



Wake Stories of Mary Ellen McDonagh, BVM
Marian Hall Chapel, Nov. 9, 2018

Sister Diane Forster, BVM

Frances Walsh and daughter Diane Navo lived next door to Mary Ellen when growing up in Missouri. They are keeping us in prayers and want others to know that as longtime friends they are most grateful for Mary Ellen's generosity to them.

Sister Mary Frances Reis, BVM *(Read by Sister Diane Forster, BVM)*

Mary Ellen, always eager to support any outreach to the poor and was among the first BVMs to visit our new ministry in Missouri's Bootheel. She brought us a gift of a very simple but lovely crib set made of paper velour and cotton. Most of the women in our GED class had left school in mid-elementary education, so they were always eager to celebrate the holidays they remembered in their limited schooling. When they asked if we were going to have a Christmas tree, we brought one with decorations and the crib set. One of the women asked if she could help unpack, and the first box she opened was the crib set. "Oh," she yelled out, "I know this story; it was about these guys who were out in the desert." I said, "Well, you have part of that right, would you like to hear the whole story?" In a matter of seconds, all the women turned their chairs around and began listening to the story of the first Christmas. It was a profound experience, for the women and for us discovering another hunger in their lives. Thank you Mary Ellen, for that awakening.

Sheryl Schulte, Former BVM

I am so sad to hear this. Mary Ellen and I entered the community together. Mary Ellen was such a kind, generous and spiritual soul. I wish I could attend her services but distance prevents me from going. The world needs more people like Mary Ellen. She will be missed. Rest in peace, Mary Ellen!

Christine Engels, Niece

Aunt Mary Ellen, first I want to thank you for being our aunt and sister. I will always remember our family holidays, all of us around the table talking and telling jokes. You always laughed even if you didn't get it. You always had a better one and funnier at that. Thank you for being a part of our lives and being there for us when we didn't even know we needed the extra help. You will be missed, but we know you will be looking over all of us. From Mary Ann, the Engels, the Perotti, & McGlynn Families.

Vince McDonagh, Cousin

I am a second cousin of Mary Ellen's and I am here with my wife Julie. I first need to tell you that nothing that I'm going to say is even going to come close to the eulogy you just heard. I learned so much about my own cousin already since this morning that I had no idea she had ever done. This has been a very educational day for me already. I am also from St. Louis. I lived about 30 miles south of the McDonagh family. They lived in North St. Louis; we lived in South St. Louis. Because of the distance and our age difference (she was about ten years older), we were not that close when we were kids. In fact, as I've told a few people earlier today, I used to dread seeing her family. The reason for that was because Mary Ellen and her brother Johnny, who is two or three years younger, and another cousin Mary, used to have great fun and joy teasing me that I was the little kid. I would see them on Christmas, sometimes for New Year's. However, there were so many times I dreaded going up there that I would pray for snow so we didn't have to make the trip.

One time in particular – I maybe was seven year old – I worked up the nerve after worrying about it for 20 minutes to ask my cousin Johnny for a drink of water. He looked at me and said, “I’m so sorry but our house just ran out.” I probably shuttered myself for the rest of the day knowing that it was a fib and that he was teasing me. That took any steam that I had of saying anything else the rest of that day, and maybe three or four years afterwards.

We were not close as kids, but we did become much closer when I was in my twenties. My wife and I got married in 1987. Mary Ellen did one of the scripture readings at our wedding. It just seems that from that point on, I became closer to Mary Ellen and Mary, who could not be here today. That started a new chapter, a chapter that I really welcome and, as I look back on it, am very happy to have had. Mary Ellen started to come to our Christmas parties. At first, we had them every year. It used to be on Christmas Eve and then we backed it off a little as we got older and had traveling to do ourselves. Mary Ellen first came with her stepmother Virginia and her dad Jack, then with her dad along after Virginia died. Mary Ellen always made a point to give us very personal, well thought out, handcrafted gifts for my daughters. You could tell that she worked on them for a long time and that they came from the heart. She always made a point of remembering our daughters.

She also was very proud of telling me about controversial movies that she had attended off the radar. One was *The Last Temptation of Christ*. This came out about 30 years ago. When I asked her why she went to see them, she said, “I just had to check it out.” That was her personality; she explored everything. She was an avid St. Louis Cardinals baseball fan, as you probably already know. She had the game on every time I would visit her, every time it was on TV. She also drove a very hard bargain when she sold her dad’s house after he died in 2010. She had a price in mind for that house and she wasn’t going to budge. You can see that. She did not ask for help on anything until she had given it a first, a second, and a third try herself. Whether it was mechanical or needing information, she always gave it her best shot before she reeled in reinforcements. She was a firecracker, a *real* firecracker and a political firecracker. One time when she came to take care of her dad about 12 years ago, she was driving a Toyota Prius. It was absolutely filled with political signs, bumper stickers and pamphlets. I even wondered how she had room to fit herself in to drive the car.

