



Sharing of Memories of Edna Mae (Gretchen) Knudsen, BVM

Mary Frances Clarke Chapel, Feb. 6, 2026

Sister Frances Donnelly, BVM

My story and Edna's story is about being volunteers at the Minnesota Zoo. My blue jacket is the exact color of our zoo uniforms. When Edna first came to Minnesota, she adjusted well. She sought out a new cluster, a new living situation, new work, and new fun things to do. My initial encounter with her was when I was beginning a new sabbatical year. One of the things I always dreamt of doing was volunteering at the Minnesota Zoo. It was born in 1978. For all these years until up to today I thought, "Someday, someday when I grow up maybe I can volunteer at the zoo. I told Edna that and she said, "How do I get to do that?" For six Saturdays, we went to "Zoo School." We really had to work to learn so much stuff in order to be certified to handle some animals. Even though we rarely worked the same day, there were opportunities to observe Edna at work. If there were little people around, she was just in her glory. I would enjoy the parents. If we were holding a snake, the little ones couldn't wait to touch the snake. Meanwhile, their 6'5" father was standing behind them petrified. I liked giving those guys a bad time.

She was, without a doubt, a go-to person. If I needed help, I asked Edna. "How do I hold that chinchilla?" "Like this," she would say. "And you put their legs through your fingers to secure it and it can't jump out. Then people can come and pet it." She showed me how to hold a boa constrictor. The head up in one hand and its body across my body. We sat on bar stools, and the boa would wrap his leg around my leg. If I tried to get up, I was dragging a stool. She was skilled with the iguana. Trust me, that was no easy tasks. They were big animals with great big claws and very heavy. Edna would open the cage and take it out like taking out a kitten. My favorite animal was a small, blue-tongue skink.

She also had a bit of a cottage industry going – the care and feeding of animals for the BVMs and associates as well as friends and coworkers. She would take care of any animal in any setting, including the archbishop's golden retrievers whom she loved. For us, she never let us down. Whether it was a weekend trip or a vacation she always was available to stay with our critters. She loved having our house and the animals to herself. It was her own little retreat from the world. We missed her so much when she moved here, but not just because she cared for our pets. Her presence was such a give to us all. She was one of the kindest, most generous people I have ever known. She's our pray-er, so I have expectations she will continue the job.

Edna, you have a whole new perspective of God's creation. Enjoy it. Treasure it. You deserve the reward.

Lucille "Lucy" Knudsen Chapman, Sister

Edna was quite an adventurous person. She wanted to take a tour down the Grand Canyon, but she didn't have the funds. She gathered used newspapers from businesses and friends. She would sell

them by the pound until she had enough money, at that time \$200, to take her trip down the Grand Canyon. She also wanted to fly in a glider plane. I don't know why. She was successful in saving the money and got her ride. She just really loved life. I want to thank all these lovely sisters here for taking good care of my sister.

Maryln Quinlan Balaban, Former BVM

I entered the postulate with Edna. At one point we were asked to introduce ourselves, including where we were from. I can't remember the town, but she said the town manufactures barbwire so that it always had something to fall back on.

Julia Consella, Mount Carmel Terrace Resident

Two winters ago, I met Edna for the first time. I didn't know her very well, but I did know her a little bit. I'll never forget the first time I saw her. I saw this little person in the Atrium. She used to walk around the building with her walker. She had her face plastered against a window at the front entrance and looking up. When you see people looking up, you tend to think, "What is she looking at?" I was so curious that I walked over to her and said, "What are you looking at?" There was an enormous, from the roof almost all the way two floors down, icicle. It was huge! She would come every day to see its movement, waiting for it to crash down. Now and then, I would pass through the Atrium and she would be there. I got to know her a little bit. She had a squirrel shirt that she just loved. She had a fascination with squirrels. Everyone has been sharing her love of nature. She had an awe and wonder about all of it. I am so happy to have known her for this short, little time. I will miss her.

Sister Carol Spiegel, BVM

Edna was a great neighbor. In St. Paul, Mary Maas and I lived in the same apartment complex as Edna. She tended the stairway landing between us. Invariably, there was an assortment of plants, often with flowers. She made the beauty of nature accessible to us, just as she did here.

Edna was fun to be with. When we went walking, she was our teacher. For example, she was fond of watching the migration of sandhill cranes and directed us to some fields in Wisconsin where we could see them.

