



Sharing of Memories of Nicholas “Nic” Catrambone, BVM
Mary Frances Clarke Chapel, July 20, 2021

Jacquelyn Cramer, BVM

Although she worked throughout her life as a teacher and one-on-one consoler of those in trouble, in her 5 Wishes, where it asks how “I want to be remembered,” Nic wrote, “My years in Clarksdale, Miss., and Memphis, Tenn., were very important. The people taught me the importance of human dignity. I learned the importance of being a person of peace and justice, a follower of the nonviolent Jesus.”

What comes through in comments on Facebook from former students and coworkers is the primary impact of personal relationship in how Nic lived her life. Memphis friends had this to say:

Jan: You were here when I needed you and I pray I did the same for you.

Jerri: Nic has been a comfort, support and joy to everyone she has ever met.

Cari Ann: She was so warm and kind and just made you an immediate friend. And she was so proud of her church.

Tony Lis: I remember her laugh. A wonderful woman and lovely spirit.

Mrs. Shelton: Such a loving, sweet holy servant of the Lord

From Memphis Catholic students:

David Schmall: What a tremendous blessing she was to all of us graced by her laughter, presence, and love.

Catherine Wells: She was TNT in a small package.

In Clarksdale, where we lived and worked through the Civil Rights years in the Mississippi Delta, Nic was the math teacher for our 120 student high school, the choir director who took the high school choir on tour to several cities one year, the yearbook moderator and photographer, and senior homeroom teacher. It is the loving person her students remember.

Valda: Sister Nic, your time is near for you to do what you taught us to “sing” about for years: “Walk in the sunshine, quiet and free. Wake in the morning and live with a will. Welcome the evening. Find rest and be still.” Love you so much!

Gerald Dixon: A true abolitionist. Thanks for the dedication.

Lydia Spragin: Nic was very influential in my life and gave me a love for mathematics and photography. I enjoyed many a day at the convent with both Dumbo and Mable, Nic’s two cats. Her indomitable Eagle spirit soars even higher as she goes to be with the One to whom she dedicated her life and service.

Earl Gooden, a fellow teacher and parishioner: One of my dearest friends.

Ore Spragin: Remembering Sister Nic for the love she gave. She encouraged me to work on the yearbook, inspired me with her understanding of mathematics and yes, let me, and so many others, “set the clock.” Thank you, Sister Nic, for your consistent Christian love even when threatened by perpetrators of hate or misunderstood by those you sought to serve.

Martin Strong: Sister Nic made math an interesting subject. I think her style was what made it understandable.

Bill Downall: Sister Nic was a special, feisty force. She and the other IC nuns smashed some stereotypes for me.

Kenita: Sister Nic taught us to be proud of our blackness. We were “young, gifted, and Black.” Thanks too, for teaching me the *Fiddler on the Roof* songs, and “Lo How a Rose E'er Blooming.” I literally hum this every day. You will be forever in my heart.

Sylvia: I remember working on the yearbook, going through so many pictures and barely making the deadline to have it complete.

Debra: What a precious soul. She was good on the inside and that showed on the outside. My fondest memory of Sister Nic is the day I told her she was Black. Wow, did she get a kick out of that! She made my days at IC special.

Ethel Rosser: The last time I saw her was at Mrs. Woods' funeral. I asked if she remembered me and she replied, “Yes, Ethel.” Priceless moment!

Sister Teresa Shields: What an inspiring model of what a sister should be. When we first came to IC, we kept hearing about Sister Nic. I'm so privileged to have known her.

Johnny Newson: Thank you, Sister. Your IC children are doing well because of IC.

Barbara Brown: I can see her now directing heaven's choir.

Patricia O'Neal sums it up: Her spirit, joy of life, love of people and knowledge of God's works will be missed. Thank you!

Carol Cook, BVM

I first met Nic in 1967 when I went to Clarksdale, Miss. She was so in love with the people. Nic taught math at the Immaculate Conception High School. She was also the school photographer and the producer of the yearbook. Some years, a BVM music teacher in Memphis would spend a day at IC. Nic managed the choir the rest of the time and made sure that the spirituals were sung.

Nic collected tuition; the pastor paid the bills. He wanted his diocesan account to show a zero balance at the end of the year so sometimes in May we were told there was some money to spare. One year Nic learned that a truck would come from Memphis with pianos for sale. Nic decided to replace the old piano. That's when I discovered Nic's determination. Nic kept on bargaining over the price until it was agreed that it would be sold for the amount Nic wanted to pay. The sellers even agreed to deliver the piano and to remove the old one.

