



Sharing of Memories of Judith Sheahan, BVM (St. Judith)

Mary Frances Clarke Chapel, July 15, 2022

Kate Sheahan Crawford, Niece

It is impossible to remember my childhood without Aunt Mary in it. Growing up, she would visit my family every summer. We'd go sightseeing in the San Francisco Bay Area, swim in our backyard pool, and have loads of fun. One year Aunt Mary and her friend Ginny (Virginia McDermott) took a class at San Francisco State, and we got to visit with them all summer long. In 1983 Aunt Mary and I took a two-week trip to Ireland together. She was with me when I visited the place where I was born, my first trip back to Ireland since I left as a toddler. What an adventure! As an adult, my husband and I enjoyed visiting Aunt Mary and Sister Clemenza (Finney) in West Des Moines. I'm so grateful we were able to share those moments together. She was a loving aunt to us both and a loving great aunt to our daughter. Thank you all for taking such wonderful care of my aunt.

Sister Jude Fitzpatrick, CHM

Little did Sister Judith and I know in 1970 when we were both assigned for the first time to Des Moines, that that coincidence would be the beginning of a now 50+ year relationship. She was the new principal of St. Joseph Academy and I the new principal at St. Theresa School.

Judith's two years at the Academy were marked by the inevitability of that beloved school closing as construction on the "new" Dowling Catholic High School was being completed. The new co-ed school would combine the boys of the "old" Dowling and the girls of the Academy into the student body of the new school. Although I was not directly involved at the Academy, there was no doubt that there was great sadness among many that their beloved school would be closing. Looking back, there was abundant wisdom in the appointment of Judith as the principal during these trying years. One of the enduring qualities of Judith's leadership was her calm, measured approach, and her readiness to walk with folks through even the most trying of situations. While being able to understand the emotions arising out of loss, she was able to help the community look beyond the loss to the potential in the life of the new Dowling.

When the new school opened, Judith served as assistant principal and curriculum director for twelve years. In 1984, I was able to lure her away from Dowling to serve on our diocesan schools office staff as schools coordinator, a role she held until 1998. In that capacity, she was heavily involved in curriculum direction and staff development. Her experience and expertise in those areas were tremendous assets but, more important, were the relationships she shared with our school administrators as they navigated the challenges they faced. On Wednesday evening I had dinner with several of them now retired. I asked them if they remembered Judith and the response was "Who could ever forget Judith?" They were recalling how they could always count on her to be there and walk with them through the "fires". There was no doubt that her calm, steady support was most reassuring to them then and had never been forgotten.

I have focused on the gifts of Judith's professional leadership. Surely, her ministry over twenty-eight years was an absolute gift to the Diocese of Des Moines and one which Bishop Joensen recognized in his message to priests, deacons, women religious and staff about her death. But Judith's presence in my life as friend was a gift beyond measure and continued well beyond the years we worked together. How blessed I have been! I carry with me an adaptation of a chapter from the Book of Proverbs which serves as a challenge for me, but I believe it also

captures so many of the gifts Judith shared with all of us. Permit me to paraphrase a few of those lines: “Judith was a valiant woman; her roots were firmly planted. The kingdom was within; her heart, treasure filled. Judith was a joyful woman for whom laughter was no stranger. Judith was a sharing woman who, with arms outstretched, gave her gifts and treasures to those both near and far.”

We indeed celebrate the gift of your life, Judith. May you now experience the fullness of new life with your God.

Sister Katheryn Lawlor, BVM

When I was writing the book *From There to Here*, the history of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary from 1942-1972, I interviewed Judith Sheahan, Gabriel Hagerty, Virginia McCaffrey. They were from the Set of 1942. The book begins Chapter 1 with their stories from that interview.

