

Sister Stella Marie Swakoski, BVM (Lidwina)
Wake Stories/Reflections
Marian Hall Chapel, Oct. 10, 2014

Sister Theresa McNerney, BVM

I am a good friend of Stella's and I know many of the people who are here for her. I am so happy to see so many of you here because she talked about you all the time. Maybe we could start out today by singing "Happy Birthday" to her (*singing*).

Sister Gertrude Ann Sullivan, BVM

I was at St. Anthony when we moved from Clarke to the new convent. Stella was our superior and principal. One thing I want to say about her is that she was very unique, in case anybody didn't know her. She was very unique in how she prayed, but almost anything she prayed for came to reality.

When we moved into the new house, we didn't have much; she wanted a car. I was sacristan and she was devoted to the Infant of Prague. We had to dress the Infant of Prague in his various robes. But before I put the robe on, I had to put this little toy car with a string on it around the neck of the Infant of Prague and the clothes were worn over it. We would pray this prayer to the Infant of Prague every day after Mass. During Holy Week, since it was silent, we were called down individually to be told that we had a car. Well, you have to be careful what you pray for because we were going to Chicago to get some things for the house and it rained. We found out why this car was given anonymously. As it rained, we realized the car had no bottom; it was rusted out. We just had the mats. With our long habit, that was a little bit of a problem. So we spent the time coming back from Chicago with our feet in the air and clothes just sopping wet.

She also challenged us beyond what we thought we could do. She saw in my record that I had taken French so she thought I could teach French. I can't pronounce French. What I did was translate Mary Poppins and the kids sang it and everybody was happy. Another time she sent me up to the choir loft to play the organ. I can only play with one finger. But I am really grateful for all the challenges she did give to me. And I am grateful for the way she did pray to get all the things we really needed at the time. I hope she prays for me.

Sister Irene Lukefahr, BVM

This past August I had the opportunity to vacation in Montana where they say even God would like to vacation. Liz Olsen took me on a tour of St. Anthony in Missoula where Stella had been principal for many a year. The former chapel was open because they now have Mass in there. So Liz arranged with the pastor to give me a tour of St. Anthony's convent and she pointed out Stella's bedroom, Alice Dunphy's bedroom, and everybody's bedroom. Out in the grotto there is a beautiful statue of Mary which Stella arranged to have many years ago. I met people in Missoula who still remembered S.M. Lidwina. When I got back, I told Stella about that. She just wanted to hear every word about everything I saw in Missoula.

Sister Marie Neff, BVM

I used to sit with Stella at the dining room table. She used to ask me each morning, "Did your team win last night?" That was the Kansas City Royals. And I said, "Yes." Now they are in play for the World Series and I am going to pray to Stella that they win.

Lenny Young, Former St. Anthony Student (Read by Sister Catherine Jean Hayen, BVM)

In September 1961, Sister Lidwina came to St. Anthony ES as our principal and our eighth grade teacher. She was replacing Sister Marcellita Brown, a very soft-spoken, loving lady. As with most changes, it is difficult to find someone else so well-respected and loved, but Sister Lidwina was up to the task. She made it very clear to the students that good citizenship, patriotism, and self-discipline plus respect, were high priorities.

Sister wasted little time making all students aware of the importance of saying the rosary. She reminded us that the month of October should be dedicated to saying the rosary. She soon made plans for a living rosary to be performed for our parents. The boys lead the "Our Father" and "Glory Be" and the girls lead the "Hail Mary"—all holding candles in our darkened church. It must have made a very lasting impression on us, because now, over 50 years later as Stella was nearing death, a group of her St. Anthony students wanted to say the rosary with her one more time.

We also sang "Happy Birthday" to her, knowing that her birthday was just a week away. We briefly shared some personal memories with Sister and watched her react with some smiles. Sister Lidwina will forever be remembered as a character builder. Sure, she taught us math, history, grammar, and writing skills, but the greatest impression for me was that she wanted us to be good citizens and people of good character. What a great lesson for young teenage boys and girls!

I don't think that the girls in our class would disagree with me when I say Lidwina liked us boys more than the girls, especially the athletes. Personally, Sister taught me to stand on my own feet and helped me become a man. Even several years after eighth grade when our paths crossed, she was again listener and mentor for me. She was well aware of the positive impact that she made on me. I am proud to have known Sister as both teacher and a friend. Although I regret not being here today to celebrate Sister's life, I know she is at peace.

