment, not only about Sister Edith, but about your community that it is so forward looking and forward living. We hear a lot about women religious now, some of the second rate and third rate positions that a lot of women religious are put into. Sister Edith is now in a place where the women religious are getting first class treatment. God bless all the BVM community.

Steve Fernan, Nephew-in-law

I am married to Sister Edith's niece Cathy. A few years back when Sister Edith stopped traveling by bus to come home to Wisconsin for holidays with the family, her nephew, John Brockhaus, would take one shift bringing her from Wright Hall to Janesville, Wisconsin, and then my wife and I would take her back. Well, on the very first trip that we took, as soon as we got settled into the car, buckled in, luggage arranged, she asked that we stop and say the prayer of the traveler. At first I was a little taken back, thinking it was more a comment on my driving and my ability to be safe. But then I realized it was part of her ritual for all the years that she traveled. What really struck me was her unwavering faith in God to look out for her and the passengers and the drivers as well. It made me a little bit better driver trying to be attentive to that.