



Sharing of Memories of Jean M. (Jean Francis) Byrne, BVM

Sharing of Memories, Oct. 1, 2020

Mary McCauley, BVM

My introduction to Jean occurred when she and Mira left Des Moines and came to Dubuque to offer community service. At the time Jean was retired and was willing to respond to any need. Well it just so happened that we had a need! The BVM Personnel Office, which had been operative from the late sixties, was in need of a director! Jean graciously and competently accepted this position. It was my privilege to serve as the liaison to this office.

Although the requests for assistance from this office were dwindling, there still were employers seeking the service of BVM Sisters and BVM sisters seeking potential employment. Whatever the request, Jean responded with kindness, efficiency, sensitivity, and vision. In a final evaluation written in June 2000, the date and time that this Office did come to an end, I wrote the following regarding Jean's service:

Jean, for the last five years it has been my privilege to work and relate to you because of your service within the BVM Personnel Office. You have done so well that you have worked yourself out of a job. Do accept this as a compliment. Your service has been superb. You did everything that was required in a very effective manner, initiated ways to simplify procedures, and always kept me informed of significant issues. I commend you for your ability to work independently, to initiate practical procedures, and to keep in contact with Sisters who did request information about ministry openings. You are perceptive, prudent, kind, efficient, and organized! It has been a joy to know and work with you . . . hence to love you!

I think these words written 20 years ago aptly describe the woman we honor today. Jean was Jean. She was simple, loving, wise, and kind. Jean, may we learn from you and may our daily actions emulate your giftedness!

Amie Beckman-Collier, former student

I had the good fortune of being one of Jean's students at St. Joseph Academy in the late 1960s and early 1970s. At the end of my first year at the academy, I was preparing my registration for sophomore year and was discussing class choices with my mother. She suggested that I take sewing. I told her that I wouldn't be doing that, but that I would be taking Communism instead because I had heard that Sister Jean Byrne was a fabulous teacher. I not only took Communism, but every other course she offered. I found that it was absolutely exhilarating to study with her. She quickly destroyed preconceptions and she engaged students in vastly widening their perspectives. I gained much knowledge about a variety of topics in social studies and history thanks to Jean.

But her greatest gift to me was the discovery of the joy of critical thinking. I've never lost the sense that engaging in the world of ideas is the greatest joy in life. Throughout my own 40-year career as a teacher, I tried to model that for my students, always with gratitude for Jean's example. My sewing skills aren't very good, but I like to think my critical thinking skills are fairly decent. If they are, it's thanks to Sister Jean Byrne.

Sister Josephine MacLellan and Isabel MacGillivray, cousins

To the Congregation of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, we offer our sincere sympathy on the passing of Sister Jean Byrne, your faithful member and friend.

My name is Sister Josephine MacLellan, a Sister of St. Martha, and I speak on behalf of myself and my sister, Isabel MacGillivray, last remaining first cousins of Sister Jean Byrne. We all grew up, 13 of us, in a small village called Grand Mira in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Jean's mother and our father were sister and brother and in earlier years when people moved away, visiting was not always possible because of distance or financial restraints. However, letters kept us in touch and our large family was delighted and proud when we learned that young Doreen was going to become a "nun."

Fast forward to the early 1970s, when through the kindness of Sister Mira Mosle and the BVM Congregation we were blessed with a visit of Sisters Jean and Mira. There was great joy in this first meeting of such an interesting, no-fuss cousin and her wonderful friend. From the beginning there was an ease in getting to know Jean. We knew we belonged to each other. We found in Jean a playfulness that was familiar to us. Another gift of family. Our father had died some years before but we remember the joy of our mother, Lizzie, as stories were told of years past so valued and remembered. Our mother knew Jean's mother when they were both young, so the stories told were many. Jean's visits were a great gift to our mother and we bless Jean and Mira for their many kindnesses to her. Jean and Mira met cousins by the dozens and always managed to hide any signs of being completely overwhelmed. We remember fondly these visits as our joy and love deepened each time and continued to be enriched to this day.