The twenty-seven young women who traveled to Mount Carmel on September 8, 1942, carried with them ration books for sugar and meat which were required even for those entering the convent. They had learned to bring their ration stamps wherever they went because the austerities caused by World War II followed those of the Great Depression. The hardships they had endured during their youth had caused them to mature beyond their years. As children they knew what it was to lose their homes and move into smaller quarters, sometimes sharing these with relatives. They knew that corn could be burned instead of coal for heat to save money. Their relatives were experts at altering hand-me-down clothing for them to wear. One member of the “Set of 1942” had witnessed her father traveling miles by horse and wagon to sell oats for eleven cents a bushel. They never forgot the shock their parents suffered when banks closed and they learned their life savings were gone. . . Deeply etched in their minds, however, were the pictures of their mothers who struggled to keep families together despite the sorrows and the griefs of the Depression and the War.

Sister Terese Shinnors, BVM

Judith and I lived and taught together at St. Anthony Grade School in Casper, Wyo., in the 1950s. Life there was challenging and gave me many opportunities to appreciate Judith's many wonderful qualities. Her wisdom and perspective were such gifts to that community and her sense of humor and her gift for friendship are among my favorite memories. I am grateful for having had Judith in my life.

Sister Mary McCauley, BVM

Although I had heard about Judith and her exemplary work in the field of education, I really did not come to know her until 1999 when we very wisely invited her to leave Des Moines and come to Dubuque to serve as the Administrative Assistant to the Officers of the Congregation. She valiantly said YES to our request and served in this role for a number of years.

Judith responded to our every request in a very professional, sensitive, efficient, and creative manner. Besides the fact that she was a joy to work with I shall always remember Judith for the very meaningful and thought-provoking prayer services that she created. We could say “Judith, we need a prayer or reflection with a water theme. . . We need something that focuses on women. . . We need something that raises up the needs of our immigrants and refugees. . . We need that something that focuses on our core values.” Whatever it was Judith responded.

My memories of Judith are warm, and my heart is grateful for having known and worked with Judith. I also hold in my heart great admiration for how she lived her final years. Her presence in front of the first floor in front of the fireplace is embedded in my memory. Her years of retirement and illness were not easy as Judith was weak and frail and could no longer do all that she desired, but through it all she continued to be a most gracious, warm, and hospitable person. We all love Judith and will be deeply indebted to her forever. Thank you, Judith.

Virginia McDermott, Friend & Former BVM

When I arrived at St. Edmond's in Fort Dodge in 1966, preparations were underway to celebrate Sister Judith's silver jubilee – her 25th year of religious life. I was 24. I'm sure the irony is not lost. The next youngest, Sister Lurana Cranny, 16 years older than I and the superior, was now the second youngest person and Judy, as I came to call her and love her, was the third youngest.

It was a time of great change in BVM community life and the three of us forged a friendship, because of, or perhaps despite of those changes. We once challenged the salespeople at Younkers when the three of us arrived, shopping for clothing just after the option to lay aside the habit occurred. Picture us, one petite, one regular, and one plus-size shopping in the women's department finding clothes for each other. We were convinced that the salesclerks suspected we were a gang of thieves!

But our friendship went deeper and was richer than that. Over the years, we spent holidays together, talked regularly, and visited back and forth. I got to know Judy's family as she did mine.

When Rana (Lurana) came to Marian Hall, Judith was a faithful friend. When I came to Dubuque, we hung out together. Judy and I were together when Rana died. When Judy required greater assistance, we still visited and played a longtime favorite game – Yahtzee. She would ask about my parents as though they were still part of our living circle. It was how I knew though that she still remembered me.

As I told Judy last Saturday in a final phone call (thanks Sister Irene Lukefahr for making it possible), she was in what the Irish call a "thin place." I imagine she is still there. Judy, love you always.

