

# Death as a *Burst of Consciousness*

## How Benedictine Spirituality Helps Light our Way

**By Susan Flansburg,  
Communications Director**

I wonder how long this will take, I thought. I'm hungry.

This was not my finest moment: it was uttered – silently, thank God – two hours before my mother would die. I had been called to Des Moines where she lay in a cold and dark intensive care room, breathing rhythmically with a ventilator, ashen, eyes closed. The nurses had waited to pull the vent until after I – her eldest child – arrived. Now here, the vent had been removed, my siblings had left for a break, and I waited alone with the woman who had ushered me into life.

I was prepared for Mother's death (or so I told myself), but not, as the minutes began to tick

slowly by, to miss dinner.

Had she been able to speak, she'd have been more concerned about the cocktail hour than dinner.

Which was a bone of contention between us. I wanted her to live forever, of course, and knew that her lifestyle was killing her. I told her as much nearly every time I saw her or talked with her on the phone. She ignored me, pleasantly enough.

And now look at us, I thought. No need to argue any more.

My mother was 81 when she died last spring. It should have been no surprise. The regime she had embraced featured Winston Lights and vodka



*Sr. Sandra Brunenn, OSB*

## Letter from the Prioress

St. Benedict challenges us in his Rule, “Keep death daily before your eyes.” And I frequently recall the words of retreat leader Sister Ludwigin Fabian, OSB,

“Every breath is practice for our final letting go.” Even if we do not live with this daily consciousness, the death of a loved one is always occasion for us to consider our relationship to the departed and our own mortality. In this issue of *Connecting Point* our editor Sue Flansburg shares her reflections on practices that she has learned and found helpful as she experiences the recent loss of her mother.

At the monastery we remember deceased loved ones in special ways during the month of November. The final prayer of petition at Mass each day is “for our deceased sisters, relatives, friends, oblates, and benefactors, especially...”; here several names are shared from our *Book of Remembrance*. This prayer for the departed is a special **CONNECTING POINT** that unites us all in the Communion of Saints. It reminds us that we are all held together in the embrace of our living God.

Know we hold you our friends in deep connection each day in our prayer. We are grateful for your presence in our lives!

martinis flavored with a splash of olive juice (often her only fruit).

Despite those unhealthy choices, Mom had bounced back from many near-death experiences: a triple bypass, an aneurism, a life-threatening infection and blood clots.

She could open her eyes any moment, we all had said. She’s done it before.

Yet I knew it was time to let her go. As I stood by her side, stroking her hair, I began to talk.

Mom, everyone has left the room. It’s just you and me. You can go now.

After two days of no response, her mouth began to move. No sound came out, but she was talking to me nonetheless.

Mom, I said, I love you too.

Her mouth continued to move.

We will all be fine. Beth and Jim and Jane will be fine. I will be fine. The kids will be fine.

Mom’s mouth continued to move. And then it hit me. My father and her husband of 58 years now lived in a memory care facility.

Mom, Dad will be fine! We will take care of him. He will be just fine. I promise.

Mom’s mouth stopped moving.

I continued to stand there, grateful for having found the answer Mom was looking for. I

continued to hold her hand, not sure what to do next.

And then the nurse came in. Mom was gone.

Carol McCauley Flansburg was brilliant, charming, funny, fun and wise. The wisdom you had to pry out of her, though, because she didn’t like to “be a downer.” She named each of her daughters for a crusader. My namesake is Susan B. Anthony. She approved of my work with the Benedictine Sisters and read every *Connecting Point* cover-to-cover.

Whether we expect a death or not, it often hits us hard, although we all grieve differently. My brother, for instance, had all of Mother’s stuff on the curb by sundown on the day of the funeral. He couldn’t bear to look at it anymore. He put a pumpkin filled with flowers on her grave recently, sending pictures of it to all the siblings.

My sisters and I, on the other hand, have been largely silent about it.

My silence masks a rich interior dialogue, however, that Mother is often insinuated into. Does she or I do the insinuating? What active role does she still play in my life? Have I forgiven her for preferring cigarettes to ... me? Have I forgiven myself for my damning judgment of her choices?

I’ve brought these questions (and many more) to my teachers here at the monastery. Here are some insights they have shared with me since Mom’s death.



*Carol McCauley Flansburg*

### Closure is key

Sister Mary Core was on her way to summer school when her mentor and friend, Sister Loyola, died. Living at some distance from the monastery, Sr. Mary was unable to return home for the funeral. Her grief continued to grow rather than lessen.

“I kept thinking about Sr. Loyola,” she says. “About how I never said goodbye, about all the things I still needed to ask her and tell her. I missed her so much.”

When she returned later that summer, Sr. Mary says she decided to write a letter to Sr. Loyola that she would read at the cemetery.

“I wrote a heartfelt letter telling her everything I wanted to say,” Sr. Mary says. “I stood over her grave and read it, weeping the whole time. When I finished, I felt much better. For me, this was closure.”