I just want to thank the BVM sisters and the entire staff for keeping me informed for the last couple of years. My cousin Mary and I were able to come visit last October and spend some time with her when she was still able to recognize us. She was fading in and out some of the time, but still we are very glad we made the visit. For that, I am very grateful to all of you. My cousin Mary also sent me a few remarks knowing that she wouldn’t be here.

Mary Edwards, Cousin (*Read by Vince McDonagh, Cousin*)

I have always known Mary Ellen. Our fathers were cousins too. She was a good playmate at family events. Her brother Johnny really liked to give it to me hard. We went to the same high school. She was known as the smartest girl in the school. I remember her strong, terrific career in Chicago and that she always wanted to be a nun. I think the happiest day of Mary Ellen’s life was when she entered the BVMs. Mary Ellen was a good person and she shot from the hip. She will be missed. Rest in peace.

Sister Dolores Kramer, BVM

I lived next door to Mary Ellen for the last several years. I can’t tell you how moved I was when I read the Pax Christi vow of non-violence included in Mary Ellen’s prayer service. I never heard Mary Ellen utter one word of complaint, not one word of discouragement, not one word of frustration. She simply accepted and endured the incredible suffering she experienced these many years. She couldn’t see, she couldn’t hear, her body had grown so fragile and even her brilliant mind began to fade. Mary Ellen, I know that at the moment of death you were met by a loving Jesus. I think he must have run to meet you.

Sister Nancy McCarthy, BVM

I met Mary Ellen over 40 years ago. I have a little story that was not included in the eulogy. I was asked by a Regional to room with Mary Ellen at one of our Senates in Chicago. I was supposed to try to encourage her to get a hearing aid. I had had my own hearing aids for a while; I was a lot younger then, but Mary Ellen was a lot younger than I was. How am I going to suggest to this beautiful, young woman that a hearing aid could possibly enhance her quality of life? Surprisingly, she was very receptive and agreed to get a hearing aid. That was the beginning of a wonderful lasting relationship. In the beginning, part of the relationship meant sitting together in the front row by ourselves at every event so that we could hear better. Over the years, we developed many interests in common. Probably the best gift Mary Ellen gave me was to encourage me to volunteer at the 8th Day Center one year. That was one of the best experiences in my life. As Dolores just said, I admire Mary Ellen because she never complained about hearing loss. I wish I could say the same. I'm very grateful for everything we shared in life.

Sister Gwen Farry, BVM

I bring greetings, sympathy and prayer from staff members who worked with Mary Ellen at 8th Day Center, especially Mary Kay Flannigan. I also have a message from a friend from St. Louis.

Barbara Jennings, CSJ *(Read by Sister Gwen Farry, BVM)*

I knew Mary Ellen at the Holy Family Catholic Worker House in Kansas City. We were part of the staff. She was also working at *The Catholic Key* for part of that time. Mary Ellen contributed many new ideas to the organization of the House, to being welcoming, more efficient for the guests as well as the volunteers, planning the Thursday evening liturgies, writing our communications with volunteers, parishes, schools. She and I had great fun comparing our reading of novels, and exchanging books. Actually, she lent me her books, which saved me trips to the library! Mary Ellen had a great empathy for the poor and sick and could translate that into actions like lobbying with NETWORK. When Mary Ellen moved to St. Louis from Chicago, we got together many times. I have missed the real Mary Ellen in the past few years – the healthier, vibrant, smart and active Mary Ellen. I am glad she is at peace.

Julie Hill

I am a Clarke graduate. I grew up in St. Louis and then came up to Dubuque to attend Clarke College. I earned my Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in the May 1995. I was also very involved in campus ministry, retreats and service trips. Not knowing what my next step was after graduation, Sister Kathy Carr, BVM said, "Why don't you come and meet Sister Mary Ellen and think about spending some time at the Catholic Worker House in Kansas City." For the summer of 1995, I lived and worked with Sister Mary Ellen at the Catholic Worker. What I will remember the most is that every night, six days a week, an average of 200 people per night came through the House and we served dinner to them. I lived in Kansas City for a year. One of her hobbies was counted cross-stitch. She made me a counted cross-stitch. It really represents the two things I learned the most from Sister Mary Ellen. On the cross-stitch, it said, "Welcome." Hospitality was one of the values I learned from her. The other was simply living. This counted cross-stitch only had four colors. I don't know if that was because she couldn't see the variance of colors or if she chose it on purpose. Those two values of welcoming and simple living is what I learned from Sister Mary Ellen in that one short year of being with her.