Sister Mary Therese Pfeifer, BVM

I wanted you to know that when you talked with Stella, she always had the last word. But today, I firmly believe that her family had the last word. This morning I was talking with Sister Virginia Crilly and she said that one of the aides came to her and wanted to know if any of the family were wearing white because that was her request before she died. Virginia said, "The only thing you can see in white are the white shirts the men are wearing." I think that the family, today, are having the last word.

Sister Mary M. O'Connor, BVM

I was asked to drive Sister to the airport in Moline, Ill. We left at four o'clock in the morning and when we got there it was almost time for her plane. The problem was that someone from England who had been on the plane had liquid that caused a problem. So they were going through Sister Stella's articles and they found eye drops. They said, "You can't take these." She said, "Well, these

are very special and I have to have them for my eyes. If I go blind, you will be sued.” So they said, “Put these in your purse and don’t show them to anyone.”

Dick Feller, Former St. Anthony Student

I have to agree with Lenny Young; she was very involved with the students. She came to all the sporting events. I was on the football team and she came to all the games. I remember when I was in eighth grade our first game was against Nativity. We did really well for the first three quarters, but we lost the game in the fourth quarter because we ran out of energy.

At our next game, Sister Lidwina came early; we were playing against St. Columbkille. She came with a box of chocolate crunch candy bars and she gave one to each of the football players. We won that game even though the St. Columbkille boys were much larger than we were. She showed up before every game after that with a box of candy bars. We won every game except for the last game against Holy Ghost. I think that year we came in second place.

So I just want to thank Sister Lidwina for being so involved and encouraging the boys, for teaching us and not only in sports, but in every way. Today I stand here and I think I owe my strong faith to not only her, but to all the BVMs who taught at St. Anthony. I just want to say thank you.

Joe O’Hare, Former St. Anthony Student

I was one of seven children: five boys in a row and then two girls at the end. We were the typical Catholic family back in the 1960s. Sister Lidwina was our favorite and very instrumental in our growing up. At the time we lived next to Clarke University. There used to be a little house where the science hall is now located at Clarke. My folks rented the house from Clarke for \$35 per month, according to my mother. Eventually we outgrew it and moved down to Kirkwood Street. But we used to walk by Clarke all the time and we would walk Sister Lidwina back sometimes. We just got to be good friends with her.

About 10 years ago when she came here to Mount Carmel, I found out that Sister Stella was back in town. I started to come up and visit her periodically. Anyway, my mother plays the piano very well and when she found out Sister was back here, we came up to play. I have a banjo, my stepfather sang, and we have a little washtub base. There’s a room downstairs in which we played. Sister came down with some other sisters and we had a good time. It was interesting because she was still the teacher. She tried to get all the sisters who were able up in order to line dance. She was going through the motions teaching all the sisters how to line dance to “Hello, Dolly” and “Down by the Riverside.” It is a very nice memory.

I got married about two years ago and we have a little girl so we came up here a few times to visit Sister. She got a good kick out of the little baby. I have a picture of my mom, my wife, my little baby, and Sister Lidwina—those four. It is just the sweetest picture; I think I gave her a copy of it along with a picture of when we took her and my mom up to Eagle Point Park for Mother’s Day a few years ago. Anyway, that picture with Sister, my mom, my wife and my baby is just my whole existence; my past, my present and my future. Sister Lidwina is one of the four ladies who have molded me. I will always be grateful for that.

Betty Lou Magers, Niece

Some of you know me as Betty Lou, but in the family she called me Missy. She has left a legacy that we will never forget. She always taught us to be very proud of our heritage, to hold our head up high no matter what. She gave us our faith; she taught us to be thankful to God for everything. I could stand here for hours and tell stories that would make you laugh and cry. Many of the stories dealt with the sisters; a lot were with her students. Some stand out in my mind.