Sister Judy Callahan, BVM

I'm sorry that I didn't have more opportunities to get to know Judith. My only real experience with her was when she was doing the Mary Frances Clarke scholarships/grants, of which I had submitted quite a few applications. What impressed me most about her during that experience was her very intense and great appreciation for detail. She wanted to know exactly how to put things. However, if you have ever worked with immigrants and paperwork, the name changes, the last name changes, the double last names are confusing. The phone numbers change or are disconnected. Addresses change. There are all these flexible things that happen within one year. She was so creative, understanding and patient with all of that. Even as they wrote their own reasons for needing a grant, she was appreciative of the simplest information, but accepted the reality of their situations. I was so impressed with her wonderful gift

Sister Irene Lukefahr, BVM

When Judith served as Administrator Assistance, one of her responsibilities was to oversee the Ministry Partnership Grants. During that time, Sister Laurene Brady and I were just beginning our attempts to build a library in Ghana. Judith always encouraged us to "THINK BIG". Because of Judith's encouragement, and the generosity of the Congregation and so many others, the library became a reality. Eleven years later, it is still open!

Marilyn (Broderick) & Don Duwelius, Des Moines, Iowa

It is always with happiness that we think of Judith. Heaven will be an even better place with her presence. Judith was a dear friend of my sister, Sister Carola Broderick. She was such a lady, that sweet smile, a book at her bedside in later years, and an accomplished teacher and administrator at St. Joseph Academy and Dowling Catholic in Des Moines. Over the years we've shared lots of fun times together – family dinners, a few Dowling football games along with Sister Clemenza (Finney), and their shared apartment with Sisters Mira (Mosle) and Jean (Bryne) when the St. Joseph Academy sisters moved to West Des Moines and the new (post-merger) Dowling. Those sisters are a dear part of our family's history and we have loved every one of them. We're so appreciative of the BVM community and what they have meant in our lives.

Father John Bertogli, Des Moines, Iowa

I am a retired priest of the Des Moines diocese. My friendship with Sister Judith began in 1977 while an associate pastor at Sacred Heart parish in West Des Moines where many of the BVM sisters who ministered at Dowling Catholic High School were involved. When I came to teach at Dowling in August 1980, Judith was the first to greet and welcome me with her Irish hospitality. She was a most available, capable, and pastoral administrator. She was a gentle, yet strong, leader who was not afraid to speak her mind and heart. She was a humble servant who had a special concern for students and families who struggled financially to attend Dowling. She would bring some of those pastoral concerns to me for my advisement and support as to how we could best assist them.

Sister Judith had the professional responsibility to observe my classroom teaching as was done with faculty members. In interacting with the students and myself she shared with that class of senior theology students her favorite prayer. Her written observation of the class experience was detailed and affirming, along with suggested comments for future classroom improvements. I was a young novice teacher who took Sister Judith's words to heart. She told me it was obvious to her I had a vocation as a teacher within my religious vocation!

Sister Judith would monitor students for me in the Dowling chapel while I offered the sacrament of penance to them before Christmas and Easter. She greatly supported me in offering these experiences to the students. She said students will have a lifetime to learn about the faith. Our mission is to help the students grow in their experiences of faith so to want to expand knowledge of it. Sister Judith was rooted in the paschal mystery of Jesus, not just the orthodoxy of the catechism. She had a strong commitment to ensure girls at the school were given as much opportunity as were the boys at every level of their education. Her compassionate heart ruled God's mercy and love over moral imperatives.

We had many informal visits during our Dowling years. We continued to keep in contact by letters and seasonal cards until her health would not allow the penmanship to continue. Sister Judith helped an inexperienced young curate grow with an appreciation of the church's mission to teach. She shared with me how glad she was to know I became the canonical administrator of our inner-city Holy Family school which was for many years Visitation school staffed by the BVM sisters. I thank the Lord for the encouragement and spiritual support Sister Judith offered me and so many others in her 98 years of life on earth. May she experience the peace, joy, light, and life of the Risen Lord as she generously shared with all of us.

Aimee Beckmann-Collier, Former Student & Colleague, Des Moines, Iowa

I'm so glad she is at peace, although it is bittersweet to realize that the last of that whole generation of fabulous women who were my mentors is gone. I had the privilege of knowing Judith both as a student at the (St. Joseph) Academy and a faculty member at Dowling. In each circumstance I appreciated her support, honesty, insight, and fierce dedication to my own growth and that of all other members of those communities, as well as the institutions as a whole. I became a better person and teacher because of Judith, and I am grateful for her influence in my life.

