



Wake Stories of Gertrude Ann Sullivan, BVM
Marian Hall Chapel, March 18, 2019

Fr. John J. Serio SDB, Salesian HS, New Rochelle N.Y. *(Read by Sister Diane Forster, BVM)*

When I was in the eighth grade at St. Thomas the Apostle, West Hempstead, NY, (Class of 1967), the six BVMs who comprised the faculty of the junior high (Maureen Whalen, Mary Walter, William Cecile Lenaers, Patricia Quinn, Helen Garvey and Gertrude Ann Sullivan), and led by the indomitable Sr. Mary Angela Buser, were determined to make us the best junior high school in the diocese. They spent endless hours revamping the curriculum, tinkering with the schedule (They lengthened the school day by an hour!), and discovering other means to make us well-educated young men and women. I have no doubt that Sister Gertrude Ann was the guiding force behind all this. During that year, she taught us math, science, music and art. I was ever so ready for ninth grade algebra after finishing pre-algebra with Sister Gertrude Ann. More importantly, she was interested in learning for its own sake, a quality that we probably could not appreciate as 14 year olds.

She was an excellent teacher – clear and comprehensive. She could be tough. She once corrected me for leaving my “patrol boy post” ahead of time. I’m sure she called my father that night too. But, she was also proud of her former students. As a deacon, I attended my first NCEA convention. Sister was working for the diocese of San Diego. I went to her booth. When I told her who I was, she yelled out excitedly to all the other vendors in the area, “I taught him in eighth grade and now he’s going to be ordained a priest!” It was a proud moment for both of us. When I visited her in Rancho Santa Margarita, she wanted me to apply for the principalship of the local Catholic high school (My provincial didn’t see that offer in quite the same way!). She was the consummate Catholic educator at every level. My friend, Stephen Froehlich, related that she was an excellent math teacher, and my sister Mary summed it up succinctly by stating, “She was one of a kind.”

We were blessed to have such wonderful educators guiding and forming us in those early years of our Catholic education. We can never be grateful enough for Sr. Gertrude Ann and all the others who ministered with her at St. Thomas and everywhere else she served.

“Blessed are they who die in the Lord. Let them rest from their labors, for their good deeds go with them.” Sister, may you enjoy the beauty of God’s presence, the One whose messenger you were for all of your life.

Patty Burn, Cousin

My father and Ethel’s mother were brother and sister. I refer to Sister Gertrude Ann as Ethel. I spell my name P-A-T-T-Y, but she spelled my name P-A-D-D-Y. I have been forever grateful for that because I love it. That’s how we all say it so today my name tag says Paddy in honor of her. I feel so blessed to be here among everyone. You have been so lucky to have shared all these years with her. My memories are from when I was pretty little. Ethel would come to town. We’d all get together, gather around and she would tell us stories. They are very good memories. As the years passed, we didn’t get to see her as much. My brother-in-law Bob, who is here today, and my sister Jeanie and I would come to see her here every year and go to Tony Roma’s. I like beef tenderloin, but not like she does. She would ask for her beef tenderloin rare, hardly cooked. They would always look at her, but she meant it. She send it back once because it wasn’t rare enough. I will never forget that. Thank you so much for inviting us. Thank you to Chelsey for getting my brother-in-law and me organize to come. We are happy to be here and hear your memories; I love it.

Sister Carol Marie Baum, BVM

I'll pick up on what Patty said about Gertrude Ann ordering a steak, which was her meat of choice. Often she would say to the server, "Please bring it to me mooing." The server would look at her and she would say, "Yes, I said mooing." I have several wonderful memories of Gert. I met her when I was working here in the Motherhouse. Gert was one of the ones responsible for doing the monthly birthday cards for the sisters. They were always unique, exquisitely done and very thoughtful. Our little gift from the house to the sister was ten stamps so they could continue communicating with their friends in distance places. I also remember the card group that met faithfully every Friday night – Marcelita Brown, Maddie Hogan, Gert, Catherine Jean Hayen and myself. Gert always wanted to be called Gert; she didn't like Gerty. We did that a couple of times and immediately she would correct us, "No, it's Gert." We would usually have a light supper and then play 500 or rummy. However, the best part was after the card games when we would have a little snack and wonderful conversations around the table on various issues. If I had to pick a word to describe her, I would say seeker. She continually was seeking a way to express, find and share a God; that was very important to her. I don't think that ever left her. She always read the latest in spirituality, experimented with different forms of prayer and met with a spiritual director. This was a nudge for me. I realized an important quality to have was to seek always the meaning of being a faithful servant. Something else I remember was that Gert was a lover of dark chocolate. Often when we were up at The Spiders, we could stop at the candy shop to pick up a pound of very dark chocolate fudge. Gert, now you have all the chocolate you want and you are with the God who you loved. Thank you for being my prayer this year. I ask for your prayers in the days ahead.

Sister Kathryn (Kitty) Lawlor, BVM

When Gert and I entered the novitiate, we were lined up according to height. Gert was quite tall so she was toward the end. We were given our community numbers and red embroidery thread. We had to make the community numbers ourselves and then sew them on our clothing. Every time a postulate would go home, Gert would get a different number and had to redo her embroidered number and sew it on her clothing. Embroidery was not part of Gert's childhood, but she became very good at it. She was, however, very relieved when we finally entered the novitiate and she got to keep the community number she had – 3486.