One was about a set of twins that she had taught; they were identical twins that nobody could ever tell apart. Sister figured out a way because on one of the twins there was a little mole. Nobody else ever put that together with the twins. I have identical twins in my family. It was very difficult; my husband still has a hard time telling them apart and they are 24 years old. Anyway, she had figured out a way. Evidently they had switched in the classroom one day and they didn't think she knew. But she knew and later on she told them that she was going to tell the parents what they had done. They could never figure out how she knew. Even the parents had a hard time figuring out the twins, so they asked her how she could tell them apart. She said, "I'll tell you only if you swear to secrecy and never let them know how I know or they'll pull this all the time." So she told the parents and they were amazed that they never noticed the mole before. After that they could tell their own kids apart.

When we got the news last week that she had passed away, the first thing that came to mind was the fact that she is now up there and she's telling God how to rearrange heaven because she was so good at telling people and getting things done. She always made sure she got everything done right down to a "t."

I have another short story. We were in Las Vegas one time. My husband wanted to show her these really fancy watches in the jewelry store at the Bellagio Hotel. She said, "If I win, I will put five dollars down a week and you can have that watch." She was just kidding. She never, ever, forgot and would say, "Tell Doug that his watch is ticking." So up there she will tell him that his watch is ticking and she still owes \$99,000 on it.

We have a little 10-acre farm and my daughter raises animals. Doug had bought her this miniature pony and didn't know how she was going to get this pony home in her truck because it couldn't ride in the back. Well, Sister Stella was staying with us that week and she could not believe that we had this little miniature four-legged critter running around inside our house. I think there is a picture with her and the pony because she had never been anywhere where they had horses in their houses. In Montana, that's pretty easy.

The stories that she would tell us would keep going and going. If we went on a drive anywhere, she would keep telling the stories. It was so nice to hear them. We almost feel a part of you because you are her extended family. She made us feel a part of that too. Forever we will be grateful. I thank you for all the stories because they sure do help.

Rhonda Nofoa, Niece

I have many stories too. Like my sister said, it would take us forever. She was one in a million. I'll pick out two special memories. She visited me in 1980 when I lived in Hawaii. I knew she was

coming and I knew a special treat would be to attend midnight Mass. I had a friend that had connections on the naval base at Pearl Harbor. So why not try to get her to midnight Mass there? We got to go to midnight Mass at Pearl Harbor and that was one of the highlights of her trip.

I went on a polka cruise to Mexico with her and she never sat down. She danced and danced and danced. She was the queen of that boat; everybody loved her, pampered her and adored her, just like her family. Aunt Dolly, you would be so proud today of your family. The men are all spiffy in their suits and ties just like you wanted and you requested. The ladies look beautiful. We are here to honor you; we will never, ever forget you. I am honored to be your niece. You will remain in my heart and prayers forever. I love you dearly. Thank you for giving me what you made me.

William Smith, Nephew

Stella, as you know, is Aunt Dolly to us. She's always been very special in our family. I think the first time that I have any recollection of her was when I was about five years old. She had come with Sister Mary Ann Shea to our house in Bremer, Wash., to visit us. She came in with the habit on and I knew right away that someone very special had come to our house. Later in the afternoon some of my friends came over and we were going to go out and play some baseball in the front yard. The next thing I know here comes Aunt Dolly and she has a bunch of rubber bands and she is tying up her habit. She came out and got a baseball bat and stepped right up to the plate. All my friends were absolutely amazed with her. To everybody who has ever met her, she has been such a treasure.

Fast forward 30 or 40 years. Aunt Dolly would always try to bring out the best in you. Now I'm no dancer, but Aunt Dolly happened to be the president of the Orange County Polka Club. She asked me and my lovely wife Sandy if we would like to go to the polka dance with her. I had planned on going, but I wasn't going to get out there and dance because I have two left feet. By gosh, she came over and grabbed me and got me out there dancing. There were some people who really knew how to polka out there. I looked like . . . well, I really don't know what to say, but it didn't look very good. She was always the one who was very positive. If she saw you were a little bit shy in certain areas, she'd get out there to try to bring the best out of you.

Fast forward a few years. We were the ones who brought her here to Mount Carmel the first time. We had a great time on the way out; we visited every relative. I had stopped in a restaurant on the way and I bought a Tammy Wynette CD; she's a country singer who has passed on. I will always remember Aunt Dolly for one thing. We put on the song "Your Good Girl's Gonna Go Bad" and she'd be in the back of the van singing along, "No! No! No!" She was a pistol!