Justice was important to Nic and she worked for this in individual cases as well as general policy; she participated in a demonstration and encouraged the students who chose to join. Not a popular action in Mississippi in the early 1970s.

Her Italian family was a priority for Nic. As her health declined, she begged to move with them and talked to her sister many times a day. And now Nic, I rejoice with you as you relish your reunion with them and the God you so love. Missing you, loving you. Peace, my friend.

Katie Pfiffner, spiritual care minister, Mount Carmel Bluffs

When I came to Mount Carmel four years ago, Nic was someone I spent a lot of time with. About three years ago, she reached a stage in her dementia where she was not only very aware that her brain was not working like it used to, but that it was happening more and more often. So while I would be visiting with her she would be in the middle of telling me a story about her family or her years in the South and the words would just disappear. Each time this happened she would close her eyes, rub her forehead with her fingertips for a moment, look over at me, and using those expressive Italian hands, she would say, “Whatta ya' gonna do? It is what it is.” In these moments that phrase was not cliché and she was not being dismissive of what was happening to her. She was modeling for

me over and over in a profound way acceptance, letting go, and truly allowing the moment to be what it is. Nic, thank you for being my friend and thank you especially for teaching me so much. I will miss you.

Val Belmonte, Niece

Sometimes the strongest women are the ones who love beyond all faults, cry behind closed doors, and fight battles that no one knows about. Sister Nic–Auntie Rita—a remarkable women and special Aunt. Love you.

Nancy McCarthy, BVM

Most of my memories of Nic are from stories I heard from Carol Cook. But I do remember the first time I met her –at SOA (School of the Americas) one year when she was a “peace keeper” on the stage during the presentations throughout the day. She was such a *strong* person that day. I so appreciated her commitment to justice.

My personal experience happened when I was teaching in the St. Callistus School in Chicago (where Nic attended grade school). Once again, it was thanks to Carol Cook that I had this opportunity. Carol told me about a monument to the Catrambone family located in a very small city park near the school, so I decided to take my students to visit it one day–sort of a field trip. We found it only a block from the school. It's a beautiful monument to the 75 Catrambones who had settled in that neighborhood. Carol told me Nic had been asked to lead a prayer at the time when the monument was dedicated. My students were *very* impressed with the fact that I actually *knew* one of those Catrambones, and that she was also a BVM. I took advantage of the chance to tell them about some of the social justice events we had been involved in. I've always been grateful to Nic for inspiring me to continue to work for justice. Thank you, Nic, for *all* that you are.

Margaret Molloy Nelle, Omaha

A sweet memory of Nic: In 1968 I spent the summer at Clarksdale and learned the meaning of dedication, commitment, and total service to the cause of social justice while living day to day with Sister Nic. I am still unpacking what I learned that wonderful summer. Thanks to you, Nic.

Angele Lutgen, BVM

I first met Nic Catrambone in the mid-1970s when I went with Sisters Madalyn Hogan and Jean Hayen to give service at Immaculate Conception School in Clarksdale, Miss. We taught school in the morning and did manual labor in the afternoon.

Nic seemed to be responsible for entertaining us volunteers. On the 4th of July, she set up a record player in the hallway near our bedrooms and at a very early hour blasted us with "Oh What a Beautiful Morning." Later that morning she had games planned outside to keep us entertained. She was lots of fun and introduced us to life in the South!

I recall she enlisted some of her high school boys to help lay sidewalk along a stretch of the walkway by the elementary school. That project was a big help as Mississippi can be rainy and muddy.

Nic had a positive influence on the three of us as we returned the next summer to teach and labor again. I went back for six years of full-time teaching after that. Thank you, Nic, for your warmth, humor and love of the people of the South that you shared with me!

Mary Martens, BVM

In the mid-seventies, I visited the local BVM community for several days in Clarksdale, Mississippi where Nic taught. Even that early in her ministry, and for all the many years thereafter, she was loved and respected by students and parents and the Black community, which she embraced wholeheartedly with equal love and respect.

During my time there, Nic's schedule at Immaculate Conception High School included Algebra I and II, Geometry, Business and Consumer Math, General Math, and Choir. In addition she was a member of the school's

administrative team. As if that didn't keep her sufficiently busy, she took students on school trips. Early on in the segregated South, those trips necessitated careful planning to include rest stops that would accommodate "colored people" as well as "whites only."