Edna knew how to be quiet, and she told us one time how she had shared this with some very young children that she was teaching. They were on a field trip, and the children were wound up. Before they got on the bus to head home, Edna asked them to sit down and be as quiet as possible. Then they got on the bus. A few days later, one of the boys asked if they could do that same thing in school.

Edna's love of nature was a spirituality that enriched her and the rest of us. Thank you, Edna.

Sister Karen Conover, BVM

I didn't know Edna until I moved here a little over ten years ago to work in support services. Somewhere along the line, we were aware of changing technology. Many people were wondering what to do with their cameras that were older. Edna was one of those people who came to me and said, "I have these and I don't know what to do with them. I think there might be some photos on the memory cards. Whatever is there, you can have." When I put those little cards into my reader, I was amazed at the breadth of beautiful scenes, particularly of fall leaves. It was magnificent. I was so grateful for the gift and told her. She just said, "That's OK. They are in my mind."

Sister Mary Frances Reis, BVM

One evening three years ago, as a new arrival to Mount Carmel, I decided to roam the very quiet halls to see what I might discover. I discovered Edna Mae and her wisdom and extraordinary understanding of nature. After other meetings, I wrote about her to her great surprise. The evening that she passed away, I read it to her, thanked her, and prayed that she would have a peaceful and quick walk home to heaven. I would like to share the poem with you.

Hallway Friends

That's what we called ourselves – hallway friends,
And that's where we sometimes met.
No one else wanders at that crazy hour,
But there we were getting our steps in,
exchanging smiles, a bit of lovely kindness,
and our latest perspective on the consciousness of animal life.
It was her turkey episode that clinched for me
the quantum theory talk that had unsettled my brain.
Truly, Edna Mae is a sister of Creation's terrain.
So thanks to exercise and turkey talk,
We both carry the memory of the sacredness of a walk.

Sister Bertha Fox, BVM, Set of 1954

Seventy-one years ago, we entered. We found out that we were both from Iowa farms and we had fathers who had come from Germany one way or another. My father was the third generation. Her father was the first. What we really had in common was understanding farming – how important it was and how gentle it was. I miss her. We didn't talk often but knew that both of us were looking at the farms and hoping that the farming would be good and that the rain would be sufficient. I will miss her very much.

Sister Kate Keating, BVM

I used to see her outside when she was seeing the birds. One morning I went out and said, "I bet those birds are really grateful. I did my 'bird talk,'" and then I said, "They just said, 'Thank you' for all the food."

Sister Dee Myers, BVM

It was Memorial Day of 2023. It was early in the morning. Everyone was sleeping. I was out walking along the river. I heard this sound that sounded like a baby. I thought, "At last we can have a baby at Mount Carmel to take care of." I looked around. There was no one. Finally, I was led to this hole in the pit where the construction was not quite complete. I looked in the hole that was about six feet deep. There was this little fawn with big eyes looking up and shaking with fear.

I ran back inside and there still was no one. I thought I would call the police and they would come. They get cats out of trees. They would get the deer out. I got a woman at the police station. She said, "Oh, let nature take its course. The deer will find a way out." I put the phone down. I didn't like what she said, but I knew nothing about deer. A few minutes later, before I could figure out my next step, the phone rang. It was the police who said they were sending a car out.

This police officer, Mike, comes to the Atrium entrance and said he was there to get the deer out. There were still no sisters around, so Mike and I went to the hole. There was a ladder the construction

people had left. He thought that if he went down in the hole he could hand me this baby fawn and then I could carry it away. As soon as we approached the hole, the little baby looked up at us and then shot out of there. I didn't know it could jump that far, but it propelled on his hind legs out of the hole and was gone.

Edna lived over in Vista. At three o'clock in the afternoon, I got a phone call. It was Edna. 'Dee, I found the baby. I'll meet you in the Motherhouse beauty shop." I said, "I'll be right there. We crawled up onto the table and right against the window was the deer in her little nest. Nearby was the mother. Occasionally, the little baby would get up and nurse and then go and rest again. Edna and I stayed there for an hour watching the baby. Eventually, the mother decided it was time to move. There was a construction fence around the site. She looked at the baby, expecting it to follow which it did. The mother leaped over the fence and went down the riverbank. The little baby who had jumped out of the hole, decided she couldn't jump that high. She went all the way to the end, around the fence, and followed the mother home.

