



Wake Stories of Joan (Magdaletta) Stritesky, BVM
Marian Hall Chapel, Feb. 27, 2020

Kathy Greaney Bebe, former BVM

When I was given my first mission assignment in 1963, I was a young 20-year-old BVM with no teaching experience and limited understanding of what it would be like to be living in a small convent with BVMs of different ages. I was assigned to Visitation in Des Moines, Iowa, where Joan Stritesky, then Sister Mary Magdaletta, was superior and principal of Visitation School. What a piece of good fortune for me!

Joan's fine skills in managing a well-ordered elementary school serving hundreds of children and ministering to their families cemented an understanding in me as to how to be an effective teacher and a community-minded BVM. This was only part of the picture, however. What I also was lucky to experience was the fun-loving, playful, warm connections that were fostered by Joan and became contagious with all of us living and working together as BVMs under her leadership. Joan allowed us to be joyful and engaged in activities that brought us closer as the small community we were. What delightful times we had!

Joan's dearest friend, Jackie Burke, was the superior and principal of St. Ambrose, the neighboring parish school, and the two of these women concocted reasons and ways for our two convents to socialize, picnic, and be together. Those were the days! We became family then and continued in the family relationship and mindset for over 60 years. Joan was family to me.

After I left the community, Joan remained family and my relationship with her was strong, consistent, and ever-present throughout all of these years. My sons, their wives, and their children became Joan's children; our visits and times together in San Francisco, Dubuque, and ultimately at Mount Carmel were many and precious. We spent days together laughing, telling stories, cooking and eating wonderful food, going to the casino, and playing games. Those chosen BVMs were considered "the girls"—Joan, Therese Frelø, Jackie and Eleanor Burke, Betty Carey, and Judy Callahan. What a hoot! We knew how to have fun.

Of course, Joan would entertain us with her wild stories, her reminiscing, her teasing, and her good humor. Mostly she excelled in cheating at games and when we would confront her, she would get this innocent look on her face, raise her eyebrows, and say "Who, me?"

The very last time I saw Joan was at Mount Carmel three years ago and my son, his wife, and my two young grandsons were also there. They stopped for a few days while on a road trip. Once again, it was good times; however, the group had gotten smaller and only Joan, Therese, and Judy were "the girls." We ate in the dining room at a table with "reserved" signs that Joan set in place, as she usually did. My youngest grandson was only 6 months old at the time, and I had him on my lap. Joan got that mischievous glint in her eyes and an impish smile on her face as she took a chunk of chocolate cake, reached across the table with it, and put it into the little guy's mouth. Of course, he gummed it and was pleased. However, his dad, my son, was aghast and scolded me for letting Joan do that. I knew that I hadn't let Joan do it, she just DID it! That little guy is now 4 years old and loves chocolate cake.

Joan's spirit, her positive attitude, her ability to enjoy life, and her spontaneous disposition made her so unique. There will only be one Joan Stritesky and we will always love her.

George Lifka, nephew-in-law

My first experience with BVMs came at the age of five. For the next eight years, I got to know what the BVMs were all about. They were tough, dedicated teachers and disciplinarians, with a lot of emphasis on the discipline, especially if you were a young male. The girls got away with everything! I didn't have enough with eight years, so I had to go to a Catholic high school to find out what the lessons were like with the Christians Brothers; they were even tougher! After 12 years of Christian education and four years out on my own, I got married and entered the family of a BVM. Joan Stritesky became my aunt-in-law. That was a real experience.

I know Joan Stritesky as well as anyone with 50-plus years of personal experiences. After my wife and I were married a couple of years, we bought our first home. Joan came out to our house for a week or so in the summertime. I did not know what to expect until the next morning. It was a nice summer day and I heard all this yelling and laughing out behind the house. Something was going on and I figured I had better investigate. I ran out the back and there was Sister Therese [Frelø] on the side; she was the cheerleader. Sister Joan had a hold of the garden hose and was chasing my children around the yard yelling and screaming. That was the first time and in the next 50 years, it never stopped. If Joan was there, there was action going on.

I also learned the love and care that was in Joan as a nun, an aunt, and a great-aunt. It also never stopped. She was of the most loving persons you will ever meet. That's the thought that stays with us—the love of Joan Stritesky. I don't know if I should be happy or concerned about what's going on up in heaven right now. You can bet she's got her right hand right alongside of him and the two of them are running down the streets together. That's what I will always remember about Joan Stritesky and Therese Frelø.