Sr. Mary says whether we experience closure might depend upon our own hearts

more than our actions. That is, if there are things unsaid, writing that letter – and reading it aloud, whether at the gravesite or in our kitchen – can help. And the letter itself?

Sr. Mary might counsel us to tuck it away somewhere. I say, burn it.

### For all that has been, thanks

When asked about death, Sister Helen Carey shares a quote from Swedish diplomat Dag Hammarskjöld: “For all that has been, thanks. For all that will be, Yes!”

It’s a call to courage. “Accept that you will have regrets,” Sr. Helen says. “But place your regrets alongside your gratuities. I regret that I never got to know my mother as an adult. She died when I was 18. I wish I hadn’t been such a superficial person then. But I’m grateful for those who knew her and shared their memories of her. I treasure my older brother’s memories of her.”

Sr. Helen suggests asking people to share stories of our loved ones, both happy and sad.

And when the pain is too severe to live with?

“Then tell God, ‘I’m not strong enough to deal with this right now,’” Sr. Helen says. “Help me let it go for now, so it doesn’t harm me.”

### Death is personal

Sister Catherine Maloney served (as Sisters Helen and Sheila) as a hospital chaplain. She says one of the most

important lessons for her was that everyone reacts differently to death.

“Death is so personal to each person and family,” she says. “You might feel prepared and relieved when a loved one dies after experiencing suffering. Or you might be shocked, despite a long period of preparation.

“I think the Spirit comes through whatever door is open, by Scripture, song, touch. People have such different faith ideas. In crisis, they pull from their childhoods, their parents. If prayer meant something to them, they will turn to prayer. If not, then touch. Or song.”

I had stood by my mom, stroking her hair, holding her hand. Sr. Catherine assures me that Mom felt it, and that comforts me still.

### Becoming more ...

So, what happens when we die? After my mom died – and when the room was empty but for the two of us – I cried, “Mom, where are you?”

I actually listened for her answer. I am still listening.

Sister Margaret Murphy, who serves as a spiritual director, says she thinks of death as a “burst of consciousness.”

“God’s presence has always been with us,” she says. “It’s hard to separate life from death, and in the long run there might not be any separation but a burst of consciousness. A transformation. Death is becoming more.”



I have a hunch she's right. In our conversations now, Mom seems endless.

**... Yet absent**

A loved one's sudden absence (because it's always sudden: one minute they are here, alive if unconscious, and the next they are no longer) will provoke questions and regrets. What did I mean to tell Mom? What do I miss right now? And ... now?

Sister Catherine Cleary says questions like these are wonderful, as they show the love and care we felt, even if we didn't feel close. I was close to my mother if unhappy with her life choices.

Of course, I regret the harangues I indulged in. They never stood a chance of changing her behavior. I knew it then, and ignored my own advice to cease. I think I just wanted to be right.

"It's not too late to forgive your mother and/or yourself," Sr. Catherine says. "And cherish the good memories."

I am learning. I do cherish the good memories, and they keep coming back. I've asked for forgiveness as well, for wanting dinner, for arguing about her choices.

I know I am forgiven. I hope I have reciprocated ... and that I will pass it on.

**Creating a community**

The days and weeks immediately following a death are often busy. There's the funeral to plan, drawers to clean out, insurance to track down, accounts to close. Friends prepare casseroles, call, drop by. They listen with patience and sympathy.

Then, they quit. Because it's time to get on with life.

"Different people have different experiences of loss," Sister Sheila McGrath says. "Grief support groups are communities where it's okay to tell your story over and over again. They allow people to be where they are without judgment."

"Evenings and Sundays seem to be the most difficult times to get through. Anniversaries and holidays are other hoops you have to jump through. Support groups help you walk through your grief."

Those groups can be formal and ongoing, through a church or hospital. Sr. Sheila led such a group at the hospital. Or they can be created by individuals for a special purpose, such as holding a memorial service.

"I adapted a service from a funeral home brochure that I've used several times," Sr. Sheila says. "A few months after my brother died, my other siblings and I were gathered together for a vacation. I had asked them if they would want to participate in a service, and they said yes. So I lit four candles – each representing a different quality such as hope and courage – and we took turns reading scripture that reflected how my brother modeled the quality."

"We shared stories afterwards. There were lots of tears but also laughter."

I haven't tried this yet, but the holidays are upon us and I do have plans to visit my siblings. Maybe we'll do it now, maybe next summer.

**Put a new song in my mouth. (Isaiah)**

Benedictine spirituality sees the Divine in all things: the white caps forming on the lake in a brisk winter wind ... the small birds squabbling at the feeder on the patio ... every creature, whether beautiful or not, happy or not, appealing or not. Scripture. Music. Everything.