Thank you, thank you, Mira. We still have you. And thank you, sisters, for sharing with us the life of this honorable woman we celebrate today. We long to see her again, where we will all be home . . . and staying!

Diane Broderick, BVM Associate, former student

What does "Do your best" mean? What does "Love your life" mean? Those were always her words to me as a friend, teacher, and confidante. I have spent my life being a grateful recipient of her unconditional love and living up to those challenges.

As a teacher, students at St Joseph's Academy adored her. She inspired, listened, challenged, and laughed with us. She was "game," camping out by the fire with us on retreats, hosting "news nights" at SJA when major events happened. Creative in her teaching, she developed curriculum on so many topics: Asian studies, Communism—which required her own text book be written—and Black studies, long before its time. We flocked to her social studies classes. What I realize now is that she was teaching the core values of the BVMs. She made history a personal story in which we all had a responsibility

As a friend, she has been a joy. Her visits to me in Seattle and mine to her in Dubuque have been a time of sharing our lives, our journeys, our hopes. Jean has always been so open about her triumphs, heartbreaks, disappointments, and simple joys in life. She has inspired me to do the same with students, friends, and family. That takes courage. And she has it in plenty.

I became a BVM Associate because of her inspiration and those of BVMs Mira Mosle, Nancy McCarthy, Kathy Carr, and Lori Ritz. My greatest gratitude is that Mira made her a part of the celebration—Jean's cheers, my time with Jean. My life's purposes started with her encouragement. My next chapter will be because of her.

Lori Ritz, Director, Office of Life and Mission

Beautifully written, Diane. She truly touched your life. I will always remember her "AMEN" at the end of your BVM commitment ceremony—timely and only her voice!!!

Josette Kelly, BVM

Among my fondest memories of living with Jean at St. Bridget's in Chicago 60 years ago were regular weekend visits to her mother's apartment. Mrs. Byrne's Scottish recipes, tales of Prince Edward Island, and open-cage policy for her love birds were fun and welcoming. Jean inherited her mother's loving heart, quick wit, and no-nonsense manner.

Jean was a history scholar and brilliant teacher, as was evident in her later Archival Clips in *The BVM Center News*. In the late 1950s, she was a fascinating companion on our Saturday commutes to Mundelein College, free to clergy and religious in those days. We never transferred busses on Michigan Avenue without exploring a museum, institute, or library. It was a joy to have Jean as my BVM sister. Luckily, my Kelly sisters knew and loved her, too. I'll miss her cocking that eyebrow at me.

Patricia Donahoe, BVM

Sister Jean Byrne was a very brave woman. In the 1970s, she offered to teach me how to drive when I was in Des Moines caring for my mother. I had two lessons at the empty State Fairgrounds, then a drive out to Easter Lake Park. The route required using East 14th Street—a four-lane highway with no median! Always busy, it was the only connector on the east side between the north and south sides of the city over the river. Jean was always calm and relaxed while my insides were churning. As proof of her success as a driver education instructor, the following summer her student braved the Dan Ryan Expressway on her way to visit Mary Cramer, BVM in Washington, D.C. God bless SAINT Jean Byrne.

Joellen McCarthy, BVM

One of the benefits of having lived with Jean Byrne was to have been in close contact with someone I consider a master chef. Jean was a great cook and produced a meal with seemingly no effort. I remember her advice to not fret about quantities as long as I was not measuring yeast or baking powder or soda. Any other ingredient could be adapted. Her words provided me with a sense of freedom and added to my enjoyment of cooking.

Upon reflection, I see Jean's cooking philosophy flowed from how she lived. I experienced Jean as a "no fuss" person who lived a clear, focused life. I realize now that her gift of staying connected to what was essential was at the heart of how she lived. I am grateful for what she taught me, even beyond her cooking skills.

Ann DeNicolò, BVM

In 1991 the community was looking for sisters willing to create intentional communities for new members. Jean and Mira graciously accepted the challenge. They gave up their comfortable home in Dubuque for what I liked to call "Little Mount Carmel" on the bluff in East Dubuque.