Sister Catherine Jean Hayen, BVM

My memories of Gert begin in Davenport in the early 1970s. She was always dedicated to her education ministry. She was such a gift to our local communities. She was a blessing to live with. She enjoyed playing card games, including bridge. How creative was her artistic talent expressed in a variety of mediums. Her journey with cancer several times in her life was amazing as she kept hope and determination. I treasure Gert as a friend and companion on the journey of life. Gert, may you rest in peace with your mom and dad and your loving God.

Sister Irene Lukefahr, BVM

Prior to the celebration of the diamond jubilarians last September, Jon Aguilar, who was new to the Communications Office, did a wonderful ministry of meeting with most of the set followed by an individual interview with each sister. I was privileged to be present when Jon interviewed Gert. I told Gert who said, "I don't know how good I'll be. I don't even know who I am and why I'm here." Actually, we spent a delightful 45 minutes with Gert admiring her artistic work, talking about her many missions, reading one of the trilogies on the Franciscan Junipero Serra. I could never pronounce his name so Gert would tell me the name every time. As we were leaving Gert's room after we both had thanked her, Jon was shaking his head. I said, "What's wrong?" He said, "They're all like that. None of the jubilarians ever think they have done anything extraordinary in their life." Just from the highlights of Gert's life given in the eulogy, we all know that Gert lived one amazing life. I hope that by now, Gert, you really recognize what an amazing woman you are. Thank you!

Gary Schulte, Former Student

I had the honor of being taught by Sister Gert in seventh grade at St. Anthony's here in Dubuque. After I retired, I came to Mount Carmel to look her up. The receptionist called her and she said she would come down to see me.

She got to the reception area and said, "Gary?" "Yes." "You're much taller than I remember you." I said, "Well, you're much shorter than I remember you." I have a Franciscan aunt who is Sister Gertrude Ann. When my younger brother Peter and I were out on the playground at St. Anthony's, a nun who was with my brother Peter said, "Here's comes Sister Gertrude Ann." He said, "That's not Sister Gertrude Ann." She said, "Yes, it is." He said, "No, I know Sister Gertrude Ann. That's not her." Sister Gert and I had a lot of good talks. She was a neat lady.

Sister Joan Stritesky, BVM

Gert was a postulant when I was a novice. She said she always looked up to me. I don't know how she could say that by how much taller she was than I. We met several times - when she was giving workshops in the schools where I was teaching, attending the same conference, sitting next to each other at an assembly. I am recalling a tiny photo plaque that was given to me that says, "You have touched me. I have grown." That's what I say to you, Gert. You have touched me. I have grown.

Sister Catherine Dunn, BVM

Gert was a woman of great strength, great humility. What I remember best about her was her ability to lift others. She did a great job in our education department, so great that when there was a vacancy, I asked if she would serve as the vice president/academic dean. She did that just as well as she did everything else until she became ill. The sorrow for us is that she had to give up that position. I knew she would work so well with the faculty, embrace them and lift them. I was up with Gert last week. While she didn't seem conscious, I tried to tell her, since hearing is the last to go, how much we love her and how much we at Clarke are grateful for her service there. She was a great woman of education in every aspect. During her illness, she really discovered her artistic abilities. We are left with the beauty of her artwork today. One more talent that Gert had. Bless you, Gert, and thank you for all you have done for all of us. We look forward to seeing you again.

Sandy Clark, Roberta Kuhn Center Instructor

I first met Gert when she decided to take my Photoshop class. She sat in the very first chair up by the screen. This was just a few years ago, but her goal was to learn Photoshop so she could combine her artwork and her computer work. She was still trying to improve her skills as a learner not that long ago. I have a funny story to share. When they were working on something, and if they wanted to, they would show their work on the screen and get feedback from the whole class. There was a gentleman sitting behind Gert named Jim who was looking at her work on the screen. All of a sudden he said, "Gertrude Ann. Gertrude Ann. Would that be Sister Gertrude Ann?" She turned around and said, "Yes." He screamed and got so excited, "Oh, oh, you were my fourth grade teacher at St. Anthony's! I loved you to death!" He was so excited. The whole class was laughing and clapping. She was kind of embarrassed, but enjoyed it too. He went home that night and told his wife, "You'll never guess who's sitting in front of me." He called each of his children that night to tell them. His favorite memory of her was from an altar boy picnic when Gert, in full habit, climbed right in the boat and said, "Give me those paddles." He said, "I can still picture that to this day."

Sister Kathleen Mullin, BVM

In the mid-1980s, the congregation had a Senate in San Diego. The steering committee met in March of that year in San Diego. Some of us came from a blizzard condition in Chicago, not even knowing if we would take off. We got to San Diego about eleven o'clock and Gertrude Ann was there to meet three of us. Of course, we had worn boots, heavy coats, and wool scarves. She said, "We're going to a park for a picnic. I have the food in the car." Overlooking the bay, we sat in the beauty that she loved too and had a wonderful time long before the meeting started. The sensitivity of Gert in situations like that are also good memories.