

Sister H. Dorothy Townsell, BVM (Mildred Ann)
Wake Stories/Reflections
Marian Hall Chapel, March 29, 2016

Kay O'Brien, Niece

I have a family remembrance of Dorothy. With me today are Dorothy's two sisters, one brother-in-law, one sister-in-law, two cousins, 36 nieces and nephews and their spouses, more than 60 grandnieces and nephews, and some of them have spouses, and more than 20 great-grandnieces and nephews. I represent them all and bring all of them with me in spirit. With Dorothy today are her parents and grandparents, her two sisters, one of whom is my mother, four brothers, her sisters- and brothers-in-law, her one nephew and many, many aunts, uncles and cousins. We are a very large family, you see. As one cousin put it, Dorothy was both the anchor and the glue in our family. Each of us was touched by her. As another cousin said for all of us, "I was blessed to have known her." We all have our stories and this past week we have been sharing them by phone and email and by a Townsell cousin's Facebook page set up this year for which Dorothy was the inspiring force.

Dorothy was an extraordinary, remarkable, amazing person endowed with great energy and practicality, fascinated by everyone and everything. I think her trademark was curiosity. I can still hear her saying, "I'm curious about that." She certainly was a person with great strength and determination too. As little more than a toddler in Caney, Kan., she'd take off and find her way to the library. The librarian would send her home and give her some books to take with her.

Dorothy had many passions: of course her faith, her BVM order, her family, her teaching, her students, her Irish heritage. But innumerable other fascinations absorbed her: art, architecture, history, concerts, opera, nature, trees, birds, gardening, fabrics, museum quality lace, science, research on the Dutch elm disease that she worked on at Iowa State University, and opportunity for learning and living, too.

One cousin told a story related to Dorothy's commitment to lifelong learning. For her week's visit with my cousin, Dorothy asked for 14 cans of Ensure, any flavor, and then added, "If you happen to pass the university, stop by and pick up a textbook on any subject. The lesson here—our brains are just like any other muscle in our bodies and that, in order for them to stay strong, we must exercise them each and every day. Dorothy read the entire textbook during that week. That was her exercise program. The flavor of the Ensure didn't matter, nor did the book's subject matter. She appreciated both as fuel for her body and her brain.

Dorothy liked nothing better than accompanying her Wright Hall guests on the CTA bus with a full itinerary planned, narrating the history of Chicago and each building's features while sitting backwards on the bus because, of course, she situated her guest in the available forward facing seats. If you didn't know who Mies van der Rohe was, you soon learned. If you had never seen a Tiffany ceiling, you would soon be amazed. Then she'd guide her fellow travelers through the Art Institute telling them exactly what to see, including her favorite golden bird sculpture. She

would explain a particular gallery or special showing to you, send you on your way, and quiz you when you returned. She equally enjoyed arranging train travel for any and all, sending them across country with specific directions on which side to sit for the best views.

On her many visits to the family through the many years, she was never idle. Among the loving reminders of these visits were the lasting mementos of her work as an excellent seamstress—lace curtains, christening dresses, Halloween costumes, robes and little outfits. With similar dedication, Dorothy made exquisite quilts, hand-sewn on her bed at Wright Hall for each of her siblings and quite a few other family members. We think of these quilts as representing what Dorothy meant to her family—taking a collection of different pieces and putting them together to make one unified, beautiful composition.

She was the pivotal one who kept us all in touch with each other, sending each and every family member birthday and holiday greetings through all the years and maintaining the official directory. My last email from Dorothy was March 14 in which she directed me to fill in eight missing dates. She always expressed great enthusiasm for the various family undertakings and was the most supportive cheerleader interested in all the aspects of our lives from the smallest things to the most significant. Dorothy was interested in everything you said and filed every bit of information for access at a later date. If she even thought you had hinted at an interest in something, she'd send you what she found related to that topic—newspaper clippings, postcards, stamps, coins, a book, a binder showing stained glass windows from Chicago churches. Many of us treasure her little boxes made from greeting cards and filled with candy.

Dorothy and her siblings were all blessed with a unique humor gene, a spot on, quick Irish wit. With a twinkle in her eye, Dorothy might reflect a second and then make the most apt comment. Some of us needed several more seconds to catch that aptness.

