

## New Year's Resolution: *All Will Be Well*

*Sister Joan Chittister, OSB writes, "Darkness deserves gratitude. It is the alleluia point at which we learn to understand that all growth does not take place in the sunlight."*

Adversity is a stern taskmaster. It always comes at the wrong time, when you're on your way somewhere else. It preempts all your plans. It changes your life, at least for the moment.

With the New Year upon us – traditionally a time for making plans – we decided to suggest another resolution.

A resolution to regard any dark time, upset plan or unwelcome development as a future blessing, not yet realized.

A resolution to welcome, as the poet Rumi urges, whatever comes with gratitude.

We asked some Sisters to share experiences that had begun unhappily, but that had turned out – in time – to be blessings in disguise.

### When polio came to the Millers' house (and empathy stayed)

November 26, 1953 dawned chilly on the Millers' modest, central-Illinois farm. It was 28 degrees. A bit of snow was in the air. A stiff breeze blew out of the southwest.

Inside the house, though, the kitchen was warm and bustling.

Mouthwatering scents of roast turkey and pumpkin pie filled the house. Three of the family's four children played happily. It was Thanksgiving Day.

The fourth child – usually in the middle of all the fun – was absent. Nine-year-old Marlene had been in bed for several days now, listless, mostly sleeping.

She was fed in her bedroom that afternoon. Afterwards, she was sent to the bathroom to brush her teeth. She came back out almost immediately. "Mom," she said, "I can't squeeze the toothpaste tube."



*Sr. Sandra Brunenn, OSB*

## Letter from the Prioress

We are in the midst of Advent, a season of HOPE! And how we yearn to have hope renewed in us this year. The divisions among us, the seemingly endless conflicts and acts of terrorism, the devastation of natural disasters challenge us as we seek to recognize God’s presence in the midst of everyday life.

We thank God for Advent which unites us with the hopes and yearnings of the ages and calls us to be ready for the surprise of new life and new birth in our time. This season invites us to stir up hope.

One way to do that is to return in memory to experiences when we have been ‘surprised by the Spirit,’ when seemingly bad events led to unpredictable good. I hope that this issue of Connecting Point might lead you to identify such experiences in your own life.

Another way to stir up hope is to actively practice it. I am reminded of a description of hope that Pope Francis once shared. He said hope is like an anchor attached to a cord.... you toss it in the direction you wish to go and then gently pull on the cord to get there. Active hope requires working toward the kind of future you would like to have.

I hope this Advent season stirs within you deep abiding awareness of God’s presence and openness to the surprises yet to be revealed.

Blessings from all of us!

By that evening, Marlene had endured a spinal tap and been admitted to the Children’s Contagion Hospital in Springfield, Ill. There, she was placed in a bed on a ward with dozens of other children.

It was the height of the polio epidemic.

“The iron lungs went all night,” Sister Marlene says today. “I can still hear them. I cried every day. But I was fortunate. It only affected my left side. I could still walk.”

Marlene was released from the hospital in time for Christmas and was back in school by March.

“I still have some physical restrictions,” Sr. Marlene says, lifting her arms up. “I can’t use my left arm to full capacity. But polio had some blessings for me. It helped me develop deeper empathy for others. And a deeper spirituality. More reliance on God.

“I learned not to take my health or any other gift for granted. It can disappear very quickly.”

### Stuck in the wrong job (until an accident changed everything)

Four Sisters climbed into the dark green Chevy station wagon to begin their drive from Peoria, where they taught school, to Nauvoo for a community celebration. The car was new; a gift from parishioners. It lacked the standard safety features of today: seat belts, power brakes and power steering. But it was only 1963, and these things were still catching on.

Sister Charlotte Sonnevill sat

next to Sr. Veronica, with Sisters Roberta Smith and Andrea Giltner in back. It was a beautiful early spring morning. They sat in silence, saying personal prayers.

“A big, black Buick with four men in it passed us on a curve outside Farmington,” Sr. Charlotte remembers.