Carl Loras Pilmaier, BVM

Joan always enjoyed a good time. When our set got together, she was always the life of the party. She was never at a loss for words and enjoyed telling stories and sharing memories with those around her. When her good friend Therese Frelø died, Joan carried on as best she could, but we know that she missed her a lot. The two of them lived together for so long. Now they are both at peace. As we say goodbye to Joan, we know that she is in a better place where her days of suffering are over. She fought the good fight. May she now rest in peace. God be with you, Joan.

Al Larson, great nephew-in-law

There's a saying that you don't know what you've got until it's gone. I think that we would all agree that that is not the case with Aunt Joan. We knew exactly what we got from day one. A long time ago, about 29 years, I first met her at a party at my future in-laws' house. It was for a bridal shower to celebrate me marrying their daughter. I had been in the Navy about a year-and-a-half and only really knew the family with face-to-face time about 20 days. As a sailor who is getting ready to marry a Marine's daughter, I'm on my best behavior, trying to make sure I am not insulting the future brothers-in-law, the protective people. I am sitting at this party like a stiff shirt, not really relaxed at all.

Aunt Joan comes in and corners me into a section of the room and begins to berate me in a funny kind of way. I normally am a relaxed guy, but at this party, I want to make a really good positive impression. She just started breaking me down to the point where the sailor in me starting coming out and I started breaking her down. The two of us are just attacking each other in a fun-loving way. She eventually dismisses herself and walks back into the kitchen.

My future bride comes out, walks up to me, and says, "Are you having a good time?" For the first time I was having a good time because Aunt Joan had broken me down to actually enjoying myself. I said, "Yeah, I think I am." She said, "Well, there is somebody I want you to meet—my Aunt Joan." I said, "I think I just met her. She's

really cool!" My wife looked at me and said, "Do you know that she's a nun?" I said, "There is no way in the world that that woman is a nun! Not after what we just did." She brings me into the kitchen and for the next half-hour, the family is trying to convince me that Aunt Joan is a nun. It took a little while. Since then she has always been "my Aunt Joan, the nun."

When I was walking up, I got a little teary-eyed. I've seen some very terrible things; I've been to war. I have a belief that the Lord works in us. We see things, but then he puts people in our lives who swing the pendulum back the other way. Aunt Joan was my pendulum. You could never go to a party that she was at and not be excited about getting the chance to talk with her. When we were here at Mount Carmel, we would go upstairs and have dinner. You ladies would walk by. After you got out of earshot, she would say "That was . . ." and then she would make fun of you, laugh, and then say some very uplifting comment about just how great and remarkable you were. That's the way I remember her. She is my pendulum. There is evil and there is love. She was the love component and swung my pendulum the other way. I will always remember her for that.

Judy Callahan, BVM

I have been Joan's friend since the late 1960s and lived with her three times. Besides friend, she was a teacher and a mentor for me during all those experiences right up until the week that she died. As a very young, exuberant teacher, she calmed some of the impulses young people had. She had such a wisdom in dealing with hard things. She was way ahead of her time in how to lead people and involve them in decision-making. I just took it for granted that that was how to do it. As an administrator, she was very capable, competent, innovative, and creative. That sparked some of those talents within myself that I have used and enjoyed in ministry as well.

The most important and significant mentoring that she did for me, which we all have to do, was how to prepare for death. The last two or three months since just before Christmas, she dealt with some really serious physical pain and anxiety. I had the good fortune to break my arm and needed to be at Mount Carmel for about month, so I was able to observe this. I was going through some of her stuff, for which she was known. Among her stuff were not diamonds or jewels or Tiffany glass or anything like it. It was stuff from little holiday parties with her friends. All of those little insignificant things in her room connected to deep relationships taught me about how she appreciated people. Bigger than even that was Joan's relationship with the staff—the nurses, the aides, the person who passes out the laundry, the dining room staff. When she was in her room the last week, people came in with tears in their eyes and big kisses and hugs for her. Her relationship with people was so profound. All the family members here have probably experienced that same love, encouragement, and mentoring from the time they were very young as well. We have a great deal for which to be grateful to Joan—for all that she has been and how she has modeled preparation for death and dealing with great suffering with great patience, great love, and great perseverance. Thank you, Joan, for teaching all of us something.

Dolores (Dee) Myers, BVM

This is a good time to read this note from Sister Tram, one of the four Vietnamese sisters. She asked me to read this because she had to be at school today.