Michele Whitty, Friend, Des Moines, Iowa

I considered Judith my friend and confidant in prayer. Several times over the years I confided in her to pray for intentions. She listened in earnest and gave assurances she would pray. I trusted her and had great confidence in her promises.

Judith was a tremendous observer of people and situations. A great example of an individual that was quietly observing, listening, and gathering perspectives before she would speak or react. When she did respond her point of view was so grounded and thoughtful.

We had a shared interest in Notre Dame because she lived vicariously through her nephew's experiences there and I through my son's. She was crazy about her Irish family, and we were both lucky enough to be from families where we believed in a bit of luck of the Irish and shenanigans.

I marveled at Judith's perspectives on women, justice, and environmental issues. She had a bright inquisitive mind, and I admired her capabilities as a professional in her role at St Joseph Academy and at Dowling Catholic. Quick visits to the administration office to connect with her were always met with a bright smile.

Heaven gained a faithful citizen this past Monday morning. I will continue to ask prayer favors from her. In absence of her physical presence in my life, I will feel her spiritual presence just over my shoulder at times when I need a lift.

Sister Nancy McCarthy, BVM

I first met Judith when she arrived to be the last principal at St. Joseph Academy in Des Moines. She was a wonderful administrator who knew how to inspire and motivate a faculty who would have to deal with the closing of a BVM school. Having come from a brand-new school (Carmel HS) it was quite a contrast for me to participate in a closing. This was also the year of TOPA so those of us who chose to stay in Des Moines and teach at the newly merged Dowling High School, we had to apply for a position for the first time in our BVM experience.

Judith chose to stay at Dowling and moved to the apartment complex with the rest of us. At first Judith lived in her own apartment but later, when a space opened in our apartment, she joined Clemenza Finney, Diane Forster and me. For several years we shared living and working experiences, a challenging experience at times. However, as vice principal at Dowling, Judith showed the same administrative skills when she observed in our classroom as we saw at the Academy and always managed to give truly constructive criticism.

Judith was a big sports fan, which also helped community spirit. After I left Dowling in 1980, to begin deaf education, she kept in touch with me and alerted me to many BVM opportunities, since I was living with other communities at that time. I really appreciated her genuine interest in my new ministry and enjoyed reuniting with her at region meetings. When Judith moved to Dubuque, the same connections continued. I was always pleasantly surprised that she remembered so much from our past relationship. After I moved to Mount Carmel, I was privileged to participate in the yearly birthday celebrations that Mira organized for Judith – another valued connection. Thank you, Judith, for all the valuable lessons you taught me.

Dr. Michael J. Coury, Former Colleague

Sister Judith was a great educator and, more importantly, a wonderful person. She was a trusted and valued colleague when I was privileged to serve with her at Dowling Catholic High School in West Des Moines, Iowa (1980-87). I was the principal, and she was the assistant principal, aka my right arm. May her soul and all the souls of the faithful departed rest in peace.

Most Rev. William M. Joensen, Bishop, Diocese of Des Moines

With trust in God's compassion and enduring love, I inform/remind you of the death of Sister Judith Sheahan, BVM, on July 11.

Sister Judith served in Des Moines for 28 years. Her initial role was as principal of St. Joseph Academy from 1970-1972. When the "new Dowling" opened in 1972, she served as vice-principal for the next twelve years. In 1984, she joined the Diocesan Schools Office staff as our coordinator of schools and served in that capacity until 1998.

Please remember this wise and holy virgin who kept her lamp trimmed and lit in her service of God's flock in the Diocese and beyond. We lift her up, along with all her family, friends, and the members of her spiritual family, the BVMs, in our praying of the Liturgy of the Hours and at Mass. May she enjoy a servant's reward.

+Eternal rest grant unto Sr. Judith, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon her. May she rest in peace with the Blessed Mother, Sister Mary Frances Clarke, and all God's friends.