“We came around the bend and saw they had braked for a stopped school bus. We didn’t have power brakes and couldn’t stop in time. I dented the roof with my head.”

The others were hurt too, although not as badly. For Sr. Charlotte, it was another story. Headaches plagued her. She couldn’t walk without passing out. She spent weeks in bed.

“I wondered if I would ever get back to teaching,” she says. “I did love my work, but I had always longed to do something else.”

Lying in bed, Sr. Charlotte began dreaming of what, exactly, that “something else” might be.

For once, she didn’t feel guilty for imagining a life other than that of musician or music teacher. She’d played the organ for church since first grade. She’d earned her degree in music. She’d taught music since entering religious life.

“I sometimes felt like I was seen as a big treble clef,” Sr. Charlotte says. “I wanted to share my faith in a new way.”

The time off gave Sr. Charlotte a chance to not only imagine the new way, but to realize the world wasn’t stopping because she wasn’t playing piano. So when her



traumatic brain injury was finally identified and treated in August, she was able to request a change of ministry.

“I requested to go back to college to get a masters degree in theology with an emphasis in guidance and counseling,” Sr. Charlotte says.

“It was the best thing in the world. I felt God calling me to do it.”

Although Sr. Charlotte continued to teach piano lessons on the side, her new ministry led her to serve as a pastoral minister as well as in adult faith education.

So the accident was a blessing in disguise?

“Oh yes,” she says. “It allowed me to merge all my education, experiences and gifts. It was everything I ever dreamed of.”

### One dream in ruins (with another around the corner)

Stefanie MacDonald finished sending her kindergartners home, went back into her classroom

and sat down to do some work. Anguished thoughts kept crowding her mind, though. After four months of living with the Franciscan Sisters, it was becoming clear.

*She wasn't cut out to be a Sister. Everything she had dreamed of was over.*

She laid her head on her desk and sobbed.

Stefanie had grown up with the Franciscans, and loved them dearly. They'd lived across the street from her family ... dined at the family table ... shared holiday traditions. So when Stefanie felt God calling her to be a Sister, she had turned to them.

She had believed becoming a Franciscan Sister would bring her the community, peace and purpose she so craved.

Working with their vocation director, Stefanie had taken a job in Cedar Rapids, Iowa in order to live with two Franciscan Sisters who would introduce her to the life. It

would be the perfect discernment opportunity.

Unfortunately – at the time – the discernment revealed the opposite of what Stefanie had expected.

“I was happy at first,” she says. “I thought, *I'm where I belong.*”

Within a few months, though, Stefanie began to find the ministry-focused apostolic lifestyle was not a good fit for her.

“It felt to me like I was living with roommates,” she says. “Their ministries kept them at work till late at night. We didn't pray or eat together daily. I thought, *Religious life must not be for me. I can do this as a single person.*”

Stefanie says she couldn't tell anyone what she was feeling for a while. It was too painful. Eventually, though, she had to come clean.

“The hardest thing was to go to their vocation director and say, This isn't working out,” she says.

“It was awful. I spent the entire summer grieving. Then I found a new place to live and got back to teaching.”

For the next three years, Stefanie put religious life out of her mind. She continued to teach, participate in parish life and enjoy socializing with friends. She visited her family often, as well, in nearby Dubuque.

She was with her family when she began to hear a call to explore religious life again.

“We were at Mass when a group of visiting Sisters was introduced,”



she says. “My dad suggested I learn about this group and others, because all communities are different. He said I might find one that would be a better fit than the Franciscans.”

Stefanie restarted her discernment. Eventually, she found her way to the Benedictine Sisters, and entered the community in 2007.

“I love life as a monastic Benedictine Sister,” Sister Stefanie says today.

“We pray together, eat together, enjoy leisure together. It’s a community with shared life and shared purpose.