I shall miss, more than I want to imagine, my weekly conversations with Dorothy and her first question, “And how’s Kay?” Those conversations covered everything from the new ladder I had bought for my kitchen to James Martin’s new book to the latest articles in *Time* or *America* to something new she just learned about Galileo to an artwork I must see at the National Gallery to the weather in our respective cities. Everything and anything.

For Catherine and Mildred, her sisters, there will be heartache with her absence, and for so many of our cousins too for we were all special to her and she to us. Each of us has heard that same question, “And how’s . . .?” Through the years, three of my friends visited Dorothy in Dubuque and previously in Chicago. Their visits lasted a few hours or a few days, but like with family, they retained an incredible lasting memory of an extraordinary person. Like us, they all commented about their friendship bond with her, her real interest in them, and the emails and cards exchanged through the years. I would like to read part of an email from a friend, Sister Ann Marie McQuade, from Anaskilla, Northern Ireland, who studied at Loyola at Chicago and came to be a treasured friend of Dorothy’s.

Dear Kay, I am just learning of Dorothy's sudden death through an email from Sister Mary Healey. You have my heartfelt sympathy. I know you were very dear and special to her and she to you. I am truly sad at her passing as she has been a very significant person in my life and I loved her dearly. At the same time, I do not begrudge her going to God. She has been waiting for the call for so long and I'm glad her death was peaceful, with her being alert to the end. It's just how she would have arranged it herself. This is another of those times when I regret being on this side of the Atlantic. You will be in my thoughts and prayers as you take your final farewell of her.

I'll close with a prayer by the Jesuit Karl Rahner, which I've said for the last 20 years as our family has bid a loving farewell to those in our family whom Dorothy has now joined.

I should like to remember the dead to You, O Lord . . . My heart is with them, with my loved ones who have taken their leave of me. There is no substitute for them; there are not others who can fill the vacancy when one of those whom I have really loved suddenly and unexpectedly departs. In true love no one can replace another, for true love loves the other person in that depth where he or she is uniquely and irreplaceably himself or herself. As death has trodden roughly through my life, every one of the departed has taken a piece of my heart with him or her.

In consolation though, Dorothy has given us each a piece of her heart to carry us along and enough exemplary guidance to last all of our lifetimes. We love you dearly, Dorothy. And thank you.

Sister Therese Mackin, BVM

When I was in boarding school at St. Joseph Academy back in 1946 to 1950, there were a few of us—Nan Ross, Sheila Mulvihill, Jeanelle Bergen, and several others—who would gather our dimes, nickels and quarters and then someone would go down to the Walgreens store on Ingersall, which was the street just down from Grandview Ave. We would buy cigarettes and we would go out behind the grotto. The grotto was behind what we today would call food service but then was called the kitchen. There were four or five steps to get up from the ground to the kitchen door. We would come in and Mildred Ann would be there. She would greet us and then she would say something to this effect, "My, there's a different fragrance in the air. Would you know anything about it?" We would all look innocent and thank her and be on our way. The most important part of that is that she never told on us.

Sister Catherine Jean Hayen, BVM

I will always remember Dorothy as someone who never saw a closed door that couldn't open. As she lost more and more of her sight, she, with the help of others, became more and more creative as to how she could continue to "see." She had aides on the computer. She had readers every day of the week. In October, she asked about getting the news audibly on her

computer which we managed. We also got her the CDs with the scriptures of the day. Dorothy always saw a way to keep the door open and to see life as it is—wonderful and a gift.

Sister Kathryn Lawlor, BVM

Dorothy was a faithful member of the BVM Pioneer Sister class. In fact, the week that she died she had attended class. When I mentioned that there were many sisters who had nothing in their files that told us anything about their lives, Dorothy took that on as project and she wrote remembrances of deceased sisters that she lived with so they would be sure to have something in their file which I thought was extremely thoughtful of her. One time we were talking about Sister Antonia Durkin who was the president of Clarke College. I said to Dorothy, “Do you remember Antonia?” And she said, “Yes.” “What can you tell us about her?” “She was a presence.” Well, that’s exactly what we all thought about Dorothy. She was a presence.

