



Wake Stories of Barbara Cerny, BVM

Marian Hall Chapel, Aug. 23, 2018

Lawrence (Larry) Cerny, Brother

The following is the story of Sister meeting my old boss. Many years ago, when I was attending college at DePaul University I worked part-time for insurance investigators in downtown Chicago. I got to know the manager there, Chris Larsen, and we became close friends even though he was probably 20 years older than me. One time Chris stopped at our house to see me. Sister Barb happened to be visiting. I introduced her to Chris, they began to chat, and I could tell he was enjoying the conversation very much. A few days later when I stopped in at work, Chris came by and said, "Larry, I got a big problem." I replied, "What's wrong Chris?" He said, "I think I'm in love with your sister, Sister, and I'm married and I'm not even Catholic!" I think Chris was not alone in finding an instant affection for Sister Barb. She had that effect on people. I was so lucky to have been born into such a wonderful family and to have had a sister like Sister Barb as a reminder of how people should unconditionally love one another. Thanks again for your kind help and care in communicating with our family. A huge thank you to all of the wonderful people in the Mount Carmel community who took such loving care of my sister, Sister over the years.

Lori Ritz, Director of the Office of Life and Mission

Since my hiring in April 2017, I have learned much from you sisters as I share your charism, your core values, your life and mission. In my work, I learn much more from you than what I share.

That is the story I want to share about Sister Barbara Cerny. Last spring Barbara agreed to be part of a language arts project at Wahlert Catholic High School here in Dubuque. Eleven students came to Mt. Carmel and interviewed 11 sisters about a particular part of her life. The students then returned to Wahlert and prepared a project of some sort to share the information they gained through their interviews. Anna was the student who interviewed Barbara. Shortly after their interview, Anna emailed me and asked, "What more can you tell me about Sister Barbara? All she talked about was her teaching and her love of art." I went to Barbara and asked if there was anything else she would like to tell me so that Anna could incorporate that information in her report. Barbara smiled, with a twinkle in her eye, "No, that is it. I loved teaching and I love art. Seeing students grow in their expression of art is very rewarding." So I emailed Anna her response. Once again and then once again, I received emails from Anna, asking me if there was more information about Barbara—beyond teaching and art. My response was "No, she has told you what was important in her life."

Barbara taught Anna and me that her ministry, her mission was to share her talent and gifts of art and love of teaching with students. Anna's presentation was unique. She wrote an electronic book about Sister Barbara Cerny. The words of the book and the illustrations depicted Barbara's love of teaching and art. Following Anna's presentation, I returned to Mount Carmel and went right to Barbara's room. On my iPad I shared Anna's presentation, Anna's electronic book about Sister Barbara Cerny. Oh yes, and I brought her chocolate chip cookies to enjoy while we talked.

Mary Agnes Leonard, BVM Associate, Pueblo, Co.

We were so blessed and nourished by her presence in our Colorado cluster. Mary Frances and companions must be clapping at the gates. We are grateful for all the beauty her artwork has created in the universe. Mary and

Elizabeth ("The Visitation") are on my front door. The galaxy joins me in thanking Barbara for her life. Gentle, joyous journey home to our beloved Barbara.

Roseann, Former Student

I had Barbara as my high school art teacher at Wahlert. I loved every bit of what she did. I went on to become a nurse and later went back into art at Clarke College where I had beloved Sister Helen Kerrigan also. Barbara instilled in me that when you do a portrait that it's all in the eyes. I still do portrait commissions. If I can capture the eyes, then I feel like I have captured the soul of the person. We kept in touch over all the years when she traveled about through Christmas letters every year. I was thrilled when she came back to Dubuque and I could visit both her and Sister Helen together. I miss both of them very much.

Sister Margaret Mear, BVM

When Barbara was a Regional, she used to love to come and visit me at St. Mary's University in Minnesota because she should spend her time wandering around the art department and talking with our art students. They got to know who she was. I was starting a class one morning. One of our students came in, pulled me aside, cupped her hand and whispered in my ear. "Sister, that sister who comes and visits you is wading down the trout stream on our campus. Do you want to do anything about it?" I said, "No, she's fine. She probably has her camera and is taking pictures. It's OK. Don't worry."

Sister Georgeann Quinlan, BVM

I'm new here at Mount Carmel after 50 years in Colorado. Barbara was part of my life out there. She also has been my prayer for at least the last ten years. She had a big job to do and I think she did it well. She was in Walsenburg, Colo., for a while. Sue Wedekind was a very close friend of hers. I went to visit them when they were in Albuquerque and did the Angel Program. Angels are very important in my life. Barbara graced me with a watercolor of angels and ladybugs. I was pleased to have it. By the way, she liked to be called Barbara, not Barb. I said Barb on time and she corrected me. I am also Czech. Laurene Brady is another; she's more Czech than I am. I so appreciated her prayers. Every time I saw her she would say, "I pray for you every day." I was talking with her recently and said, "I bet you are anxious to be with Sue." She said, "Yes." "You're ready to go?" "Yeah, I am." Everything about her in her dying days showed that she was ready to go.

