

Sister Frances (Alberic) Wohn, BVM
Wake Stories/Reflections
Marian Hall Chapel, Jan. 8, 2016

Sister Kathryn Lawlor, BVM

I lived with Fran at Regina HS in Iowa City, Iowa. She was a good friend. She taught sophomores and they are famous for bad attitudes. She taught them biology. She was extremely tolerant and always defended them. They were very fond of her. She was particularly aware of any student, or anyone, who wasn't quite in the "in crowd." She was very concerned and nurturing about those who may have felt unaccepted. I think of Fran very fondly and appreciate what a good friend she was.

Kelly Holm, Grand-Nephew

As a biology teacher, Sister Fran had a great love of the outdoors. She enjoyed many camping trips, hiking and canoeing. On particular summer, she was going to try to pass it on to me. I was at my grandparents' house in Fort Dodge and we were going to have a campout in the backyard. For whatever reason, I don't remember if it was rain or terrible heat, but somehow she persuaded my grandmother to allow us to set up the tent inside the house. If you know my grandmother, you'd know that that is not the favorite thing she would have had us do, but she did consent. Sister Fran, in her generosity and kindness, and probably in her fifties, slept with me on the floor of the basement inside the tent and provided all the fun of a campfire, minus the fire.

Sister Vivian Wilson, BVM

I lived with Fran in Fort Dodge, Iowa. One year just before Thanksgiving, she called and asked if I would like to go to Rapid City, S.D., to visit my great uncle and aunt. She said that she and a high school girl were going to Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. I agreed and they got me to Rapid City and the two of them went on to Pine Ridge. I was to be down at Pine Ridge the Saturday after Thanksgiving and we would leave Sunday morning. I managed to get to Pine Ridge on Saturday, but Fran and Mary decided that we were going to leave that night even though it was 20 degrees below zero. I was to sleep early and then be the 2 a.m. driver during the night.

We went through a little town in Nebraska somewhere. I am from Wyoming near the Nebraska border, but I didn't know this territory. "Well, should we go on or try to find a place to sleep?" We decided to go on. I was sleeping, but was jarred awake as we went off the highway into a ditch. We were in the midst of a whiteout that you have on open roads in Nebraska and Wyoming. We got out and tried to get the station wagon back up on Highway 20, but we could not do it.

My parents had trained me and my brothers and sisters about what to do during white outs. We didn't have a full tank of gas. It was two o'clock in the morning and there was nobody on the highway. I said that we needed to put on extra clothes because we couldn't run the car all the time to keep warm and that we had to keep moving. Then a truck came. I don't know how Fran got out of the car so fast, but the truck didn't stop. She got back into the car and we ran the engine for a while. About an hour later, a lone car came down the road. Fran was out of her seat so fast and standing in the middle of the highway and managed to stop the car. It happened to be a college kid going home and he was inebriated. We didn't care if he was inebriated or not; we needed to get to a town.

So we climbed in and he took us to this little tiny town. There weren't many people there, but we said, "Let us out. We'll be fine." This was about 3:30 a.m. We knocked on any house that had a light on. Finally, we knocked on a house where two couples in their 60s lived. They let us in and gave us hot chocolate and hot coffee. The men went out the next morning and got our station wagon back up on the road and gassed it. After a hearty breakfast, we were back on the road to Fort Dodge.

Just as we got to Sioux City, the car broke down. There was something wrong with the wheel bearings. We spent most of the day sitting in a filling station in Sioux City. When we finally got back to Fort Dodge, everyone was mad because nobody had called to let them know we were leaving early. The upshot was that Fran later learned survival techniques and taught them to her students. She was even featured in the *Fort Dodge Messenger*. She had them down by the river showing them how to test water if they were ever caught without it someplace. She took them up to Minnesota and Wisconsin just to teach them survival. I was really impressed with her.

Sister Anita Therese Hayes, BVM

I got to know Fran when I began working with the Spiders leisure house. Every year Rita Finnigan and I would go up and get it prepared for the summer. When we were finished, we would leave. I would get in touch with Fran. As soon as school was out, she was off to come take care of the Spiders. She was a wonderful caretaker; I never had to worry one bit. She loved the Spiders; she loved hiking and going down to the lake. She took such wonderful care of it. I am so happy and very thankful for all that Fran did to help. I'm sure she will keep her eye on the Spiders in the years to come too. Thanks a million, Fran, for all you did.

Rosemary Saunders, Niece

Fran took a group of her students on a canoe trip every summer. One summer she asked my oldest son, Kevin, if he would chaperone her boys. Reluctantly, he said yes. He was never fond of rice and would never eat it at home. Soon after he got home, I had prepared rice for a meal and he gobbled it up. I was shocked! I said, "Kevin, you're eating rice." He said, "Well, with Aunt Fran, you learn to like rice."

Deb Morrow, Niece

I have two little stories to tell you. The first one has to do with "Do Not Call." Aunt Fran had a cell phone and she got on a list of "Do Not Call." She would document the time, date and phone number and called me on board to help her with that. I registered her with "Do Not Call" and a month later the calls went away. Well, they started again in a couple of months. She called me again with the list of particulars and I went online again. I told the big story that this is my aunt and she does not like calls at 8 p.m. because she's in bed and asked them to take her off their list. About six months later, she called me one day and said, "Oh, I've got something really funny to tell you. I kept getting this phone call from the same number. I got it 13, 14, 15 times. I thought I would not bother you and I would take care of it myself. So I answered it. It was my great nephew."