Luke North

My favorite memory of Dorothy actually comes from this year’s Mardi Gras when I came here for the first time to visit Dorothy. We had a very nice dinner together during which she confessed to me that she had a tendency to take some extra dessert from the kitchen. I wasn’t sure where this was going at first, but as we finished our meal, she pulled out a Ziploc bag from her wheelchair and asked me if I would please discreetly go round up some fudge brownie cookies because she would like to have some for a late night snack. I collected nine of them and gave them back to her, hoping that I had done my good deed for the day. As I prepared to leave, I said good-bye to Dorothy and she said, “What a minute.” She reached into the compartment on her wheelchair once more, took out the bag, and said, “Here. Happy Mardi Gras!” Since I had chosen to give up sweets for Lent, I enjoyed all nine of those cookies that night. I will enjoy the memory of Dorothy Townsell for a long time to come.

Sister Mary Jean Ferry, BVM

I was blessed to be Dorothy’s letter writer. There are three words that impressed me. First of all, she was organized. She already has her jubilee cards, about 20 of them, ready for September. So those who are having jubilees this year will get a card from heaven. Second, she was so frugal, even with envelopes with just a name on it. She would turn them inside out and use them a second time. Thirdly, she was grateful. She never stopped saying thank you. I think she was especially grateful to Donna Bebensee who helped her since the 1980s with her computer.

Mary Sullivan, Friend

I’m not a relative of Dorothy’s, but she got stuck with us because we had friends in common from central Illinois. I would pick her up from Wright Hall on a Saturday morning and we would drive down to visit her cousin Babe for the day. On one of our two-hour trips back home to Wright Hall, she told me that although she had been to Boston a number of times for conferences, she had never done any sightseeing. I called a friend who worked for United Airlines and the following Saturday morning we were on the 6 a.m. flight to Boston. We did sightseeing all day on foot and were on the 6 p.m. flight back to O’Hare. My friend and I

confessed to her that we were exhausted. Of course, Dorothy wouldn't admit that she was, but that's because she was only 85 years old at the time.

Sister Anita Therese Hayes, BVM

The first time that I met Dorothy was when she was Mildred Ann back a few years ago at Clarke. I think when she was at Clarke she had charge of the dining room and kitchen. I was there for a retreat and during the retreat I was a server. Well, I'm telling you that everything was according to Mildred Ann. Not a mistake would we want to make. I used to laugh about it because everything had to be so exact.

The next time I met Dorothy was when she was in Streator, Ill., taking care of her Aunt Rosalie. The first time I visited her there, we had to go out to Eagle, Ill. Now Eagle was one of our BVM missions. There wasn't much there; no convent in those days. She took me into the church and explained everything that she could. We went all around Streator telling bits of history. Dorothy never gave up trying to find little bits of history about Eagle or any reference to the sisters; she kept searching and searching. She would come down to the Archives with little bits of history. I'm sure someday we will be wide awake and there will be another little bit of Eagle which she will have sent to us.

Sister Catherine Dominick, BVM

Dorothy liked to recycle. She had me collect the memos every Saturday after the meals were over. She would use the back of them in her printer to print messages.

Nancy Lease

Dorothy was in my music medley class at Roberta Kuhn for two years. She would come early to every class and we would always chat. Just about two weeks ago, I said to her, "Good morning, Dorothy. You're looking very well today." She answered, "They tell me that I'm in surprisingly good health for my age."

Sister Patricia Robinson, BVM

I met Dorothy before she was a golden jubilarian. She was in Katie Fay's set. Katie knew Dorothy was living with Rosalie and they were alone in Streator, Ill. So we would take a ride over from Rensselaer, Ind., to Streator and then have a taco salad and visit. Dorothy would always educate us. She told us about all the different kind of churches in Streator. She told us all about going to garage sales to get those crazy quilt pieces from men's silk ties.

Later on, Dorothy and I traveled a lot. We went east to Leo Townsell's place and then we went west to Bill Townsell's place and we went up and down the coast, here and there. Dorothy was always educating people. She educated everybody who came into Wright Hall. She wanted them to see Chicago.

Well, she almost killed me a couple of times. We went to the museum and had to be out at a certain time to catch the bus to the next museum. We grabbed a lunch on the way through some cafeteria. I was dead by supertime. But she said, "Oh, we're going to Ravinia tonight."

Dorothy never went backward; Dorothy went forward all her life. She fit in every place. She was just a wonderful, wonderful woman to know and be around.