Jean, who was semi-retired, was a great mentor. She generously shared all of her gifts from her culinary arts to helpful teaching tips for the new teacher. Jean, a lover of history, often shared stories from our BVM history, revealing her love of the community. Hospitality was a hallmark of the "Little Mount Carmel Community." The new member's family, friends, and other guests were always welcome at their table.

Jean was the heart of the home. She was genuine, humble, encouraging, and a woman of principle. I learned from watching her those few years what it means to "grow old gracefully." Thank you, dear friend, for your mentoring. Rest in peace now.

Sandra Rodemyer, BVM

I met Jean Byrne when I joined the Dowling High School faculty in the fall of 1974. We were friends for 46 years. There are way too many memories forged over those years to do them justice, so I'll share just a few.

In the Dowling faculty-staff areas, desks were somewhat arranged by department, so since Jean and I were in the Social Studies department, our desks were next to each other. I had plenty of time to study the mobile hanging over Jean's desk. She had made a mobile of WWI model airplanes. She was a woman of many talents! She was a voracious reader; a bird watcher, when she lived in East Dubuque. She tended plants on Rush Street., especially her beautiful African violets.

While she was at Dowling, Jean met Elaine Steinger, the president of the Jewish Federation. That began a long and fruitful relationship. As a result, I was introduced to Elaine and both Jean and I were invited to attend Elaine's daughter's Bat Mitzvah at their synagogue. And when Elaine brought Holocaust survivor Gerda Klein, to town, Jean and I had the honor of meeting her. Hanging out with Jean resulted in some wonderful experiences and adventures. One adventure was attending an Elderhostel with Jean in July of 1993: the year of the flood!

Off we went to Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minn. The themes of the courses were US History. We had a great time and the other participants were delightful. But one night we got into a bit of trouble. The entertainment was a Barbershop Concert. Well, neither Jean nor I cared for Barbershop music, so we took ourselves off to a lounge and watched the movie "Far and Away." After all, it was about Irish immigration to America. Who knew we would be missed? Who knew anyone would care? It turns out, we were and they did. We actually had to make an accounting of ourselves.

After we returned home from Minnesota, Jean went about packing for the move to East Dubuque. Since Mira was still working, I went out to help Jean pack. The moving company had provided boxes with packing paper inside. I was doing the packing, and when I reached into one of the boxes, I felt something heavy at the bottom of the box. It was a bottle of Spanish Sparkling Wine! We had a good laugh. Somebody somewhere was **not** going to celebrate their move with this bottle of bubbly. Neither were Jean and Mira. Jean told me to take out the bottle; there were more important things to pack. That was Jean: pack only what was necessary for the journey. That's what she did in life and even in death. She literally took nothing for her journey to Heaven. But she has left us with treasured memories . . . and a bottle of Spanish Champagne.

Maureen Patrice Fury, BVM

I lived with Jean in East Dubuque. My memories of Jean are her love of working in the Archives and teaching at Roberta Kuhn Center. She would share how she used the political cartoons in her classes. Her students were captured by her teaching. Most of all, Jean was a kind woman and often expressed her love and appreciation for the community.

Bob and Adelaide Nizzi, former colleague, Dowling High School, West Des Moines, Iowa

When Adelaide and I were informed of Sister Jean's transition to eternal life, it brought forth many BVM memories. About a year ago we had the opportunity to visit with Sister Jean at the Caritas Center in Dubuque. She still recalled the names of many of her former Dowling students and colleagues. Sister Jean was a premier history and social studies teacher. She also served as head of that department for a time.

The professional integrity and scholarship that Jean brought to Dowling was a positive example to all of us. When a frank and insightful opinion was needed, Jean's voice was clear and powerful. She was a wise, worthy adversary in any debate; a strong religious woman of respected opinion and depth. Sister Jean's teaching renown from St. Joseph's Academy preceded her. Like the entire BVM St. Joe's community, she brought an immeasurable grace, wisdom, and vast academic resource to the newly merged school in 1972.

It was a privilege and honor to have served on the faculty with her and all her BVM sisters. Dowling's academic reputation was greatly enhanced by Sister Jean Byrne's presence and dedication. She was a rare talent of spirituality and truth. Her presence at Dowling will long be remembered.