Brother Louis Roddermann *(Read by Sister Joellen McCarthy, BVM)*

I was friends with Mary Ellen all of her years in Kansas City, Mo. After her three years as editor of the diocesan paper, *The Catholic Key*, she moved into Holy Family Catholic Worker House. I spent those seven years with her on staff. I was always amazed at the huge energy, creativity, spontaneity, hospitality that came from such a small, fragile human body. In addition to all the demands of the House, she was always involved with significant peace and justice groups, especially the KC Metro Interfaith Peace Alliance. Friend, former staff, volunteers and guests of the House still remember and ask about her. She will be missed and remembered.

Lori Ritz (*Read by Sister LaDonna Manternach, BVM*)

Mary Ellen McDonagh was in the set of 1973, the only member in that set as I remember. She was the set before Mary Lou Wetzell and me. It was a unique time. There were weekends and occasions when our two little sets joined the big set of six following us. It was not called March Madness then, but there was time for prayer, laughter, food and stories. Somewhere in my archives, I have a photo of all of us on one of those weekends. Mary Ellen often spoke of Sister Cathlin Casey, the sister who helped her enter. Cathlin was a mentor and friend of Mary Ellen's spiritually and professionally. Mary Ellen was a great teacher and a phenomenal writer. What I remember most is her distinctive laugh, the admiration for her dad about whom she spoke often and her faithfulness to the St. Louis Cardinals. Mary Ellen, rest now. May you be at peace.

Linda McBride

I first met Sister Mary Ellen on Oct. 4, 1975, when my good friends, Mary Lou Wetzell and Lori Ritz, were received and Mary Ellen made her first vows. Over the years, I would see her at BVM functions. We would talk, often about caring for our aging parents. When she was in Chicago at 8th Day Center for Justice, several times we went to dinner and a concert at Millennium Park. I am amazed at her talent and her willingness to give of herself so much. May she rest in peace.

Sister Eileen Fuchs, BVM

I was near Mary Ellen's room at the time of her death. We were waiting for the funeral home to come. I was sitting out in the hall. I thought, "Just out of curiosity, I'm going to see what's in the news right now." Probably very near the time Mary Ellen went to God, the UN envoy finally made it to the Syrian refugees in the desert that they have been trying to do since January. I thought, "You go, girl!"

Sister Luann Brown, BVM

One of the things Mary Ellen used to say at March Madness meetings and other times when I talked with her about her experience with Catholic Worker was "God kicked me into the Catholic Worker and walked me through it." I might not have that exactly right, but it was something like that. It says to me that she was open to God's action in her life and that sometimes God forces you into things and sometimes God loves us through things. She was just open to whatever experience would come to her. When I was living in Ecuador, she came down to visit. I know that in everything I showed her, she saw through the lens of how does this impact poor people. That was the lens through which she saw things – what can we do about it and how does this impact people who are poor and vulnerable. That's what I'll remember about Mary Ellen.

Sister Kathleen Sinclair, BVM (*Read by Sister Anne Marie McKenna, BVM*)

I have many and varied recollections of Mary Ellen from Senates, Region meetings, and March Madness gatherings. However, my most powerful memories are of the times when Mary Lou Wetzell and I would take Mary Ellen out to dinner when she came up to Chicago from Saint Louis for meetings. The three of us would spend the evening catching up on our individual adventures. It was our own little supper club. To me, Mary Ellen's adventures always seemed so exciting. The people she interacted with and the work she did was heart-warming and heart wrenching all at the same time.

As I write this from Xavier College Prep, one of Mary Ellen's former missions, I look at the girls and imagine the fierce love and dedication she must have given to her students. I wonder how many of them went on to be teachers, journalists, or Catholic Workers. My life has been forever changed and blessed by my friendship with Mary Ellen. May her passion for justice live on in me and may she save a place for all of us at the eternal banquet, that glorious and unending supper club in heaven.

Sister Ann Harrington, BVM

I taught Mary Ellen both in St. Louis and at Mundelein College in Chicago. I think she was the brightest person I ever taught, but with no sense of her own accomplishments at all. She was always looking out for what she could do next and she *never* stopped. I have great admiration for her. She was a lesson in my life.