Sister Eileen Golby, OSF

The first time I met Sister Dorothy, I was a senior novice going to Marycrest College in Davenport, Iowa. A friend of mine was going to do student teaching at Assumption. She asked me to go with her. I walked in the door and Dorothy took one look at me and said, "Are you Liz Larkin's daughter?" "Yes, I am." I believe her mother and my mother were first cousins.

The next time I was able to really visit with her was a year ago when I was here for a meeting. I went up to her room and we had a wonderful chat. She wasn't going to let me go until she "walked" me out to my car in her wheelchair. She could go faster than I could, and sometimes that was backwards! I really appreciated the short time I had to know her and visit with her. Yes, Eagle, Ill., was important; my mother always liked to go to Eagle and my brothers have probably been there more times than I have. It's a special place and they certainly were a great family.

Sister Irene Lukefahr, BVM

On Dorothy's 103rd birthday, she made it very clear that she never wanted to celebrate her 104th birthday. She mentioned her dear friend Rachel Eppel, BVM who worked in the post office at Clarke who happened to live to be 101. She said, "I'm asking Rachel to help me to not ever be 104." Thank you, Rachel. I'm sure Dorothy's grateful.

Sister Sharon Rezmer, BVM

I first met Sister Dorothy at Wright Hall when I worked there. We became good friends. Despite her poor eyesight, she sent me letters and, even as late as last year, she wrote a poem in my honor and gave it to me.

We shared a lot of loves—love of Chicago, science, butterflies, praying outdoors, and pastries. Last year I brought her some kolache that I made. She said they were the best she had since Streator, Ill. I took that as a huge compliment! She did talk about wanting to go home to the Lord the last few years. I opened up a prayer book after she died and the first thing I read was "I've waited and waited for you, O God. Now at last you have turned to me and heard my cry for help." I really hope that she is enjoying eternal life. I'm sure she is.

Sister Mary Kelliher, BVM

For two years I was with Dorothy at Wright Hall in Chicago. I got to be her companion to the Art Institute, especially when they were changing exhibits. She would really want to know where they put that Murillo Assumption. She really wanted to know. One time waiting to get into the new modern wing, we were standing in line and some docent was trying to keep us in order. He was answering questions about the skylights, but he didn't know very much. She took over and gave the rest of the information. I was a student at Clarke my junior year before I entered. Was she strict in that dining room—water will be poured at 5:16, salads brought in by 5:20, vegetables by 5:29, main course, etc. She looked very prominent there in the dining room. She

had a white starched apron down her black habit. It was very striking. She didn't miss a thing! Her education to us was practical too. I can still give you the formula for how to take coffee stains out of table cloths, if any of you are interested.

Sister Karen Conover, BVM

I'm certain that I'm the person who knows Dorothy the shortest amount of time having just arrived in late August. Dorothy would go motoring forward and back down the first floor of Marian Hall always with a wave as she passed my office.

In Nancy Lease's class there was some presentation of Japanese music and she said, "I think you would like that." Well, I was tied up with other things. She asked if I had been there. I said, "No, I'm sorry. How was it Dorothy?" She sort of shrugged and waved her hand and tried to describe it, but didn't seem to have the words to say, but she wasn't trying to be critical. I said, "So, it wasn't what you expected?" She said, "Well . . ." And that was all she said.

The Sunday before she went home to God, I met her on the lower floor using the long side rails which she liked the best because they gave her the longest opportunity to walk. She would get out of her wheelchair, hang on and walk, and then she'd turn around and come back. Talk about dedication to physical strength! I'm blessed to have known her even these short months.

Sister Donna Bebensee, BVM

This is an email from Dorothy's nephew Patrick Willit. Some of you have received jubilee cards with a picture of Mount Carmel. Patrick is the one who drew that and sent it to Dorothy.

Patrick Willit, Nephew (email read by Sister Donna Bebensee, BVM)

What can I say about the force of nature that was my Aunt Dorothy? Where to start? Aside from my parents, she was one of the most inspirational people in my life. I remember her saying that the best way to live is to find a way to be useful to others. She practiced that; it's what she preached, dedicating her life to the service of others.

When I first came to Chicago on business, my wife and I made plans to meet Dorothy and do a bit of sightseeing. When my business was done, upon meeting up with her at the hotel, she handed me an itinerary that started at 6 a.m. I handed it back and we came to an agreement about times and places we would see. It turned out to be one of many wonderful visits, something I looked forward to every year.