One of Nic's tangible legacies was an annual yearbook she helped students produce. Each was replete with photos and text memorializing the school year. When she arrived at Mount Carmel, one of her boxes contained a bookshelf full of those yearbooks, which she enjoyed sharing during visits from BVMs and friends, especially the one that had been dedicated to her.

It is Nic's loving relationships with generations of students she mentored in Clarksdale that are her living legacy today.

Lauranne Schmit

I was fortunate enough to live and work with Nic in Clarksdale for four years. We became instant friends and our friendship has lasted a lifetime. Nic was fun-loving and always cheated at cards so much so that no one would play with her. She was humble and self-effacing, always putting the needs of others before her own. She had two cats, Mable and Dumbo, who she treasured but, although it almost broke her heart, she gave them up because another sister was allergic to cats.

Nic spent her entire life fighting for social justice. She worked hard to give the IC kids the best possible education to enable them to not only succeed in life, but to leave their personal mark in the world. Her heart was rooted in the Black community where she felt totally at home. Her fight for justice never diminished.

Her final mission was in Memphis where she again became totally engrossed in the Black community there. Due to health issues, Nic had to leave her beloved Memphis community and move to Mount Carmel. That was the hardest thing she ever had to do in her life. She mourned the loss of the familiar but did her best to love and cherish her sisters and the employees at Mount Carmel. She said that although she couldn't remember anyone's name, she always greeted everyone and wanted to put a smile on their face. She left a lasting impression on all the sisters and the students she worked with throughout her life as a BVM. Nic has left her footprints on our hearts and we have been enriched by her presence.

Immaculate Conception High School, Class of 1981

As I often told Sister Nic, because of her teaching and caring we are better citizens today! The Immaculate Conception High School Class of 1981 sends their deepest condolences to the family and friends of Sister Nicholas. Our hearts are sad that she is no longer physically on earth with us, but we will always carry her in our hearts! May the God of peace comfort you and us in these trying times. Thanking God for a life well lived, a race well run! The Lord truly blessed Sister Nic by allowing her 85 years on this earth and she changed many lives!

Lanita Marie Ford Davis

Dear family of Sister Nicholas Catrambone, we the Eugene "Bubba" and Cleotha (Hollingsworth) Ford Family want you to know that we are thinking of you as you remember the love, as you mourn the loss, and as you celebrate the life of an amazing person.

We thank God for allowing Sister Nic to be a part of our lives for so many years here in Clarksdale, Miss. Her fun teaching methods will never be forgotten. Sister Nic lives on through the many students she taught and the many co-workers she labored with.

The Ford family is forever grateful for having Sister Nic as a part of our family. She taught all five of us—Ronnie, Larry, Marvin, Beverly, and me! She taught our cousins, the Hollingsworths—Shirley, Mildred, Kenneth, Carol, and Janet, and other cousins—Annie Ruth, Carolyn, Andrew, Anthony, and Edward. We all send love to the Catrambone family and all BVMs.

Saint Turner

Sister Nic had a presence at IC for 14 years. She came to us like a fish out of water. Sister told me that she was born and raised in Chicago, but she grew up in Mississippi. She loved "the kids." She said, "I learned more from you all than you can ever imagine." She was proud of us and we were proud of her.

There are so many stories to be told about Sister Nic. She was serious, funny, and aggressive. She was a teacher in every sense of the word. Sister Nic put our school choir together when she could not read music, but she knew how we were supposed to sound. She was our only school's photographer for as long as I can remember. Sister Nic made us believe in ourselves. She made it happen at Immaculate Conception in Clarksdale, Miss. No job was too big or too small for Nic. She did it all. We will always remember her. Her work was done well.

Mike O'Neal

Sister Nic, my beloved geometry teacher and so much more at Immaculate Conception High School in Clarksdale, Miss. She changed the life trajectory of many, many young Black students in the apartheid Mississippi Delta, some of whom ended up in places like Columbia University, Dartmouth, Phillips Exeter Academy, Washington University, to name just a few of the more prestigious educational institutions. She was an earth angel, a gift from God, an Immaculate Conception! Rest peacefully in heaven, Nic.

Peggy Buckman

Sister Nic lived next door to me in Memphis. It was a great neighborhood. We looked after each other, we ate together, and we celebrated together. One of my favorite memories of Nic was one Halloween. We all dressed up, set up a table in my driveway, had an apple bobbing contest, and gave out candy to the kids from all neighborhoods. For the older kids without costumes, we asked them to sing or dance for candy. We heard a lot of renditions of "Happy Birthday!" Nic's costume that night was a simple white sweatshirt and in big red letters, it read, "I'm all Poped out."

