

*Sister Mary Joel Kramer, BVM*  
*Wake Stories/Reflections*  
*Marian Hall Chapel, July 21, 2014*

**Steve Keane, former student**

I am originally from Sioux City, but I now live in Arkansas. My wife and I drove up yesterday. I was fortunate to have Sister Mary Joel. She was my second grade teacher and my altar boy instructor. Three years later, she taught my wife in second grade.

As time goes by, as many of us are aware, we lose track of each other. Back in 1987, I rekindled my relationship with Sister Mary Joel in Sioux City at the hospital when I came in one night as a patient loaded up on Demerol from kidney stones. All of a sudden there was this little figure down at the foot of my bed. The only light in the room was from the hallway, but she was filling out forms. She told me she had a few questions to ask me. And then this figure at the foot of my bed said, "Steve, you don't know who I am, do you?" "Not really." She said, "It's Sister Mary Joel." I thought, "Oh my God, I'm OK."

Ever since then we managed to stay in touch with Sister. We would go visit her when we lived in Sioux City. In 1993, we moved to Arkansas. Whenever we came back, we would stop up and see her. Then she transferred over here to Mount Carmel. I ride a motorcycle and make a yearly trip from Arkansas to north central Illinois for a campout. I would get in touch with Sister ahead of time and stop. She would make arrangements so that I would have a room here. I got to meet a lot of her fellow sisters. I would stay overnight and we would have dinner in the evening and breakfast in the morning and then she would send me on my way.

We talked about a lot of things over those years. One time I mentioned something to her about a diagnosis I had. One of the things I was diagnosed with was being resistive and rebellious. Sister Mary Joel looked at me and said, "Steve, I don't remember you being resistive and rebellious." I said, "Sister, a lot of things happened between second grade and 1987. You probably wouldn't have been too proud of me in some of those years." Anyway, we shared a lot with each other. I would stop every year.

It was in May when she called me one evening after 9 p.m. She said, "I didn't wake you, did I?" I said, "No." She said, "Do you know who this is?" I said, "Of course I know who this is. I recognize your voice." She said, "Well, I'm not doing very well." I said, "Really? What's the matter?" "Well, they had to move me to a different room. I can't walk any more. I have to use a wheelchair." I said, "Well, Sister, when I was up last year I was wheeling you around in a wheelchair." She said, "You were?" Then she said, "I probably won't see you this year." I said, "I'm planning on it next month." She said, "You are?" "Yeah, but I'm not sure of the day." She said, "I've got a little problem. I have a blood clot behind my knee." I said, "What do they do for that?" "Well, they're taking me to the hospital tomorrow." I said, "They'll probably do an ultrasound and try to get it dissolved. Hopefully you will be better next month when I get there." I always appreciated her humor. She said, "Well, I'll either be better or deader."

Anyway, I did get up here and we were having dinner when she says, "This will probably be the last time I will see you." I said, "Well, we don't know that, Sister. That's up to somebody else, not us." She said, "We'll talk when I get back to my room." There she showed me a copy of her

MRI showing her cancer diagnosis. I didn't say anything to her, but I thought, "Oh, Lord, please don't let this get into a lengthy bone cancer." That can be so painful; my wife and I are both RNs. Thank God that didn't happen. A couple of years ago I had asked the staff to let us know if anything ever happens to Sister. I reiterated that last month when I was here. They called last Monday and told us that Sister passed away suddenly and quickly.

One of the things I always had to do when I came up was to play a game of Skip-Bo. I couldn't remember all the rules from one year to the next, but I would swear she changed them. I accused her of cheating because she always won. One thing I did over the past week was to try and contact some of "her boys." I heard years back that she kept a scrapbook on "her boys." One day I got called out of class in second grade. "What have I done now?" I was probably justified in my fears. Well, all she wanted to do was to offer me the opportunity to become an altar boy. So I remember some of those boys; some have passed on, but I talked to a couple of them. I talked to my friend, Dean, who grew up in the same neighborhood as I did. In fact, he joined me in school in the second grade. He's out in California and I called him. "This is a voice from the past, Steve Keane. Do you remember Sister Mary Joel from second grade?" He said, "She was my favorite." She was that way to a lot of us. She could be firm, but it was always firmness tempered with love. She simply tried to guide us and turn us into just good human beings.