“I’d never have believed it as my discernment with the Franciscans was ending, but it was a blessing in disguise. If I had stayed there, I would have been unhappy. I’m happy as a Benedictine. It’s where I’m meant to be.”

### **Wrenched from the best job (and placed in a better one)**

Sister Catherine Maloney knew she was in the right ministry. Her patients and their families told her so. Her heart told her so.

Serving in the Hospice program in LaSalle/Peru, Ill., Sr. Catherine sat with dying patients, waited with grieving families and held prayer services.

*“You always said the right thing at the right time to us,”* she remembers a family member saying. *“You helped us accept dying.”*

You might say Sr. Catherine had a heart for the suffering.

“My work at Hospice was an example of the Holy Spirit working in me,” she says. “I was the helping hand of God. I loved every minute of it.”

Then, she got a phone call.

“The prioress asked me to move to a new ministry,” Sr. Catherine says.

“She wanted me to serve the senior residents of St. Augustine Manor in Peoria. I didn’t know anything about that. I was dismayed.”

Sr. Catherine wrestled with the request. She could have said no, she says, but the prioress wouldn’t have asked frivolously. Apparently, Sr. Catherine was needed there.

“I didn’t feel qualified,” Sr. Catherine says. “I didn’t want to leave my position. I loved everyone I worked with. But I finally said, *Maybe I can be helpful.*”

Walking in the door of St. Augustine a few weeks later, Sr. Catherine was met with open arms.

“I was overwhelmed by their joy at my arrival,” she says. “It was

like I was a Godsend. I couldn't help being happy the moment I got there."

Sr. Catherine went about meeting everyone, looking for ways to connect, listen and help.



*Sister Catherine Maloney, OSB*

"One of the people I remember best was a 100-year-old woman who was very, very alive," she says. "She wasn't very mobile, though. She sat in her room feeling isolated. I got her friends to come to her.

"So many times, the solution to any problem is simple. Her son was so grateful that I helped bring her out of her isolation. But the bottom line for me was my own gratitude to all of them. Just like in Hospice, they gave me more than I gave them."

That happened throughout Sr. Catherine's ministries, beginning with her first teaching assignment.

"When I look back on it, I loved almost everything," she says.

"From teaching first graders to being a hospital chaplain, and Hospice to working with senior citizens. There were a few ups and downs, but mostly blessings. And the downs might have felt bad at first, but they would turn into blessings, too."

### **Saying yes when her heart said no (it changed its mind later)**

At long last, Sister Sheila McGrath had been assigned to her hometown of Peoria. Very close to her family,

she was thrilled to be able to enjoy casual and frequent visits. And she loved her assignment to Bergan High School.

There, she innovated new programs, pulling boys into cooking and child development classes that had heretofore been unthinkable for teenage boys.

It was 1974. Gender roles were beginning to be challenged. And the boys were delighted to be pioneers.

"I had several football players in my foods class," Sr. Sheila remembers.

"One day the coach came to see me. He said, 'You'll never believe it, but I just heard the guys arguing about whose muffins had the best texture!'"

After teaching only girls at St. Mary Academy for years, Sr. Sheila enjoyed the addition of boys in her classes.

"I had to watch them while we were doing dough," Sr. Sheila laughs. "They had a tendency to aim at each other when tossing away unused bits."

After three years, Sr. Sheila received a request to begin a new ministry.

"I was asked to move back to Nauvoo to become the community's formation director," she says. "I didn't want to leave. I said I'd have to think about it."

But monastic Benedictine life is predicated, in part, on putting one's own desires aside to do what's right for the whole community. And the community needed her in Nauvoo.

## **The Guest House**

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
As an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the  
malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

Rumi



So Sr. Sheila accepted the change of assignment and moved with heavy heart to Dubuque for a year of training.

There, she made friends for life. She learned how to do her new job. And she discovered a new passion.

“We had to take a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education in a hospital,” Sr. Sheila says of the program that trains chaplains.

“When I finished my ministry as formation director eight years later, I said I’d like to serve as a hospital chaplain.”