Tony Smith, Nephew

I am the oldest of the nephews. I go back with her 77 years. She was an individual who wouldn't quit on anything. She was from an Irish Catholic mother and a Polish Catholic father who died when Aunt Dorothy was in her teens. The first time she came back after her vows is when I really recognized her and, like my brother, she struck me pretty good. She went on through life to accomplish a lot of things. She touched a lot of people, children and adults. She loved sports. If you were talking Notre Dame Football, you better be talking it right! She was a wonderful lady. She touched my life deeply and I am going to miss her terribly.

Sister Therese Mackin, BVM

I worked with Stella; she was my principal at St. Anthony. We used to tease her a lot about a song. I can't sing it for you or remember it, but it was "Stella by Starlight." We used to sing it to her and give her a hard time. I do want to point out though that she was a fine educator. She ran her school well. She encouraged her teachers to do a good job. She was a good friend at the same time.

Sister Catherine Dominick, BVM

Stella and I had something in common. She and I were both Irish and Polish. She always called me her blood sister.

Anna Romero, Niece

Unfortunately, I am one of the nieces who did not get to spend a lot of time with her because my family moved when I was rather young from Montana to Washington State. But she did come to visit us. I do remember the time when she and Billy and all of his friends were out in the front yard playing baseball and how she managed to do very well with her skills and put them to shame. She was always an athlete and loved movement whether it was dancing or sports. By the time I got to know her better, I was a married adult with two children.

The first time I really heard from her was when she made a trip with some friends and another sister to Europe. She got to go to Ireland where she looked up family. She was so proud of her connection with Ireland. Then they managed a trip to Poland shortly thereafter and she got to know a little bit more about her father's side of the family. She is probably the only one who really knew a lot about Grandpa because he died when most of his children were very young. She was an educator. She was a wonderful person.

When we were stationed at March Air Force Base, she and Aunt Bernice, her sister with whom she lived in California after Uncle George died, came to our house for Thanksgiving dinner. We had an old upright piano. She encouraged Aunt Bea to play the piano because I certainly don't know how to play. She was out there dancing and having such a wonderful time. We all had a wonderful dinner; a friend made the pies and I made dinner and Aunt Dolly and Aunt Bea had a wonderful time visiting us. It was a sad day when Aunt Bea died. She encouraged those of us who could come to the funeral for Aunt Bea and we met again with all my wonderful cousins and all the family.

One of the largest things I can remember about Aunt Dolly is how important family is. One of her concerns as she was passing was that we would forget each other, that we would not remember how important family is. That includes all of you as well because you are her sisters. I just want to let you know that, including Aunt Dolly, we will never forget any of you for the love and the peace and the generosity of the BVMs. We thank you all for making her the person she was because she wouldn't have been without you. Thank you.

Michael Romero, Grandnephew

I am her favorite nephew. I say that as a joke because that's how she made us all feel—that we were absolutely her favorite. We had a great relationship. We didn't spend a lot of time together,

obviously as my mother talked about with my father in the air force and eventually I joined the air force. We didn't get a whole lot of time to meet with her. My best memory as a child was when I was about 10 years old. I flew back to visit my grandmother down in San Diego; we were living in Germany at the time. My grandmother put me on a bus up to Anaheim and on the other side of the bus was my Aunt Dolly. We had about three or four days of mini-vacation for me. She took me to the California Angels game; we got seats back there in right field. We just sat there and talked baseball strategy; she could do it better than anyone. We would go back to her condo and we'd play tennis for a couple of hours and we'd go swimming.

While growing up, although I knew she was a nun (I never saw her in the habit) and an educator, she was just Aunt Dolly. She had the opportunity to come to Illinois when I was stationed down there a few years ago. She came to an event for us. My daughters, who are now 15 and 10, my wife, and I have been up here a couple of times to visit with her, the last time being her 75th jubilee last year. I was always amazed at the memory she had. I don't remember things from a week ago and she could tell you things that happened 60 or 70 years ago. One of our first visits included going around to St. Anthony and all the other places that she was a part of here in Dubuque. She would tell us the minutest details; she always amazed me. Her kind words to my family have always meant a lot. We appreciate her and we appreciate all the love and support that you have given my family when we would come to visit.