She had an encyclopedic knowledge of Chicago's architecture, art, and pretty much anything worth seeing. Her energy was amazing, something that despite multiple health issues she rarely talked about. I recall our trips to the Art Institute of Chicago as she waved off the guards when they tried to get her to use a wheelchair. She told us to breeze through certain areas and don't read the titles, it just slows you down. Dorothy knew the entire museum and would point out certain masterpieces despite the fact that she was almost totally blind. She always had a few dollars for the panhandlers who seemed to know her as we exited the building on our way to Berghoff's.

As the years passed, we made our annual trip to Chicago and then Dubuque always with joy at seeing Dorothy again. Through our weekly calls and emails, she came to know my grandchildren whom she always asked about. In one of the last conversations we had, upon being asked how she was feeling, she replied, "Better than someone my age has a right to," which to me sums up her perfectly. She has now been set free of all her pain and difficulties.

The afternoons on the bluff overlooking the Mississippi River in Dubuque, having ice cream, listening to Dorothy's stories of growing up in Illinois and Kansas, and her world travels were incredibly special. Her grasp of memories and details even after her 100th year were astonishing as she painted pictures of the Dust Bowl. Just being in her presence was a living example to all of us—ever humble, ever thankful for every day, and especially her joy of being of service.

Sister Donna Bebensee, BVM

Some of you have talked about Dorothy when she was at Clarke. Just recently this memory came to her, so she shared it with me. One night she was working very late in the kitchen at Clarke. There was a tap on the window. Here were three girls who had missed curfew and all of the doors were locked. Dorothy opened the door and let them in and just looked at them and nodded. The girls left and, of course, nobody ever found out that they were late. They were grateful to Dorothy.

Chris Hall, Marian Hall Receptionist (Read by Sister Anne Marie Mullen, BVM)

I met Sister Dorothy the very first day when she came to Mount Carmel. I greeted her as I always do when sisters arrive. I told her my name and said, "If you ever need anything, come see me." I think she took those words to heart. She came to see me every day. From then on we became great friends. She would come around the corner and say, "Are you there today, Chris?" I enjoyed the visits. They made coming to work every day that much easier. I will miss you, Dorothy, but know you are watching over me.

Sharon Pellino

I knew Dorothy from Streator, Ill., and when she lived at Wright Hall. When I first met Sister Dorothy, I didn't know she was a sister. When I questioned her about it later she said, "Oh, that's not important."

She was taking care of Rosalie Whalen and I lived in her building as a young pharmacist. She would often see me in the hallway and would say, "Could you stop by and help me put Rosalie into bed?" I always forgot and was always late. She always had Rosalie ready for bed and she smelled of baby powder and baby oil. She was just so loving towards her, such a great example. I think she got her sense of humor from Rosalie because Rosalie, at the point I knew her, was a little hard to understand because she talked very, very softly. Rosalie would talk and talk. One time I leaned close to her and said, "Rosalie, I'm very sorry, but I can't understand what you are saying." Very clearly and audibly she said, "Am I using too big of words for you, Sharon?" It sounded a lot like what Dorothy probably would have said.

When I had my firstborn, we invited her to his birthday party and she came with eight other nuns. They all filed in and could spend a half hour. So all the nuns came in for cookies and cake with everybody and it was really fun. She also adopted my brother when she lived in Streator. He had three little kids. She thought that Rosalie needed contact with little kids. She had a sneaky-saint way of getting people to do things that were beneficial to everyone. She decided that those kids should come up every week and bring the church bulletin so that Rosalie could spend time with those little ones. She was always very thoughtful in that way.

When she lived at Wright Hall, she would invite us over on Holy Family Sunday, the Sunday after Christmas. For many years my kids would come and sometimes they would bring their violins and play. I'm sure that was great fun for everyone. She was a wonderful person and she was a great inspiration for my family.

Sister Mary Angela Buser, BVM

I knew Dorothy a little bit from the time of serving at Clarke College which was fun. I admired the beautiful salads she made. But knowing her here, we shared that we were both Kansas people and we both had macular degeneration. So we had something very much in common. I had the privilege of being one of the people who were at the ministry of presence her last morning. What impressed me so much as I sat there praying for her, was that one after another—aides, nurses and Chris Hall came in to say their good-byes which was very, very inspirational. It showed how much she had influenced their lives.