I am going to miss her and I'll miss stopping up here. I'm getting a little old to be riding 700 miles on a motorcycle anyway. I'm glad we could make it up for this; it's something both my wife and I wanted to do. My condolences to the family and the rest of the sisters here. This is probably one of the loveliest places I have ever been in my life. I love it here; I feel comfortable here. In this day and age, that's saying something. Thank you.

**Sister Lynn Winsor, BVM** (Read by Deb Doyle, Pastoral Services)

In some summers 1971 through 1974, when two or three of us novices worked in the Mount Carmel cemetery, the weather was usually oppressively hot and humid. When our daily job of clipping, mowing, raking and trimming was finished around 3 p.m., we immediately headed over to the Marian Hall kitchen.

Awaiting us there was Joel with cold lemonade, cookies, pie and other treats. Also, she would have the big walk-in refrigerator ready for us. Yes, a card table and three chairs were set up for us to cool down and play a few hands of poker. For us, Joel was real and fun. She was caring, giving and kind; a woman who made our summers working in the cemetery memorable. Joel, in everyday ways, showed us what true community was. Joel, we miss you but we will carry with us forever the great BVM lessons you taught us.

**Sister Donard Collins, BVM**

My claim to fame with Joel is that we are both from the same home town, Marcus, population about 1,200. My second claim to fame is that I was the babysitter for one of her nephews. I didn't get to know anything about Joel until I was in third or fourth grade when I heard that Mary Jo Kramer, one of the girls from Marcus, was now Sister Mary Joel. To us, she was always just Mary Jo.

The story I would like to share is that during the month of May, I was walking down the hall at Marian Hall and three times I was stopped by people who said, "Joel wants to see you. Joel wants to see you." Before I could even get to her room, I was paged. "Joel wants to see you and

it's an emergency." So I went there as quickly as I could. The emergency was: "Donard, I need a lemon pie. I want you to go down to HyVee and pick up a lemon pie for my friends who are coming today. It has to be here before noon because that's when they will arrive." For me, over the years, the characteristic that has always be part of Joel's life is hospitality. She was going to have that hospitality even if it was via someone else.

### **Chuck Addy, nephew**

Donard Collins was my babysitter. The MJ I know isn't a nun; she is my aunt. She came to Omaha a lot. She loved her rum and cokes; she loved rides on the pontoon. She usually had a friend with her. They would come down, go to the cabin and have a retreat. They wouldn't use the electricity because it would cost them money. We finally said she couldn't come down if she didn't turn on the lights because it was bothering my neighbor who was afraid there was a burglar in there. Great person, a great lady to be around, and I'll miss her.

### **Rochelle Keane, Steve's Wife**

One thing I remember about Sister Joel happened when I was in her second grade class. We were talking about different religions one day: Lutheran, Methodist and so forth. She said, "I don't care about what religion anybody is, as long as they believe in God, they will get to heaven."

### **Sister Mary M. O'Connor, BVM**

I had the pleasure of living with Mary Joel in Hawaii and it was during the time of change; I stayed until 1966. The sisters had to wear nightgowns and I did not like nightgowns. We got permission from the community to wear pajamas. I said to Joel, "I sure wish I could get a pair of pajamas." She said, "Do you have a decent nightgown that is in good condition?" "Yes." She said, "Bring it to me." So I did. It was in the evening. The next morning I opened the door and on the floor was a perfect pair of pajamas.

### **Sister Kathleen McGrath, BVM**

In 2005 I got a call from Joel saying, "I'm coming out to California for your jubilee." I said, "Wonderful!" I met her at the plane and we were just about home and she said, "I have something I have to tell you. I won't be here for your jubilee." I looked at her and she said, "I'm going to China that day." On the day of my jubilee, we went back to the airport and she went on to China. She was gone for two weeks and then came back and said, "Now I'm staying for two weeks." So we had a great visit and a wonderful time.

### **Franci Addy, Chuck's Wife**

The thing I want to say about Mary Jo is that she was the glue that held her sisters' families together. She kept in contact with all the children; there were many children. She had favorites in every family. I, a niece-in-law, heard about all of Chuck's cousins, all their children, all their life experiences. We will miss her because we won't have that glue anymore.