Mark Wagner, Former Student

I am a former student of Sister Barbara's from Wahlert HS. I graduated in 1967. A little while ago, it was said that she saw the potential in every student. That is very true. She did see the potential in every student. I saw my classmates really excel in art class. She was very open about welcoming students' individual talents. She became a lifelong friend. I used to paint sets with her for some of the plays at Wahlert. Eventually, when I got into conservation role, I was working at a small museum in Morrison, Iowa, in Grundy County. My mother was also an artist. Sister Barbara, my mother and an aunt came out. We painted a huge diorama for one of the museum exhibits. We had loads of fun. My mother, my aunt, and I became lifelong friends of Sister Barbara. The Christmas cards she made were beautiful. I still have many of them. I saved them because they are so well done. We exchanged Christmas letters every year. She was just a great teacher and person.

Jeanne Garris, Niece

I was lucky to have her throughout my entire life. One of the memories I have is that we would go over to my Auntie Mary Ann's house every year and exchange gifts. I was very young. She would give my sister Phyllis and extra gift and tell us, "That's because she's my namesake." When I was really little, I didn't know what that meant, but I was going to find out because, apparently, there are extra gifts. When I got a little older, I understood what namesake meant. I thought, "Well, that can't be right. I must be hearing her wrong. Sister Barbara is not named Phyllis." I asked her again and she said, "She's my namesake." I looked at my sister Laura and said, "Did she say namesake?" "Yeah. Maybe Sister Barbara means Phyllis in Catholic." That's what we came up with because we couldn't figure it out. A few more years go by and I'm 17 or 18. Sister Barbara was talking about her friends in the convent. I said, "There are a lot of Marys and Barbaras. It's almost uncanny." She says,

"No, we get a name when we come in. My first name was Phyllis." Aha! It took me a long time to understand what she meant by namesake. I very, very lucky to have her in my life. I will miss her.

Sister Eileen Powell, BVM

This is a testimony to Barbara's talents and how she shared her talent with others. I found myself one summer at the Cenacle in Chicago on retreat. There were some other BVMs there as well as Barbara. We happened upon a feast day of Mary. At our places, Barbara put a bookmark that she had handmade, hand-printed, and hand-painted for each one of us. That showed me how willing she was to share the talent God had given to her with all of us.

Sister Mary Angela Buser, BVM

I want to share about one of Barbara's early masterpieces. We shared our first mission at St. Callistus in Chicago, which is an Italian parish. The rather small church had a grotto toward the front of the church. The pastor decided at Christmastime to make that grotto into a live crib. He engaged Barbara to paint the background. She painted the background, which was over 20 feet wide, with the village of Bethlehem and all the surrounding area. That crib came to life with all the moving creatures coming to adore the infant. It was used for many years. I hope it is still there because it truly was a masterpiece.

Sister Catherine Jean Hayen, BVM

Cracker, a dear friend and student of Barbara's was here earlier this morning but is unable to be here for the services. He is the one who did the painting of her design in the Motherhouse Chapel. He did tell me that starting September 15 at the Dubuque Museum of Art there will be an exhibit of artwork by Barbara Cerny and Helen Kerrigan.

Jack McCulloch

I, too, am a former student of Barbara. When I was in the seventh or eighth grade, I heard about this incredible art teacher at Wahlert HS. At that time, I put in my head that I want to take art classes from this Sister Barbara. I went to Wahlert and took every art course that I could from her. I learned a lot; she was a fabulous teacher. She let you be yourself in the classroom. It came to graduation time and she said to me, "What are your plans?" I hadn't really thought about it much. I said, "Well, I'll keep working at Eagle Food Store and work on cars." She said, "No, no. You need to go to art school." "Well, I'm not really college material." She said, "There are other options." We looked into it and found Hawkeye Tech, which is a two-year program. I went there and loved it. I knew immediately that it was exactly what I wanted to do as a career. Fast-forward forty years. I now employ sculptures, illustrators and designers. She was a huge influence on me. I am going to miss her. I was just blessed to have her in my life. She made a huge difference in my career. She put me on a very successful path in life. I am truly indebted to her for that.

