

Sister Leslie Hays (Agnita), BVM
Wake Stories/Reflections
Marian Hall Chapel, May 15, 2014

Mary Ellen & Ross Allen, Niece & Nephew-in-law

Because, as my father famously said, our family cries at supermarket openings, I probably won't be able to get through what I wrote, so Ross is going to finish for me. He also has a letter sent by my brother Larry, who lives in Seattle and is working feverishly in his baking business to be ready for Saturday market.

Growing up in Chicago, my family was quite small. Besides my parents, grandparents and one brother, I only had one uncle and three aunts. Leslie, named after her father, was my mother's favorite sister, a welcomed, but infrequent, visitor to our home, who lived in far away, exotic places like Butte, Mont., and California. She was my magical and mysterious aunt, a teacher who inspired wonder and awe dressed in her long, voluminous, swishing, black skirt, swinging rosary beads and complicated head gear.

One of my favorite childhood memories is packing the huge Christmas box we sent her each year. It was my job to fill the available space between the little wrapped packages with non-perishable food items and treats from our well-stocked pantry. Mother explained that each item would not only be a nice treat for Les, but also something for her to share with all of her sisters. So I took my job very seriously and filled the box to bulging. I also credit that experience with not only learning to be a great packer, but also learning to read the names on the boxes and the names and purposes of the kitchen items we sent. Another fond memory is of my mother and Leslie sitting on our back porch during those rare summer visits and quietly chatting. Much to my chagrin, however, they conducted those conversations in rapid, fluent Pig Latin, thus successfully thwarting a young, curious eavesdropper as I crept nearby. Oday ouyay eakspay igpay atinlay?

We really got to know Les when her frequent visits to Kansas City brought her to St. Regis Parish where my children went to school. They remember her for her quick, sharp wit, her love of books and as a ruthless, fierce competitor at card games and dominos that she loved to play. My son was in awe of his great aunt, who in full habit and only a wool shawl, withstood the sub-freezing winter temperatures of Butte, Mont., to coach the eighth grade boys' football team. He was delighted that they shared a sweet tooth's love of Oreo cookies and dark chocolate. And who besides Les would think to take my exuberant four-year-old daughter on a 500 mile road trip to Dubuque for a three-day visit at the Motherhouse. Melissa still laughs recalling how every afternoon after naptime she raced through the BVM Center hallways knocking on doors and crying, "Party time! Party time!" to invite all the sisters to the kitchen for snacks.

Along the years I began to see Les not only as my aunt, but as a very accomplished woman who had taken the gifts that were hers alone and turned them into something very special. I began to take pride in the grace she had perfected and the wisdom she gathered. I began to be grateful not only that she was in my life, but that she was in the world with her gentle strength and her powerful love. Today we celebrate and honor her, both the wonderful aunt she's always been and the incredible woman she was. She leaves behind a legacy of faith, hope and love to all of us gathered here. We are saddened by the loss of her smile, but at the same time, are comforted that

she is joined in heaven with both her birth family and the family of sisters she chose nearly 74 years ago.

Larry Lowry, Nephew (Read by Ross Allen)

Technically, of course, she was Helen Leslie Hays, Sister Mary Agnita, but to me she was always Aunt Les, the most fascinating, well-educated relative I ever had. Pardon me, Dad. I know you had a college degree, but Aunt Les, well, hers was something special.

My memories of this wonderful woman, alas, are pretty sketchy because we were always far, far away from each other. I wasn't born when she began her training and as I grew up she was always somewhere else, first for her education and then on assignment to such wonderful sounding, but to me, remote places such as Montana and California. Her visits home were always special occasions. She and the other sister who accompanied her always arrived in full dress—the long, black habit; squared-off, starched white head covering; and black veil—and full of good humor. She always reached over and gave me a loving pinch and asked, “How's things?” It was so exciting to tell friends that my favorite relative was a nun who lived far away.

It was in later years when she took on other responsibility that she and I got to know each other. But even so, we were far apart, she in Tennessee and Florida and I in those exotic states of Montana and California. She was a guiding light and a strong influence for many a student and adult. I am so proud of what she accomplished in her life. I'll miss her wonderful smile and wise understanding and appreciation for life. Bless her.

Sister Gayle Brabec, BVM

I had the privilege of living with Leslie in Hawaii. She taught second grade and I taught first. I wanted my first graders to be well prepared for Leslie because she was a very good teacher. I just want you think of her in that respect too.

Sister Stella Marie Swakoski, BVM

Leslie and I go back many, many years, as Ross mentioned, to her years in Montana. She taught third grade and I had seventh grade next door to her. We did many, many things together. My family grew to love her because when my brother-in-law died very suddenly, Sister Mary Stephen O'Brien, our superior, sent Leslie and me to write the thank you notes after the funeral. So she was always very dear to my family. She was a person who had a great knowledge about many things but never bragged about it. She was very humble.