### **Sister Peggy Brennan, OP, Sioux City, Iowa**

I probably cleaned up after Steve and Rochelle Keane because when I was in seventh grade, I used to clean Sister Joel's chalkboard and more. So we have been friends for a long, long time.

Following up on the seamstress story, Joel was so good that after Vatican II when we changed our habit and wore secular clothes, she made my first suit. We've been friends for so long that there are so many things that come to my mind. I wish I had gotten here a little earlier this

summer. I had a sister retire over at Sinsinawa Mound so I was spending time with her and missed seeing Joel. We had many good times together; Christmas, birthdays—none of them ever passed without communicating with Joel and visiting her here sometimes.

About a month ago, she reminded me of her 75th anniversary coming up in September and I had hoped to be here for that. I have visited Marcus and the Kramers there, Fern and Chuck Addy, and Ruth and Tom Fenton in Sioux City. I remember when they were dating. I wrote Joel that I thought Ruth was taking driving lessons from Tom because she was practically sitting on his lap. Anyway, we are all grateful for Joel and I hope she remembers us up there.

### **Sister Therese Jacobs, BVM**

So many beautiful things have been said about Joel. She was a wonderful woman to live with, to be around and she was full of creativity and fun, a twinkle in her eyes. I remember when I went to Hawaii that it had been the practice of the music teacher before me, because she had a lot of children to teach, to teach on Saturday. Joel said to me on one of the first days I was there, “Don’t teach on Saturday.” I said, “Why, Joel?” “That’s when we go hiking and we do all these things with the kids. And you’ve got energy; you can do it too.” I never taught on Saturday. I also have a letter from Joanna Taba, a friend of Joel’s from Hawaii. She was the one who took Joel to China when she should have been celebrating Kathleen’s jubilee.

### **Joanna Taba, friend from Hawaii** (Read by Therese Jacobs, BVM)

Dear Joel,

Thank you for the wonderful years of our friendship. I have many good memories starting from the year 1957 on Kauai and Oahu. After I was married, you came to Hawaii, visited me and you took my daughter Leslie to her first day of preschool. You took away all of her fear; you helped her be able to go.

Another great memory is our trip to China. (*Sister Therese comments: If you haven’t seen the picture, there is one back in the wake chapel that shows Joel sitting by a great, big column. The Great Wall of China is behind her.*) I remember you walking that walk, maybe not very easily, but you did it with courage and fun. You also took me to visit your wonderful nieces and nephews in Omaha. I loved your family almost as much as you. Thanks for the memories, Joel, and know that you are loved dearly even though at times I was out of touch. Rest easy, Joel. Be at peace. You know my love is there.

With much love and gratitude.

### **Sister Therese Jacobs, BVM**

I have one thing to say about the Class of 1955. Joel went to Hawaii in 1954 and taught at Holy Cross one year. She had a class of eighth graders who graduated. They are the ones who sent these gorgeous Hawaiian flowers. Several times they invited Joel back for big celebrations. They not only invited her, but they sent her a ticket to make sure she made it. This is one of the spokespersons for that class. His name is Dennis Cabral and he was here about two years ago with his good friend Donald.

### **Dennis Cabral, Former Student** (Read by Sister Therese Jacobs, BVM)

I count myself as very fortunate to have had Sister Joel as a teacher and a close friend for the past sixty or so years. She was one of the most remarkable people and it was my pleasure to have

known her. I will miss her very dearly. So many wonderful memories of her kindness, her generosity and her adventurous spirit! She was with me at 3 a.m. the night my late wife died in my arms. If she had not been there to ground me, I think I would have died. Sister Joel was probably the only one that my wife really trusted to help take care of me after she died. Besides our boys, Sister has been the only person that my wife trusted to be there. That's how special she was.

### **Sister Therese Jacobs, BVM**

He sends love and he knows that we are saddened by our loss. He sends sympathy to us with great love and appreciation for Mary Joel Kramer.

### **Sue Brandt, nurse friend, Sioux City, Iowa**

We started working together in 1976 at St. Joseph Hospital on the night shift. I was a new graduate and she was my LPN and we had one other LPN working with us. We have many great stories from those night shifts. One of them came to me this morning.