We loved Sister Nic for her warmth, her open heart and her wicked sense of humor. So proud to have known her.

Martin Jellinek, Memphis, Tenn.

We worked together as ministers in the Shelby County Correctional facility in Memphis. This was toward the end of her time here. I can honestly say that she was much beloved by all of the inmates and well as her co-ministers. Against jail rules, she hugged every inmate as they came in and said a brief blessing over them. She shared openly about her time in Clarksdale and pulled on that experience to enliven Scripture and make it relevant to the inmates. It deeply saddened her when she was no longer able to share in this ministry due to her failing memory and disorientation. I worked with her in her last months in Memphis, keeping her books updated and in good standing with the motherhouse. She accepted this help begrudgingly since it frustrated her that she was no longer able to do this work, but she also accepted the change in her life with grace. I will always remember her as a minister of Christ who blessed my life in deep and meaningful ways.

Linda Raiteri

I have a great admiration for Sister Nic. Her compassion, hard work, and generous spirit. We in the Memphis area treasure the time she was here with us. Surely she is wrapped in the Peace of Christ.

Carol Spiegel, BVM

Nic was passionate about ministry and had an amazing spirit. One time I had the privilege of visiting a prison with her. The love and respect between Nic and those who were imprisoned was profound. Nic also ministered through her illness. Here is a reflection by a dear friend of mine.

Claudith Washington

My name is Claudith Washington and I met Sister Carol Spiegel when we taught together in Minneapolis. In 2007, I was diagnosed with scleroderma at Mayo Clinic and was given three to five years to live. Carol asked Sister Nic to contact me because I was both ill and dejected; she believed I would find hope in speaking with her. To my amazement, Sister Nic had a strong voice, filled with life and energy! She spoke directly to what she was able to do, and not on the disease. My recall of that discussion was that she had remained active by going to exercise regularly, every week, and she continued to serve food regularly to people she enjoyed very much. She acknowledged that she had slowed down! I genuinely felt exhausted, wondering how she could find such energy when I was all but sidelined with the onset of the disease. That conversation inspired me with hope and determination that I could still love and serve other people, too. I thought of her with great love and admiration and felt God's intervention in my life. I am now 75, active, 13 years later, because of her fighting spirit. Thank you, Sister Carol. Rest in God's peace, dear Sister Nic, and thank you! I love you!

Mary Ann Fremgen

I first met Nic when I was in high school and she was teaching at Mary Queen of Heaven school in Cicero, Ill. When I moved to Dubuque, I periodically had dinner with her and the "Cicero crew." When I began visiting Mount Carmel with my dog Bronx, Nic became a regular. We would meet in the turret room on the 4th floor of the Caritas Center so it was more quiet. She enjoyed petting Bronx and talking about the people from the South. How dear they all were to her heart. The long walk from her room to the turret room became difficult for her so we met in her bedroom. Despite her memory loss, one day she said to me, "Didn't we use to meet in a bigger room?" My dog had helped her develop a new memory. When we began visiting at the Gables at Mount Carmel Bluffs, I was happy and sad to see Nic. Bronx licked her hand as usual and she smiled. Dear Nic, may you rest in peace with all the pets you have known. God love you!

Jerri Veltri, friend

There are not enough words to explain the impact Sister Nic had on my life and the multitude of other's lives. Nic was a rare human being and in addition had an amazing sense of humor. Nic was the first to lend a healing and helping hand in times of hurt and sorrow. She also was known to use four-letter words as she raised hell against any who caused deliberate harm. I love you and miss you, Sister Nic, always. Thank you for all you have done.

Jill Cramer Groth, friend

Sometimes, even though we know it's coming, the reality is just as hard. Sister Nic, a favorite in our family, was informally adopted and named "Janica," to fit in our "J" naming convention. I know we gave her an "A" middle name but just can't remember it. Anyway, Nic became our 8th sister. That's how we loved her. Jackie and Nic would frequently stop at my home in Lake Saint Louis en route to or from Mount Carmel. How I enjoyed those short but wonderful stays. Nic was a joy, always smiling. May she make all the souls in heaven smile and laugh with her stories. We will see you again one day, Nic.

Walter Banks, Jr.

Sister Mary Nic will be missed. She was truly a dedicated worker for the Lord. I am glad our paths crossed in this life.

Susan E. Gost, friend

So blessed to have been able to watch the remembrances and the Holy Mass for Sister Nic. She was truly a remarkable servant for the Lord. May her memory and good works continue to be a blessing for those she touched.