Dr. Jerry Deegan, Implementation Coordinator, Diocese of Des Moines, Iowa

I want to extend my sympathy to all the Sisters on the loss of one of their most beloved Sister, Jean. Her work over the years has touched many, but I am sure her years of retirement at the Motherhouse brought her close to every one of the Sisters.

I had the pleasure of working with Sister Jean during my first years as a teacher at Dowling Catholic High School in 1972. She was an excellent teacher and I worked to instill many of her skills and techniques into my teaching during the time we worked together.

Sister Jean loved her subject area and was passionate about getting her students to know and understand the importance of faith, history, government, and civics in their lives. I think she would be energized by the history we are making in 2020 and I am sure she would have a wonderful perspective to share. She was never afraid to share her thoughts and engage discussion, something her students loved about her as a teacher, but more importantly as a mentor.

Sister Jean left a legacy at Dowling Catholic. She set a standard of excellence in the classroom for others on the faculty and showed all faculty and students alike how to stand up for what you believe and trust in God to help you move forward in your beliefs.

I will keep Sister Jean and all of the BVM Sisters in my prayers on this special day for Sister Jean. She and all of you are to be thanked for all you and your order has done to make a difference in the lives of the many children you have encountered in the schools and communities where you have served. May God bless you all and may Sister Jean rest in peace.

Verne and Mary Gongol, West Des Moines, Iowa

Sister Jean was a wonderful lady who treated those of us on the staff at Dowling High School with dignity and respect. Although she was our department chairperson, she did not try to micromanage us or hold her position over us in any way. She treated us like adults and as equals despite the fact that she had many years of teaching experience beyond ours, but she was always there to lend a helping hand if requested. A fun factoid is that, had my family not moved from Chicago, she would have probably been my 8th grade teacher. She came to our wedding and we kept in touch at Christmas each year. The last time I saw her was at the Motherhouse in 2016. Although her body was failing her she still had a great smile and a cheerful personality. A special thanks to Sister Mira Mosle for keeping us updated on Sister Jean later in her life. Rest in peace, Sister Jean.

Judy Seaver-Chamat, instructor, Dowling Catholic High School, West Des Moines, Iowa

Sister Jean welcomed me to DCHS when I arrived in January of 1986. I was hired to teach Spanish. We had conversations about many things from nature to human nature. She told me she loved the rain as it energized her. We both agreed that, at the end of the day, we could lie down in the middle of a mess but in the morning we were renewed and could tackle anything.

Sister Jean even advised me on how to order my class folders. Having taught for 14 years already, I thought I had the folder situation under control but Sister Jean enlightened me. Her guidance has been with me every school year since. Sister Jean showed me that the folder for my first class should be yellow to represent the sun, the new day. The folder for the last class should be red for stop. Anything in between was up to me. Who knew? Sister Jean knew!

I often went to school on Saturday mornings to work and she was there working also. We worked on the original Apple computers. She was a no-nonsense colleague but always kind to me and offered great advice on many things.

After my father passed on July 1, 1990, I received a most meaningful note of sympathy from Sister Jean. Her note was written on one of the BVM sympathy note cards with the quote by Goethe, "Those who live in the Lord never see each other for the last time." That quote has been a staple in my life. I have since purchased some of these wonderful BVM notes and have shared this verse on every sympathy card or note that I write. This quote has carried me through personal loss and, with faith and fond memories, has kept me afloat.

I will always remember Sister Jean for the Goethe quote she shared with me. When I share it, I am frequently asked where I found that; Sister Jean is my answer! What a gift Sister Jean was to everyone! She will always be in my life; such a dear person to all!

Ron Gray, instructor, Dowling Catholic High School, West Des Moines, Iowa

I was truly saddened to hear of the passing of Sister Jean. I was a senior at the "new Dowling" in the fall of 1972 when Dowling and St. Joseph Academy merged. Sister Jean was part of that transition. I returned in the spring of 1978 to student teach at Dowling and was hired for the fall of 1978. Sister Jean was in the same department as myself--Social Studies. I fondly recall her passion for her students as well as her passion for the subjects she taught. In my early years teaching at Dowling Catholic, her desk was right behind my desk and we would occasionally have great conversations. I am completing my 43rd year of teaching (all at Dowling Catholic) and many times I reminisce about those early years with her at Dowling. May she rest in peace.