Sister Tram Thi Thu Tran, IHM

Sister Joan, my angel in secret. She never knew she was my angel because I kept it a secret, just in my mind and in my heart. The secret began in the first year that I came here. I asked many questions myself about why. Many times when I was sad or something happened to me, I met her in the dining room, even when I was home late from school. She smiled at me and it seemed like she knew what was going on within me. I felt so comforted every time I met her. I believe that God sent a Joan angel to me. Anytime I hear the word "clue," I remember Joan. This is a word that I learned from her while talking almost one hour. It impressed me, not just the simple word, but in what I had learned. It was Joan's personality—gentle, thoughtful, humorous. I would like to say thank you, God, for giving me a chance to meet many wonderful sisters like Sister Joan in my life. You are always my angel, Joan.

Georgeann Quinlan, BVM

I lived with Joan three times—Des Moines, Iowa; Boulder, Colo.; and most recently here at Mount Carmel. There are so many things to say about Joan. I tried to pick out some things that nobody else would necessarily know. One is from 1966-1968 when I was with her in Des Moines. We changed systems and didn't have superiors anymore. Joan was telling everybody, "I'm running out of power!" Isn't that typical? She liked to get people riled up. She would say, "I'm sorry that you're not having any fun." I took that on as an expression and have used it many, many times. Part of her keeping a lot of things is that she liked to shop. I would take her to JCPenney. I don't like to shop so I would drop her off and I would go to three places and return. She still wasn't finished shopping. Back in Boulder she would say, "Let's go to the mountains and have breakfast tomorrow morning." She would bring a frying pan and we would go up and do that. Another story is pretty funny. The Benedictine Fathers owned a cabin, but we would go up and spend time there. It was a beautiful place. I don't know who else was there with Joan at that time, but Catherine Mary Walsh was there. One time at night, somebody came and knocked at the door. She wasn't about to let them in. She said, "Who is it?" They wouldn't say anything. She said, "You better get out of here or I'm going to call my husband." I miss her terribly. She was wonderful.

Lori Ritz, director of the Office of BVM Life and Mission and BVM Associate

I have a different way of looking at Sister Joan because she was my eighth grade teacher at Visitation in Des Moines, so 55 years ago I got to enjoy being in her class. We were the largest class to go through Visitation. We always had two teachers from second grade on up. In eighth grade, the girls were in one room and the boys were in the other. We all had Sister Magdaletta for math and social studies. She and I shared many stories over the last three years that I have been here. Obviously, she has one perspective being the principal and I have a different perspective as having been the student, but it was still great. There's one story I always remember. I don't know if the sisters were driving at that time or not, but she would call our house and ask if my "good, holy father" was there. My mother would just laugh and say, "Where does Sister Magdaletta want to go now?"

Charlyn Simon, nurse

I am one of the nurses who had the privilege of caring for dear Joan over these last couple of years. She definitely challenged and encouraged me. She said likewise about myself. I said, "Thank you for that privilege." She always liked to go out to eat. I was looking forward to taking her out, but now, Lord willing, we will get to be at the banquet table with the Lord Jesus Christ someday. In John 37 it says, "In the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried saying, 'If any man thirst, let him come to me and drink. And he that believes in me, as the Scripture has said, out of his belly will flow rivers of living water.'" One song I was able to sing with Joan was in John 14. "Let not your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself, so that where I am there you may be also. Where I go, you know the way." Thomas said to him, "'Lord, we know not where you go. How can we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, the truth and the life. No man comes to the Father but through me.'" I am looking forward to seeing her again someday with the Lord Jesus Christ at the banquet table. In the Song of Solomon, it talks about how his banner of us is love. His banner of Joan is love. I appreciate her love for me, too. Take care, dear sisters, I look forward to serving you more.

Eileen Fuchs, BVM

When I was learning about the community but had not yet entered, I went to a Call to Action convention in Milwaukee with a couple thousand of my good personal friends. I only knew one person there and that was Kathleen Sinclair. Somehow we managed to get into the food line before the mad rush and got food without standing in line for hours on end. We were sitting in a hallway eating when suddenly this woman came up. She didn't introduce herself, but just started babbling on about how hungry she was, going on and on with lots of energy. I can still see her standing there. I looked at Kathleen. "Do we know this person?" Kathleen said with a chuckle, "Eileen, I want to introduce you to Joan Stritesky." She said, "I'm just starving," without even acknowledging us. I said, "Here, have half of my sandwich." I gave her half of my sandwich, which was a turkey on

marble rye. Ever since then, I have been “Marble Rye.” I don’t even know if she ever knew my name. Until most recently, I was “Marble Rye.” She never forgot that. That’s how I met Joan Stritesky.