Millie Wright, Cousin

I am Phyllis' cousin. I knew her the longest. She was there when I was born. My parents lived with my grandmother on Sawyer Avenue on the south side of Chicago when they were first married. Phyllis and her family lived in the first flat. I put together a little booklet of Phyllis' younger days before she became Sister Barbara. I wanted you all to see it. The Cerny family were the most wonderful family. They were so artistic and musical, full of fun and full of life. I never saw a grumpy face in that whole family. Except once. Mary Ann, Phyllis' younger sister, was three years younger than I was. I must have been about seven or eight and Mary Ann about four or five. We were running in and out of the first flat through a screen door. Crash went that screen door. It was a very tiny household. Six people lived there with only one bathroom. Uncle John had to shave with a basin of water at the kitchen table. Every time he tried to shave, the door banged and he would nick himself. That's the only time I ever saw a grumpy face in that whole family. They were so artistic. There was always a card table set up in the living room because the kitchen really was used for cooking. Auntie Catherine was always making noodles, knedlíky, yakzimash. We were Bohemian. My grandparents came from Bohemia, not Czechoslovakia, because there was no Czechoslovakia at that time. There was a lot of Bohemian cooking going on in the kitchen.

In the living room, there was the mecca of all the artwork. Phyllis would take a bar of ivory soap and carve the most beautiful little creatures. She was only about twelve or thirteen. Paintbrushes, paints, clay were always on this little table in the living room; it was a craft table. It was such fun being with them. I am going to miss her terribly.

Sister Elvira Kelly, OSF, Wahlert Colleague

Sister Mary Clare O'Toole, OSF, who is here with me, and I were two of the beginning faculty members at Wahlert HS with Sister Barbara. There were fifty sisters there at that time. We can attest to how well she was loved by her students, but also by us. We had so much fun. It was like a pioneer experience. The first time we went to Regina Convent to live, we had no desks, no mops; we had nothing. We were starting from scratch. We had fun doing many little musical plays; BVMs were famous for that. We all enjoyed it. We really can attest to how much she was loved by all of us.

Cathy Howe Thwaits, Niece

I have some memories to read that my mother sent. However, first I will share a little bit of a story myself. We mentioned her art, but she was also a lover of music. I shared that very much with her in my life. I remember our early holidays, she was always there with her guitar and ukulele and she played flute before that. When I shared this while visiting last weekend, some of the other sisters indicated that they weren't aware that she played those instruments. She was a great singer. I learned a lot of folk music in my youth from her. I grew up to continue singing. I sing in my church choir now and continue to share my love of music. When the rock opera *Jesus Christ, Superstar* came out, I was in high school at the time. My father decided that there shouldn't be a rock opera about Jesus and that it wasn't appropriate music for us to have in our home. I loved all the songs. I knew them all and wanted so much to buy that album. Sister Barbara, I think in consultation with my mother, recorded on a cassette tape the entire album for me, brought the contraband into my home, and snuck it to me. I still have those tapes somewhere. Sharing music with her was a cherished part of my growing up.

Mary Ann Cerny Starcevich, Sister (Read by her daughter Cathy Howe Thwaits)

The first time I went to Mount Carmel to see Barbara, our brother Larry was just a baby and the sisters brought out a laundry basket for him to be in while we were visiting. I remember going to the top of the building to see the fantastic views. So many changes have happened at Mount Carmel and in all of our lives since then. Barbara and I really got to know each other better when she was at St. Callistus in Chicago. I was attending St. Mary's High a few blocks away. I could do nothing that she didn't know about by the time I walked there after school. The famous BVM grapevine! We saw each other through the years as she moved from Iowa and back to Chicago. By then, our mother was living with me and she came to see us often. We shared so many happy and sad occasions. My fondest memory is sitting on the kitchen floor after a large gathering in our home on Christmas Eve after Midnight Mass. We were putting together a combination sink and stove playset for my youngest daughter Joanne. The directions came in a multipage, very thick book with instructions such as "Now stop and have a martini" or "Are you ready to quit yet?" We laughed until dawn. We spent wonderful moments in California and Albuquerque, but our favorite times were our trip to Spain and our Danube River cruise to Prague. Thanks to my daughter and the IT savvy sisters and staff, such as Kathleen Danz in Pastoral Services, Barbara and I were able to spend many hours on face time reliving these memories. I think everyone at Mount Carmel knew that Barbara had to be back in her room by 1:45 p.m. each day so she wouldn't miss our hour together video chatting. We did this for over three years. What a blessing it was for the both of us. Since my body is not cooperating with me, I can only be with you in spirit. I send my love and prayers for all. Thank you for being here today to remember and pray for Barbara. As she wrote on a little bookmark that she painted for me, "We live life like a book – a page at a time." Now we lovingly close her book, but her spirit remains with us always.