It was a ministry that she never would have discovered without that zigzag path that began in Peoria and passed through Dubuque.

“I served as a chaplain for 12 years,” Sr. Sheila says. “They were the happiest and most fulfilling years of my ministry life.”

Today serving in community administration under the third prioress, Sr. Sheila remains grateful

for all of her ministries, including the present one.

“They’ve all offered wonderful blessings,” she says. “And I wouldn’t have had any of them if I hadn’t said yes to change. It was hard sometimes, but worth it.”

### Orphaned as a baby (but given a beautiful life)

“I never knew my birth parents,” Sister Rose Joseph Kennebeck says. “My father and his first wife adopted me as a baby.”

Who knows what kind of circumstances placed that baby in an orphanage.

Sr. Rosie Jo, as she’s known to many of her friends, never found out. She says she didn’t need to. All of her adoptive parents were loving and kind.

“I really never knew my first adoptive mother either,” Sr. Rosie Jo says.

“She died when I was just 18

months old. I was told she loved me very much. My father remarried when I was six, and my new mother was wonderful, too.”

So wonderful that Sr. Rosie Jo took both her name and her father’s when entering religious life in 1948, 12 years later.

“My adoptive parents, Rose and Joseph, gave me my life,” she says.

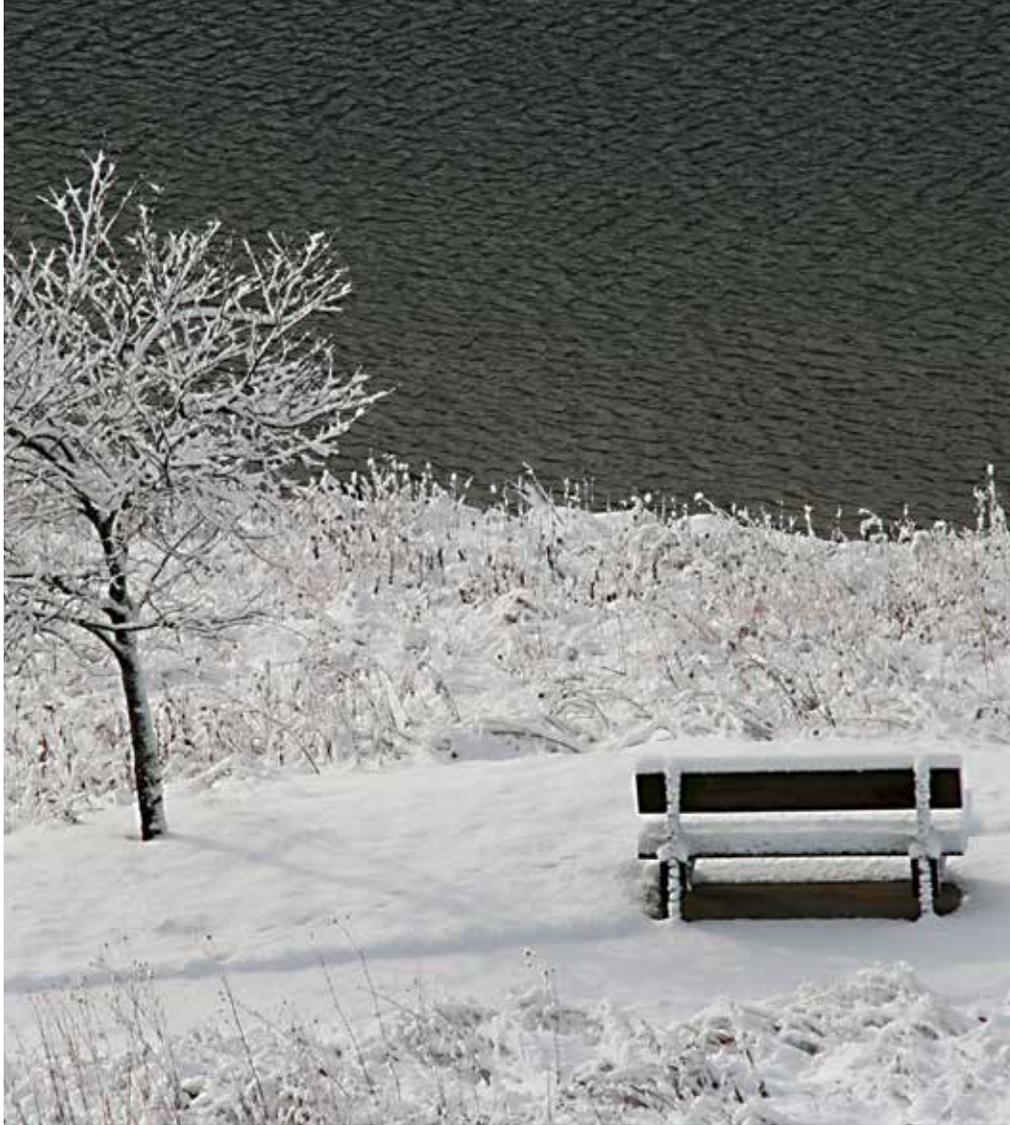
“They sent me to Catholic Schools, which I loved. They helped me become a Benedictine Sister, the greatest blessing of my life.