Kathleen Spurlin, BVM

Joan was in my set. Whether in the postulancy, novitiate, wherever, she and a couple of others could keep us laughing and joking. One of the things I learned about her when I visited her before her death was that she loved Westerns. She had the TV on and was watching a Western. Joan, I’m sure you will enjoy more Westerns in heaven. God bless you.

Mary Angela Buser, BVM

Although I was in the novitiate with Joan, I don’t remember too many things from that. I do remember that when I really got to know Joan was in her years as the Associate Director. She took a program that had been in existence for quite a few years but was really quietly sleeping away because it had no director. She came with all her exuberant life and multiple ideas. As it was said in the eulogy, many, many more people joined the community during her years as director. She began an advisory group. I happened to be living in Chicago at that time. She had many, many groups in Chicago. I remember participating in many of them and always carrying home one of those trinkets that I didn’t know that she had so many of— a seashell one time and another time a beautiful bead. You carried with the memento the idea that we had reflected on and prayed upon. It was always very meaningful to us. I thank her for all of her creativity, all of her exuberance, all of her energy. During her years at Mount Carmel, she usually was the one who got the chairs set up in the dining rooms so that we could be together. When they weren’t set up, we knew something was wrong with Joan. We miss you Joan. We will always remember your wonderful spirit.

Jackie Jones, niece

I first met Joan when I was five years old. She is nine years older than me, so I was really attracted to her spirit. Joan (Magdaletta) met God in her early years. Right from the beginning, He knew she wasn’t an ordinary person. He gave her many gifts like storytelling, laughter, and belonging. She brought with her a love of Jesus that she shared with everyone throughout her life. She could never have imagined the countless lives that she touched. Her heart always listened, her support was always strong, and her arms were always open. She was a faithful companion and a spiritual friend. Joan, you brought so much joy by just being you. Your joyful spirit will shine forever. Today we celebrate you, Joan.

Tony Frelo, nephew of Therese Frelo, BVM

After hearing all these stories by all these great and incredible people about how Joan touched their lives, it’s going to be really tough to follow. As most of you know, Joan and Therese [Frelo] were best friends. Actually, they were more than best friends. They were sisters, as close to blood relatives as two could be, true family. Their lives intertwined. They were the original dynamic duo.

I’ve known Joan as far back as I can remember and I’m approaching 54 years old. Even before I have memory, she was there. She was always there for those important things, which her family can attest to. I am adopted family. We adopted her family and they adopted us. She was there for birthdays and graduations. She actually became an integral part of three generations of Frelos. She was a very special person. Throughout our lives, she shared her family with us as well. Trips to Salem. Dressing up as Santa Claus and passing out presents to the young children. I appreciate her for letting us share those special times with her family.

Joan was a loving and playful soul. Her intelligent wit and compassionate touch will forever be cherished and remembered. I will miss her more than you will ever know. Joan was one-of-a-kind. In the card game of life, that is the hand far greater than any royal flush or four aces or winning hand could achieve. I use that analogy because as a young boy I spent a lot of time with Joan. We spent a lot of time playing cards. She actually taught me card games. You would think a boy’s father or grandfather or someone like that, but no, Joan taught me how to play cards. We both loved to gamble. She had a little specialness to her when we played cards. She taught me how to

deal, shuffle, how to use probabilities to my advantage. She showed me how a little sleight of hand could make her the best card player I ever saw. In the end, that twinkle in her eye and a wink, made losing to her a memory I will forever treasure.

We are all very sad right now for Joan's passing. Sometimes we cannot understand the "why," but we triumph the "who," and that "who" is Sister Joan and the many people she touched in her life. The legacy she leaves in our hearts makes up for the sadness we feel and the loss we will forever endure. I know it sounds really mushy. Everybody had such great stories. Like we all do, I have multiple stories, but I don't want to take everybody's time. These are the things that Joan and I shared.

Life is but a stepping stone with its joys and influences. It takes us on a great and wonderful journey. Throughout that journey, if we are lucky enough, we get that incredible chance to experience such an unconditional love, faith, and hope that was Joan. We love you and we will miss you, Joan. God bless.