On one Friday night, Joel had been to the St. Joe school faculty Christmas party and then she came to work. She kept saying all night that she was so tired. She didn't know what was wrong with her because she was so tired. We mentioned that she went to the Christmas party. She started talking about what she had at the Christmas party. "They had this really good punch and I just kept drinking this punch." Well, guess what, she was drinking the *spiked* punch! We got her through the night and made sure she got home safely the next morning.

I have many other stories. I think she sometimes tried to convert us. I have always been Methodist and my good friend was Lutheran. She always said that maybe we should think about becoming Catholic, but we never did. When I was going through a difficult time, we were talking about it and I said something about trying to figure out where God was directing me. She said to me, "Well, Susan, he is not going to put out a neon sign for you read. You are going to have to figure it out." That's just one of my many Joel stories. We will miss her.

### **Sister Stella Marie Swakoski, BVM**

I had a very special relationship with Joel Kramer and this is how it came about. When she retired to Mount Carmel, she came and sat at the table where those of us who are visually handicapped usually sat.

One morning she said to me, "Stella, I have to walk up that aisle for my diamond jubilee." I said, "Oh, that's great." She said, "I can't do it now. Take a look at me." She showed me her legs which were greatly out of shape. She said, "I want you to come and take me walking. By the time my diamond jubilee comes, I will be able to walk up that aisle." So we made a little schedule. Every morning after breakfast I would go get her and we would practice walking up and down the center aisle. She got quite strong and was very happy about it.

All of a sudden one morning, she took my hand and said, "Come in." And she closed the door and she said, "Stella, I'm not going to be able to walk up that aisle." I said, "Why not? You are doing very well at practice." She said, "No, I just had a conference with the doctors. I'm full of cancer and I won't be able to do it." We both sat down and cried and cried and cried. After that she said, "But I'll be with them in spirit. You're going to help me." Every day I would go by her and we would talk about how wonderful diamond jubilees were and what it meant to have that

many years of God's loving service. Dear Joel, you won't walk up the aisle that day, but you are with God in heaven right now. I'm so grateful for our wonderful friendship. God be with you always.

### **Sister Diane Rapozo, BVM**

I never had Joel as a teacher. By the time I graduated from high school, all my grade school teachers were called back to the mainland. I got to know Joel through my mother.

You've heard a lot of stories about Joel and food. Well, I think food for Joel was communion because it was hospitality, it was sharing, it was nourishment. My mother was very much like that so one day my mother created a cake called Booze Cake, as in whiskey. She baked it for the sisters and took it up to the convent.

Then Joel became a good friend of my mother. She asked my mother for the recipe. It became quite a famous recipe among the BVMs that Joel knew. I went to visit Joel in Sioux City and she made that cake. So I'm eating the cake with her and I said, "You know, Joel, my mother's cake was pretty good, but there's something about this frosting that's extra special." She said, "I doubled the whiskey." I think she did that all the time.

She took a trip to India and she let me read her journal. Her journal was all on food. It was the most interesting journal. It made me think about what food means. Today when we celebrate a meal and have a special dessert, we will think of Joel and her hospitality and her nourishment. I know we will all miss Joel.

### **Sheila (Hermass) Berstrand, Former Mount Carmel Employee**

I got to be friends with Sister Joel during the years I worked at Mount Carmel. She was like no other sister I knew. I was raised over at St. Columbkille's with the Presentations. I worked in the kitchen and on the floors for years. Everything is so different now. I have friends who work here now. It's bittersweet for me today. She was my boss; she got to know my family, my kids. She used to come out to our house. When the gentleman talked about the motorcycle, I thought that maybe she got on like she did with us! She used to go Harley riding with us. She would come out to our farmhouse and we just couldn't imagine a sister riding a motorcycle with us, drinking beer and eating pizza. She just was, like everybody said, so kind. She used to tell us that if we could get to Hawaii, she would put us up, but that never happened. Through the last years we kept in touch, but as life went by, I hadn't seen her as much. My friend used to tell me, "Sister's asking about you." I wish I could have been here more towards the end.