“I don’t remember the orphanage, of course, but it couldn’t have been a good thing to be surrendered there.

“It turned out to be a wonderful blessing for me. I had beautiful parents and a beautiful life.”



*Sister Rose Joseph Kennebeck, OSB*



*Pictured, front cover: Ice forms along the edge of the monastery lake, while snow softens the rest of the winter landscape.*

*Page 4, Benedictine Sisters pray Lauds (morning prayer) in their chapel.*

*Page 6, left-to-right: Sisters Charlotte Sonnevile, Margaret Murphy, and Sandra Brunenn enjoy conversation over coffee. Sister Sheila McGrath is in the background.*

*Left, benches around the monastery grounds invite meditation in any season ... another good resolution for 2017.*

## All will be well (and all will be well)

Ask Sister Rita Cain for her blessing in disguise story, and she'll chuckle.

"Everything's a blessing," she says, eyes twinkling. "You just don't know it till later."

In other words, it's a matter of perspective, no matter what the particular situation.

"I come from a large family," Sr. Rita says. "Large families have lots of death. It's part of life."



*Sister Rita Cain, OSB*

"But the grief of death helps you help others in the same circumstance. Because you've been there. We were raised to try to look for the good."

To believe, in the words of Julian of Norwich, that "All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well."

Because everything that comes to us will – if we let it – make more of us. With God at our side, 2017 won't bring anything but blessings.



## Monastery Notes

### Oblate Day by Sister Ruth Ksycki, OSB

On the crisp autumn morning of October 22, 2016, 48 Oblates of St. Mary Monastery gathered for their annual Oblate Day. The theme was “Sharing our Talents.” Sister Sandra welcomed them and gave a brief report on the monastery future planning process. She invited them to partner with the Sisters in living and carrying the Benedictine way of life into the future.

Oblate Jean Wolf gave a report on the oblate conference on “Shared Leadership” at St. Meinrad Archabbey, St. Meinrad, Ind. Ten minutes of chair yoga preceded presentations by Oblates Feli Sebastian, Bill Maakestad, Cynthia Smith, Linda Clewell, and Florrie Dammers about programs which they had initiated in their areas.



*Oblate Cynthia Smith makes her presentation.*

Liturgy of the Hours at Noon was prayed with the Sisters. As part of this prayer, there were rituals for candidates and those making oblation. At the conclusion the prioress gave a blessing on the labora (work) the Oblates would be doing in the afternoon. Following a sack lunch, the Oblates shared their talents around the monastery. There was great visiting along with completion of many tasks. What a wonderful day it was for us all! *(Pictured above, left-to-right: Sister Sandra, Spencer Gillespie, Sharon McNamara, Rose Mary Fay, Christine Spencer, Jana Schopp, Sister Ruth. Spencer became an Oblate Candidate, and the others made their Oblation.)*

### Benedictine News

It's been a busy autumn, attending conferences and hosting such events as Oblate Day (above), the St. John Vianney Bell Choir, and various appreciation dinners. Benet House Retreat Center bustled with retreats and programs (visit [smmsisters.org](http://smmsisters.org) for information).