Dr. Jim Dowdle, former principal, Dowling Catholic High School

One of the first people I met as a new principal at Dowling was Sister Jean. We hit it off well and she struck me as a very good teacher. When I introduced the Advanced Placement program in US History, I assigned the course to her. She was very excited. I knew she knew the history content and would be diligent in delivering a "college level" class to our 11th graders. She didn't let me down. But little did I know she would make the deal of the century with me.

She made an appointment and told me, "You know, a year of history gets added every year and there's not enough time for me to do this well." She had a plan! After 15 minutes, she got me to agree to add 15 minutes to her class so she'd have time to do a good job. No teacher in the school could talk me into that! I still to this day don't know how she got me to agree, but the "extra time" for some AP courses continues to this day. I'm glad she did it—it's great for the students. Thank you, Sister Jean. Rest in Peace.

Nancy McCarthy, BVM

I first met Jean when living and teaching with her at St. Joseph Academy in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1968 for the final four years the school was open, followed by eight years at the new Dowling High School in West Des Moines. Those were very challenging years, to say the least. I remember how very much the students liked Jean's classes, and also how much those of us teachers who were 'younger' at that time really appreciated her support and joyful participation in our lives. Jean was very practical, but also very good at seeing a better way to do things. She was respected and loved by the whole faculty. I can still remember some of her words on 'how to deal with living in a house of 55 sisters' at St. Joseph's and how to successfully 'set up apartments' when we were at Dowling. I've appreciated following her great work for many years and always enjoyed visiting her here in Dubuque.

Diane Forster, BVM

I have some of the same memories and great gratitude to Jean as Nancy has expressed. I was a new teacher at SJA in Des Moines in 1969, and found Jean approachable, wise, and wonderful listener and a great support as I began. In addition, when we moved to West Des Moines, I recall two trips I needed to make that would involve several hours of driving. Without hesitation, Jean offered to go with me, and I was grateful not only for her help in driving, but even more for her wonderful company. Jean was also a wonderful cook—very knowledgeable and capable in the kitchen. I was fortunate to be able to call Jean to say, "This happened. Now what do I do?"

One day, a sequence of things was scheduled that couldn't be changed, and I was quite distressed at having had to miss what to me was an important part. Jean listened to my ache and tears, and said the magic words: "We understand." When I came to Dubuque in 1996, it was great comfort to me that Jean and Mira were already here. I again appreciated talking with Jean many times, and was always grateful for her support and reassurance.

Diane Brondyke, former director, BVM Office of Development

Sister Jean always had the most beautiful African violets when she volunteered in the BVM Archives. Every time I see an African violet, I think of her and smile.

Meredith Puls, former Colleague, St. Joseph Academy, Des Moines, Iowa

I was privileged to teach with Jean at St Joseph's Academy in Des Moines. She was a remarkable history teacher and a fount of engaging and perceptive conversation.

Crystal Luna, Mount Carmel Bluffs staff

Dear Jean, I want to thank you for the countless times you made me laugh and smile. I want to thank you for the joy and life you brought to this floor. I remember that my first day of work, I was so nervous and lost. Since day one, you were so patient with me, and to this day you helped me get better and learn. You were my favorite sister. I know I shouldn't have favorites, but it was so hard for you not to become mine. I will always cherish the conversations we had, even though they made no sense. I'm only 17, but no matter where life takes me, I will always remember you and keep you close to my heart. I got a new kitten on Sunday and was so excited to show you her, I'm so sad I didn't get the chance. I couldn't think of a name for her, but now "Taco" is the only name that seems appropriate. (*"Taco" was the name of the large stuffed cat that accompanied Jean most of the time.*) Love you forever.

Mary Thielman, alum, St. Joseph Academy, Des Moines, Iowa

Although I never had the opportunity to have Sister Jean for class, she made a significant impact in my life while attending St. Joseph Academy and working the switchboard in the convent after school. She challenged me to be my best and to honor God by using my talents to serve others. I thought of her often during my 37 years as an educator. Thank you, Sister Jean.