### **Sister Carol Marie Baum, BVM**

My remembrance of Joel is rather recent and in terms of a trip. It happened that my set celebrated a 50th anniversary four years ago and we were in hopes of taking a trip to Hawaii. I think all of you know how Hawaii was such an important part of her life. When Joel heard about the trip, she right away got in touch with Catherine Jean and me to give us clues and some inside information as to with whom we might connect when we make this trip to Hawaii, which we did do this past Thanksgiving. I have to say that Joel was as excited and as curious as to how this was all going to pan out for us as we were since it was one of the first trips that we took to Hawaii. We had an absolutely marvelous time. When we got back, the very first person who wanted to see us was Joel to know all about our trip to Hawaii. So thank you, Joel. Once again—hospitality—the hallmark.

### **Sister Therese Jacobs, BVM**

I am going to say one more thing about Joel. We've talked about food; she was a cook, too, as you know. We all had turns, one day a week. Hers was Sunday. On Saturday she would make delightful coffee cake or rolls for breakfast. They were always being baked on Saturday evening. We would be in the community room having fun, but smelling all this wonderful food. She would come in and say, "Well, do you want to eat it now?" Of course we did! Early in the morning, she would be up making another coffee cake or something very special for us. Joel was always ready to meet people where they were and with what would please them. This last week at our Senate, there was a beautiful line that said, "There's only one task that we all have to do—to witness to God's presence wherever we are. That's what Joel did; she'd meet you and she'd bring God's love, sensitivity, kindness, compassion and joy wherever she went.

### **John Addy, Nephew**

I'm her favorite nephew because she always told me that. I heard the story about the cooking, the party, but nobody has mentioned her skills at driving a car. She had several mechanics in Sioux City on retainer just to keep her car going down the road.

One story, I'm sure you all heard, happened when she went to LeMars to sit with somebody who was in hospice. Somehow when she got out of the car, the car started to roll backwards. She wasn't quite as mobile as she thought she was, so when she tried to jump in the car the door hit her and knocked her down and the car ran over her. I think that caused a lot of her leg problems. But the headline of the LeMars paper was something to the effect that "Nun from Sioux City gets run over by her own car." We still have that paper. Not only was she a nun, but she was our aunt the nun and special.

When she was in Marcus one time, she and her companion were going to something in Minnesota or Wisconsin. I said, "Do you know where you are going, Mary Jo?" "Oh, yeah." She was fine and she pulled out a map that didn't have a Highway 1 on it, but it showed the levels of the ground, where the terraces and the mountains are. Of course, I had a map in my car, but Mary Jo was happy with that geographic map. So I just blessed her and sent her on her way. She will definitely be missed by our family. Like Chuck said, she was our aunt.

### **Dan Kistel, Nephew**

My mother Maggie is the last remaining sister. There was a time when Mary was coming to Fort Myers, Fla., to visit my mother Maggie. So John, the dutiful nephew in Iowa, put her on an airplane and said, "Don't get off the airplane." She would be arriving in Tampa and my job was to pick her up and drive her to Fort Myers the next day.

I got to the airport, her plane arrived, and I waited, and waited, and waited. The stewardesses came off and I thought maybe Mary Jo needs a wheelchair. Well, the pilots came off and the cleaning crew went on. I went back and got somebody at the desk. This was about nine o'clock at night now. I said, "My aunt is a nun and she's not real mobile and she's on that airplane. Go check." They came back and said, "There's nobody on the airplane." I said, "Did you check the restrooms?" "We checked everywhere. She's not even in the cockpit." So I called John and he said, "Honestly, I put her on the airplane." "Well, she's not here in Tampa."

We called all the airlines. We finally found out that Mary Jo had done the impossible: she somehow got off the plane that John had put her on and she got on a Delta airplane with the wrong ticket. This airplane was going to St. Louis. She sat down in seat 21A which coincidentally was available and she flew to St. Louis. Delta tracked her down. By this time I was back at home while we were trying to figure out where she was. We got her rerouted and she got to Tampa at about two o'clock in the morning. It was a sleepless night. We did make it to Fort Myers the next day and the trip ended up well.

For my family, I can't tell how much we appreciate everything you said about her. For our collective family, it was just a real blessing to know that she was among such fine people.