Many Sisters traveled to meetings and conferences, including Sandra Brunenn, Sheila McGrath, Marlene Miller, Stefanie MacDonald and Ruth Ksycki. Sister Mary Core led the Wisdom Seekers book club in-person and online as they read “Redeemed,” by Heather King. Visit [monasterywisdomvocationblog.smmsisters.org](http://monasterywisdomvocationblog.smmsisters.org).

**Sister Martina Brinkschroeder,  
OSB 1922-2016**

Sister  
Martina,  
94, died  
Friday, Oct.  
7, at the  
monastery.



Born  
March 2,  
1922 in Ft.  
Madison,  
Iowa, Sr. Martina entered the  
Benedictine community on Sept. 8,  
1940 and made her final profession  
on Aug. 22, 1945.

She received a Bachelor of Arts  
degree from St. Ambrose College,  
Davenport, IA, and a Master of  
Arts degree from the University of  
Illinois.

Sr. Martina taught at schools  
throughout the Peoria Diocese,  
and in Chicago. She also served as  
Librarian at St. Mary Monastery.

**Sister Jozefa Seskar, OSB  
1927-2016**

Sister  
Jozefa, 89,  
died Friday,  
Nov. 25,  
at the  
monastery.



Born on  
March 19,  
1927 in  
Tomiselj, Slovenia, Sr. Jozefa  
entered the Benedictine community  
on Sept. 8, 1950 and made her final  
profession on Aug. 24, 1955.

Sr. Jozefa's ministry included food  
service at St. Mary Monastery,  
Nauvoo, IL, St. Mary Academy,  
Nauvoo, IL, and St. Anthony  
Convent, Atkinson, IL. She also  
served with the Blue Cross Mission  
Ladies of St. Ambrose Parish in  
Milan.

## Sister Jozefa's blessings live on

*Editor's note: Sister Jozefa Seskar's death occurred as this issue of Connecting Point was being created. There is perhaps no greater example of the theme of this issue, that "all will be well." Sr. Jozefa's story is one that begins tragically during World War II, and ends in great joy and peace. We reprint excerpts here in celebration of the blessing her life became, both for herself and for all whom she touched.*

Sr. Jozefa was 14 years old and living on her family's small farm in Slovenia when the terror began. "My father died on April 12, 1941," she said, "and my mother died 18 days later. At her wake, we could see Italian soldiers marching toward our village. The Germans were coming from another direction. For the next few months, my sisters and I tried to keep the farm going. I took care of the cows and horses, and my other sisters took care of the pigs and cooked. We all did fieldwork.

"Then the Italians took all our men and boys to an island and starved them. The mayors pleaded for their release. When my brother, Ivan, came home, I almost didn't recognize him. He was just skin and bones."

By now, the Communists had begun organizing in Slovenia, and Sr. Jozefa remembers their army members trying to persuade Ivan to join. "Ivan didn't trust the Communists, so he and others organized the Domobranci army to protect our village. The Communists would come to our houses at night and steal our food and blankets and clothes."

Eventually, Sr. Jozefa's brother, Franc, was arrested by the Gestapo and sent to Dachau (he later escaped). But the Communists proved to be the biggest threat to the Slovenian people. "In early May, 1945, the war was over. But Communists were taking over our country. We had to leave. We loaded our wagon and joined a procession that was miles long. We settled into a camp in Austria, and Ivan was sent back to Slovenia, supposedly to make barracks for the civilians with the other men. But they fell into Communist hands and were slaughtered. Ivan was among them. When the Slovenians in the camp learned what happened, there was one big cry, all night long. I will never forget that sound."