Sister Irene Lukefahr, BVM

Edna had a lot of common sense and wisdom. On Monday morning, following the death of one of our sisters the night before, I was in the Caritas dining room. It was filled and everybody seemed to be in shock following the death of Anita Therese [Hayes]. Her nurse had sent me an email describing what had happened. Anita Therese was singing in the Schola the day before with her heart. Later in the afternoon, she went to a cluster meeting. Later that night, she visited one of her friends who was on her way home to God. She went back to her room and probably within a half hour, she had died. We were all shocked. After I finished reading the email, I went to eat breakfast with Edna. Edna said, "Isn't it amazing how shocked we are that a 96-year-old BVM just died.

Mary Maas, Former BVM

I met Edna when I was assigned to St. Patrick's in Cedar Rapids for my first mission. When she was re-assigned, we did not reconnect until the mid-1990s when I returned to work in St. Paul. After she moved into an apartment across the hall, and Carol Spiegel [BVM] moved in with me, the three of us did things together. There were senior trips to the casino in Tama, Iowa, and one in Hinckley, Minn.

As you probably know, Edna had a deep love for nature. She and I went on several trips to Minnesota state parks, trails, and other sites along the North Shore. One of the gifts she gave to us: in our apartment building she built a raised garden in the backyard. There she planted vegetables as well as flowers. The apartment dwellers were invited to take any of the produce for their use.

After Edna moved to the Motherhouse I would come to visit her. On several occasions we would spend a couple days in Galena hiking the trails. One summer we took a trip to the Amana Colonies. Each time I called Edna at Mount Carmel she was upbeat. Even though she had many health issues she was always positive. I will miss her inspiration and her friendship.

Sister Susan Coler, BVM

I knew Edna as a part of the Minnesota cluster for many years. Thinking of Edna makes me smile and remember her humor, her voice, and her delight in all things natural. She was goodhearted and generous and really enjoyed her work with developmentally challenged individuals and their families-work she did with Nancy Harding [BVM Associate]. Edna also was a trooper when experiencing challenges, particularly medical ones. During her time in Minnesota, I think Edna came to a self-

acceptance and confidence in herself that was wonderful to see. Now I see her continuing to revel in the beauty and surprises of holy mystery as she did when she was with us.

Anne Klejment, BVM Associate

When I think of Edna, I think of a person whose knowledge of and curiosity about nature was boundless. At her apartment complex in St Paul, Edna organized her neighbors to grow a garden, which was educational for the children and helpful for poorer families. When visiting Mount Carmel, Edna loved to show us around the gardens. And Edna had an adventuresome palate. She knew how to prepare duck and, if dining at Moracco's, she wasn't shy about ordering the frogs legs, which she relished. Although somewhat fearful of heights, when during retirement Edna traveled to Alaska on a birding adventure, she related how her desire to see a particular type of bird forced her to confront her fear and crawl out on a ledge to see a species that she hadn't encountered before. And I should mention that Edna was a "pupular" dog sitter back in the day with my two boys, Giulio and Cosmo.

Margaret Feddersen, Sister

She always got the best of me. When we would get hand-me-down clothes, Sister Marie Christine always got them first, then Mom, as a seamstress, fixed them next for me. I was happy that I came next. By the time Marie and I got done with the dress, it really wasn't good enough to wear to school. So, Edna, who came next in line, and you guessed it, would get something new to wear.

Sister Lynn Winsor, BVM

When I come [to Dubuque] for BVM meetings I always eat the noon meal up on Gables second floor with Joanie Nuckols and Lillian Lila. In the last year Edna Mae was at our table. Edna Mae, wearing one of her nature themed shirts, would talk about the animals she had seen at Mount Carmel and especially the variety of birds she had observed.

At one of our meals, she would ask me to go to the cemetery to check the birdhouse to the right of the beginning of the cemetery walk. The birdhouse is about 10 yards west of the walk in an area, not mowed. I would have to go through the weeds or snow to check out the residents of the birdhouse. On my treks I encountered ants, flies, bees, spiders and other interesting creatures. The following day I would report back as to my findings. In my many tries I never saw any birds in the house but each time I told her it was ready for occupants, and I would check for her the next time I came.

Edna Mae taught at St. Matthew Grade School in Phoenix and, as it was here at Mount Carmel, her love and respect for nature was evident in her classroom and in the gardens at St. Matthew School and Convent. Edna Mae made a lasting impression on her students as a caring, loving teacher. When she left Phoenix, she was sorely missed by the St. Matthew's community and the Phoenix BVMs. Thank you, Edna Mae, for raising awareness of the beautiful gift of nature to so many.

Debbi Davis

A life very well lived. Rest in God's peace, Sister Knudsen.