Terri Gosek, former student

What a wonderful teacher! She had a huge impact on my young life. I became so interested in history and politics because of her classes and later I earned my bachelor's in history and political science. Rest in peace. Job well done.

Kathy Scheil Pavlik, Class of 1970, St. Joseph Academy, Des Moines, Iowa

The best teacher I ever had. She taught beyond the book and made us think. Rest in peace, dearest Sister Jean.

Jean Sassatelli, former student

Sister Jean, what a brilliant and impactful educator, such an understanding and compassionate person! She was a woman of great personal strength and integrity. She shared her time, gifts, and love graciously. Sister Jean helped pull me and others out of a deep hole, inspired us to find purpose and meaning, and guided us to new possibilities! I loved and respected her! I am so grateful I had a chance to see and visit with her at Caritas Center in 2012. Remarkable lady. May she rest in peace!

Debbie O'Connor Schminkey, former student

Sister Jean was my favorite teacher. She made history come alive for me and I've been a history buff ever since. I loved her stories of her family and she was the first nun I heard use the word "damn." I've thought of her many times over the years. I should have reached out and thanked her in person for the impact she had on me. Thank you Sister, Rest in peace!

Sue Kammerude, Mount Carmel Bluffs staff

It always made my day when I walked into Sister's room early in the morning. I would say, "Good morning," and she would reply, "Good morning, Fish Face." It always made me chuckle no matter how many times I heard it! Love always, Jean.

Jo Clauer, Mount Carmel Bluffs staff

Always enjoyed her telling stories of living in Chicago with her mom and brother. Stories that praised her mom for all of her hard work.

Kat Finn, Mount Carmel Bluffs staff

It was a blessing to me when I'd go into her room and she would start singing, and telling us funny things. She was proud to be from Nova Scotia. God bless her.

Susan Bailey, Mount Carmel Bluffs staff

Jean was a wonderful, kind sister. She would sing to the staff, make jokes, and generally make our days brighter.

Mary Petesch, Mount Carmel Bluffs staff

Jean was a wonderful, nice sister. I loved her singing and storytelling. She loved her doughnuts on Saturdays and her two cats that she talked about a lot.

Kim Selker, Mount Carmel Bluffs staff

Jean, I love you so much even though you were difficult at times. You would say "Sorry," and "I love you."

Kim, second shift, Mount Carmel Bluffs staff

Jean, you are so much fun. You have a beautiful soul and smile. I will always remember when I called you the "Cat Lady," and you meowed at me. That was so cute. Love you always, Jean.

Lisa Knockel, third shift, Mount Carmel Bluffs staff

Jean, I was so blessed with taking care of you. You were awesome. I remember the time when you came down in the kitchen area and wanted to take my Stephen King book and I said, "Oh, that's too scary for you." And the time my sister, Patti Harkey, found a Word Search book in the breakroom and you asked if you could have it. My sister wasn't there at the time and I said, "Sure." When Patti came back she asked where her book went, and I started giggling, and said, "Jean Byrne took it." We had a good laugh. You were definitely a little spit-fire and I'm sure going to miss you.

Charalin Simon, Mount Carmel Bluffs staff

I was privileged to be taught a song by Jean from I John 4:16: "And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love and he that dwells in love dwells in God, and God in him." She had much fun singing the song clearly and loudly. I enjoyed singing with her too. Most often, she would sing "Amazing Grace." I look forward to singing with Jean in the presence of Jesus Christ. I thank God for getting to know Jean and all the sisters.

Katie Smith, Mount Carmel Bluffs staff

Jean Byrne was a troublemaker, but one who could always put a smile on your face. Jean never let you leave her room without letting you know you were loved, even when she would give us weird nicknames like "fish face." She gave me twice as many of kisses and hugs. She always told us how pretty we were. Jean will forever be loved by all of us and she will never be forgotten.

Rhonda A, Mount Carmel Bluffs staff

I loved the knowledge she had about history. Her laugh was contagious. She could always make you laugh.