She said things began to improve after that. "We stayed in a more permanent camp for several years, and I made friends and learned how to sew. In 1949, the Sisters of St. Benedict sponsored us to come to Nauvoo (where the Sisters then lived). The Sisters seemed so very happy, and that impressed me. After a year, I decided to enter.

"I wasn't angry at the Communists, but I was so scared of them I used to wake up crying for Ivan. But after I made final profession, I never cried like that again."

Sr. Jozefa never quit missing her beloved brother, country or way of life. But the blessings she gained - and shared - throughout her life continue to warm us all.



## SMA News

**Members of the Class of 1976 (above)** held their 40th reunion at Benet House Sept. 9-11. They plan to return for their 45th in 2021. Pictured above, left-to-right, front row: Sue Spizzirri, Ginny Kenny, Jaynie Flanagan, Mary Dries, Vicky Tufano (our junior RA); Standing: Laura Szalacha, Jean Waldsmith, Pam Luth, Linda Torbert, Lisa Westfield, Linda Olmsted, Maureen O'Connor, Debby Dwyer, Barb Driscoll

**Betsy Van Horn '66** writes, "My sister (Vicki Van Horn) and I visited Nauvoo this past summer and shared memories of our time at SMA. We also visited the cemetery to pay respects to the sisters who served so well!"

**Members of the Class of '66 (below)** met in Wisconsin to celebrate the 50th anniversary of their graduation Sept. 16-18. Pictured, left to right, front row: Paula Jones, Carol Leonard, Barbara Blough; Row 2 (center of photo): Linda Simon (black top), Betsy Van Horn (blue top); Row 3: Susie Pokorski, Mary Beth Kapp, Laura Tatarchuk, Nel-louise Wiles, Martha Panther, Betty Slupkowski, Linda Knepper, Chris Chamness, Celeste Palmer, Carol Turner.





**Members of the Class of 1981** (above) celebrated their 35th anniversary at Benet House Nov. 4-6. They are already looking forward to their 40th in August 2021. Pictured, left-to-right: Donna Moore Conboy, Cecilia Saavedra, Melanie Stieren Chancellor, Carolyn Wolfe Randolph.

**Pat (Zureck) O'Connor, '53** says the Spring 2015 commemorative issue of Connecting Point "really brought back mem'ries of our time in the North Dorm and the Rec Room/ Library where we enjoyed MANY hours, 'specially on rainy Saturday mornings with the smell of the giant pine trees!"

## In Memoriam ...

**Barbara St. Ledger Wagner, '64** died Oct. 12, 2016.

**Bill Wilkens**, father of **Mary Ann Gall, '73** and **Barbara Gates, '72** died Sept. 22, 2016.

**Jody Rice Perez, '81** died.

**Tom Moffitt**, father of **Patty Matthews, '68** and **Maureen Gnann, '74** died.

**Bill Hopp**, husband of **Roseann Blont, '65** and brother of **Larry, former SMA head of maintenance**, died.

## Reunion Announcements

**Class of 1952**  
Sept.9-10, 2017

**Class of 1967**  
Aug. 4-6, 2017

**Class of 1975**  
Oct. 6-8, 2017



**Connecting Point**  
Winter 2016/2017

Published three times a year by the Benedictine Sisters of St. Mary Monastery, Rock Island, IL 61201

Phone: 309-283-2100  
Fax: 309-283-2200

Editor  
Susan Flansburg  
sflansburgpr@smmsisters.org  
www.smmsisters.org



**Sisters of St. Benedict**

St. Mary Monastery  
2200 88th Avenue West  
Rock Island, IL 61201-7649  
309-283-2100 · 309-283-2200 FAX  
[www.smmsisters.org](http://www.smmsisters.org)

Return Service Requested

Non-Profit Org.  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Permit #59  
Rock Island, IL