In the second story, I'm telling on my sister. My sister is not a churchy person. We had come to celebrate Fran's 80th birthday with her. We asked her what she wanted to do that day. She said, "I

would really like a good piece of pizza.” We said, “Sure, Fran, we can do that. We can get you a piece of pizza.” My sister says, “Well, it’s your day. We’ll do anything you want.” And Fran said, “Mass is at 11:15.”

Sandy Cain, Niece-in-law

I had Fran the first year she taught at St. Edmund back in the early 1970s. I just want to touch on what a great teacher she was. She got me interested in a career that I stayed with for 40 years. It was not an easy class to take and we dwindled down until there were only five of us left. She was a great lady and a great teacher.

Joe Cain, Nephew

I remember a particular instance when she had a 1950s vintage panel truck that several of my uncles had gotten together and bought for her. I wanted that truck very badly. I kept trying to get her to sell it to me. Finally, she informed me that a very good friend of mine who was a mechanic also wanted the truck. I thought, “This isn’t going to be a good thing.” I wanted the truck really bad, but Sister Fran, in all fairness, realized that I would just wreck it, being the type of youngster I was. She sold it to my good friend who redid it and made it a really neat truck.

Sister Mary Janine Wolff, BVM

Sister Fran loved nature. She talked to me about taking a trip on the Alaskan ferry from Seattle to the Inner Passage. The more she talked about it, the more excited I got. That excitement rolled over into my family. My sister and her husband said, “Do you mind if we go?” “No.” And then Jim said, “Would you mind if Bertha and I go on that same trip?” “No.” But we were going to camp out on the deck and they were going to have staterooms. As the time drew near, she got an assignment to teach vacation school. Instead of Fran, my sister Margaret joined us. We had six people in our family together for a week on that trip. It was a beautiful trip. Thank you, Fran.

Sister Margaret Mary Cosgrove, BVM

I did not know Fran well, but during my last year of graduate school, I lived at Regina convent in Iowa City. During my last summer there, Fran was staying and studying at the University of Iowa. The BVMs who lived there had been told by the Archdiocese that they were going to be evicted from the convent and some other sisters were going to be allowed to move in.

So during the summer, we had to clean the convent from top to bottom because we wanted to make sure it was in good order for the new sisters. I just remember what hard a worker Fran was. It was a fairly large convent and there weren’t that many people, so we spent a lot of time cleaning the entire house room by room. I remember what a good sport Fran was even though she was just staying for the summer. She said, “Well, I’ve lived here before. Maybe some of this is my responsibility.” She was just a generous, loving person.

Rachel Gemo, Head of St. Benedict School, Chicago

I’m the head of St. Benedict School where Sister Fran retired from. She taught many classes, but one of the gems she had was freshmen biology. She didn’t know this, but we called it Sister Fran Boot Camp. She really got the freshmen in line. They come from all over the city to St. Benedict. She was able to whip them into shape and really touch the lives of so many students and inspired many to pursue the sciences.

We just had the opportunity to interview one of our recent graduates who had Sister Fran, who is currently in pre-med at the University of Illinois in Champaign. She talked about Sister Fran and how she prepared her. Just in the last six years, I took over the role of Head of School at St. Ben's. Anyone who has taught in a Catholic school knows that there is a separate pay scale for our sisters who served in Catholic schools. It is definitely far less than what Catholic school educators made. It stops at 35+ years and there's just a little raise.

Well, I talked with Sister Fran. The way the contracts are written, I had no idea how long she had been teaching, and when she humbly told me 50 years, I almost fell off my chair. I said, "We should throw you a parade. That's what you deserve." She said, "No way. Do not tell anybody. Most of the funds go back to the sisters anyway." We just wanted to make sure that she was honored in a way that the sisters would get something from St. Ben's for all the service Sister Fran has done for us. She really touched a lot of lives. We are happy to finally make it here from Chicago.

Jean Hybinette, Co-worker from St. Benedict School, Chicago

I had the privilege of working with Sister Fran for many years at St. Ben's. What a role model! I saw so many different sides of her.

My husband and I used to throw an annual Christmas party. Of course Sister Fran along with my father who is German and my mother who is Irish were the first ones there. I had made this California pizza. Once I made it, I had to make it all the time for her. The last summer before she came here, I went over to her house. Of course she requested that I make the California pizza.

Once she knew you would help her, you were called all the time. She'd say, "Oh, Jean, I have one more thing for you to do." I have two daughters, Meghan and Bridget, who never met Sister Fran, but heard the Sister Fran stories. One summer, Sister Fran calls and says, "Can I talk to Meghan?" I told my daughter to come to the phone and she replied, "I don't know Sister Fran."

When Meghan got off the phone with Sister Fran, I asked her, "Meghan, what did Sister Fran want?" My daughter was a water polo player and a swimmer at St. Ignatius. Sister Fran wanted to go swimming that summer and asked Meghan where to buy a bathing cap. I have never gotten that picture of Sister Fran out of my mind. There were so many different sides to her and we were really blessed to have her at St. Ben's. She will be in our hearts forever.

Joe Accardi, Co-worker from St. Benedict School, Chicago

I too had the benefit of working with Sister Fran at St. Benedict. Like Jean said, when she called, you went. She had to move so she called and said, "Joe, I need some of the high school kids to come and help clean the house." So I brought some students. They all wanted to come. Just say "Sister Fran" and they all wanted to come. So we drove them to her place . . . and it was clean! They said, "What shall we do?" "Whatever she tells you." It was basically to put things from one spot to another into the order she wanted. She had a distinct order for things. In her classroom, she had brought all of the furniture and the cabinetry from Cathedral school when it closed. Everything was on wheels. Every faculty member admired how her furniture moved easily. She was just an amazing woman and we were blessed to have known her.