I remember that she was so proud that God had given her a very special blessing. We were here at Mount Carmel in rooms across from each other and we talked together. She said, “When we have my wake, I want you to leave two thoughts in the minds of the people. The first thought is that God has blessed me with a very unusual gift. I have been blessed by God with the ability to be empathic. Empathy means, Stella, that I could walk in their footsteps. And for some of them, I sometimes did.” She always used that ability to discern what people were thinking to make the great changes she made in the lives of many people. Leslie will have a very high place in Heaven because she loved God very dearly and she led many people to a path to God.

Patricia Williams, Niece (Read by Deb Doyle)

First of all I must thank you, Deb, for being with Leslie when she died. That has importance for us because our aunt was such a special caregiver all her life, and knowing she passed from this

life to the next in loving hands is truly a blessing. Leslie was the third daughter and a quiet, dutiful one—that never changed. Leslie became the caretaker for our grandmother and her baby sister, Donna Jean. When grandmother died, Leslie moved to Florida with Donna and elder sister Mary Frances. When Mary Frances died, Leslie brought Donna home with her to Mount Carmel.

I was about eight when I first met Leslie. She was home on a visit from San Jose. My dad and I went to old St. Patrick convent to see her. It was my first “up close and personal” with a nun in full habit in the convent parlor. Even my dad, the family rebel, was on his best behavior! He respected her intelligence, her tolerance and her warmth behind the veil.

I was a young bride when in 1965 she came to visit my husband and me at our apartment. She had been transferred back to the Midwest, had a car to drive to the BVM schools here, and was now in a modified habit. She talked of the many changes with Vatican II—some sisters were even starting to grow their hair back in case the community decided to go to street clothes and how welcome the extra time and freedom by giving up the elaborate head piece was.

I want to thank you for the loving kindness we personally saw extended to our aunt; being cared for as tenderly as she cared for so many others. To see for ourselves how well the community was looked after, how active so many members are; still involved, if they choose to be, after their long years of devoted service, was heartwarming to see. I know their reward is to be in heaven, but a little bit now wouldn't hurt either. To that end please use this as you see fit to bring some smiles in memory of Leslie, a celebration of a life well lived with devotion and love. Sincerely and with sympathy to the community for her loss, Pat Williams.

Sister Anne Marie Mullen, BVM

I had the joy of coming out of the novitiate and living with Leslie Hays, Stella, and Jackie Burke. It was Leslie and Jackie who formed me into a teacher. I want to talk about her life in Nashville. We think of her as an educator, but she was managing a building with 211 apartments for senior citizens and for people with limitations such as Donna. Her mother and Donna lived in that building with her so she could take care of them while she took care of the building. She did it so gracefully. I had the joy of being with her in Nashville while she was doing that. I just wanted to add that to her repertoire of things that she accomplished.

Sister Therese Frelo, BVM

If I were to choose one word to describe Leslie, I think I would say she was a very faithful person. It summarizes so much of her life because she was faithful, especially to her family, by how she took care of her mother and sister, and her friends, too, because she was always someone you could depend upon. Stella mentioned her empathy; it was always there in her faithfulness.

She was also faithful to the community in the many ways she contributed her services. She was a senator for many years, she was in education, and she was in leadership positions in the community. Maybe more than anywhere else, she made an impact in the educational world. She represented our community and responded to the needs in the educational world in her leadership position. Last and not the least, she was very faithful to her God. What struck me in the first reading was when it says that she was a woman of great love who responded faithfully to God's call. We thank you, Leslie, for all you did faithfully in your life. We know that you will faithfully continue to pray for us.

Sister C. Jean Hayen, BVM

When I think of Leslie, I see a loving BVM and friend dedicated to the ministry of education, one who lived life to the fullest even when, literally, it became sight unseen. She expanded her horizon by listening to many varieties of digital books. She was one of the first to use that format at Mount Carmel. And we must not forget that she engaged in gambling at casinos and with life. Enjoy now, Leslie, eternal life.

Sister Joan Stritesky, BVM

Leslie's sister Mary was always thinking of ways for them to make money. When I elected to go to Nashville, they were raising earthworms to sell as bait to fishermen. She wanted to bring me out to the compound where she had rows of big, long boxes. On cold nights she would have to turn on lights to keep them warm. They reminded me of snakes and I fear snakes, unfortunately, so I never did go out to see them. I'm sorry, Leslie, but you had other gifts that made up for that one!

Sister Anita Therese Hayes, BVM

I was in the novitiate with Leslie but I didn't get to know her there. I did get to know her when she was the administrator at the nursing/retirement home in Nashville. I will never forget the loving concern she had for everybody and for her dear mother and Donna and Mary Fran who was there too. I got to know the whole family. She was the most caring person. I remember how she would take the people there to concerts; they had wonderful trips. I remember her loving care and what a wonderful administrator she was. So thank you, Leslie, for all the memories you have given us.

Sister Stella Marie Swakoski, BVM

No one has mentioned this, so I want to tell you this one thing about Leslie which shows what a unique love she had for her family and how she tried to meet each one's needs. Donna loved to dance to popular music. So what did Leslie do? They had an organ in the house. She went out and took private lessons to learn how to play popular music. Donna and I would dance and Leslie would be in seventh heaven because Donna was so very happy. That's how she went the extra mile for everybody.