The Benedictine response is to pray, as Paul says, ceaselessly. One of those ways I've learned to pray is to use Lectio Divina,\* a prayerful listening "with the ear of the heart" to text, art, nature and any activity without preconceived thought or intellectual study.

It has helped me sense my mother, and sense also that she is becoming. That she is new. That she still is here with me, becoming new.

I also accept that my physical loss will always be painful, but redeemed by her new life.

And that this – and every death we will face throughout our lives – is practice for what is to come.

\*To learn more about Lectio Divina, visit [smmsisters.org](http://smmsisters.org).

**Ways to Honor the Dead ... and Our Own Hearts**

1. Write a letter to the one who died and read it to her/him. You can read it at the cemetery, or while doing something – sipping tea, say – that you find comforting.
2. Ask others – siblings, friends – to share their memories, perhaps in a formal service that you create.
3. Browse picture albums.
4. Journal about your own memories.
5. Accept that you will have regrets, and forgive yourself for them.
5. Forgive the one who died for whatever hurt s/he caused you, and whatever hurt you may have caused.
6. Be comforted in knowing your loved one is no longer suffering, but with God, happy and filled with bliss.
7. Pray! As Ron Rolheiser writes, "in praying for loved ones who have died, we continue to hold their hands, and they ours, beyond the chasm of death itself." ([ronrolheiser.com/praying-for-the-dead-2](http://ronrolheiser.com/praying-for-the-dead-2))





## Thinking About Becoming a Nun? What Inquiring Women Learned about Catholic Sisters

Catholic Sisters from monastic, apostolic and cloistered communities shared their traditions, prayer and lifestyles with inquirers during the third annual One-Stop Vocation Retreat sponsored by the Benedictine Sisters.

The Catholic Sisters came from the Upper Mississippi River Valley area to meet with the single Catholic women who ranged in age from 26 to 48.

Host and organizer Sister Stefanie MacDonald, OSB said the attendees – Sisters and inquirers alike – applauded the retreat.

“The retreatants came from Wisconsin, Illinois and Florida,” she said. “They all wanted to learn about the different kinds of religious life available in the area. They wanted to learn the difference between monastic and apostolic. The Sisters were grateful for a chance to explain what makes their communities unique.”

\* Dubuque Trappistine Sister Gail Fitzpatrick, OCSO, shared

her 16-member cloistered community’s prayer and work schedule. She said the two are woven together seamlessly, beginning at 3:30 a.m. and ending at 8:15 p.m. Between times of prayer, the nuns – who strive to keep silence when possible – make candy to support themselves. “We live together 24/7,” Sister Gail said. “We have to learn to love each other with our differences. Adaptability is very important.”

\* Franciscan Sister Ginny Heldorfer, OSF, said her Dubuque community of 230 serves in many ministries throughout and outside the U.S. “As Franciscans, we believe Earth was created to give Jesus a home,” she said. “To help care for the earth and its people, we have begun the Sister Water Project in which we dig wells in Tanzania, and bring fresh water to Honduras.”

\* Davenport Sister Liz Thoman, CHM, said her 97-member community has a long history of empowering women through education. She cited the former Davenport-based Marycrest

College and the CHM Marian spirituality as examples. “As the Blessed Mother did, we believe in saying ‘Yes.’”

\* Dubuque Sister Rita Cameron, PBVM, said her 105-member community was founded to take care of those in need. Today, she said, the community works to give voice to the voiceless. “We host drop-in centers for immigrants. We teach them how to live in America. We teach them how to speak English. We also have a center for the homeless that offers, among other things, medical care and laundry facilities.”

\* Sr. Stefanie said her 39-member community has elements of both apostolic and cloistered life. “We live together under one roof. We come to chapel together at least three times a day for Liturgy of the Hours and Eucharist. We eat and have leisure together. But we go out for ministry. For example, I am a preschool teacher at Grace Catholic Academy in East Moline. But I am home with all of my Sisters for prayers and meals.”

The inquirers asked questions about community prayer styles and living arrangements (the three apostolic communities live in apartments in groups of twos and threes, while the monastic communities live in one monastery together), but they seemed most interested in what drew the Sisters to religious life in the first place.

“I felt called to be a Sister since I was 9 or 10,” Sr. Gail said. “I just wanted to love God. I was taught by the Mercy Sisters, but when I met the Trappistines I fell in love.”

Sr. Ginny said that growing up, she was most touched by service. “I watched my parents serve in many ways. When I got to know the Franciscans – they had been my teachers – I knew they were the ones for me.”

Sr. Rita had a different path entirely. “I was married and have two children and five grandchildren. When my husband died, I met the PBVM Sisters, and knew that was where I should be. They had a conference about me, and decided to let me in. I’ve been a Sister for 14 years, and love it.”



*Pictured l-r: Sisters Stefanie MacDonald, Liz Thoman, Ginny Heldorfer, Gail Fitzpatrick.*

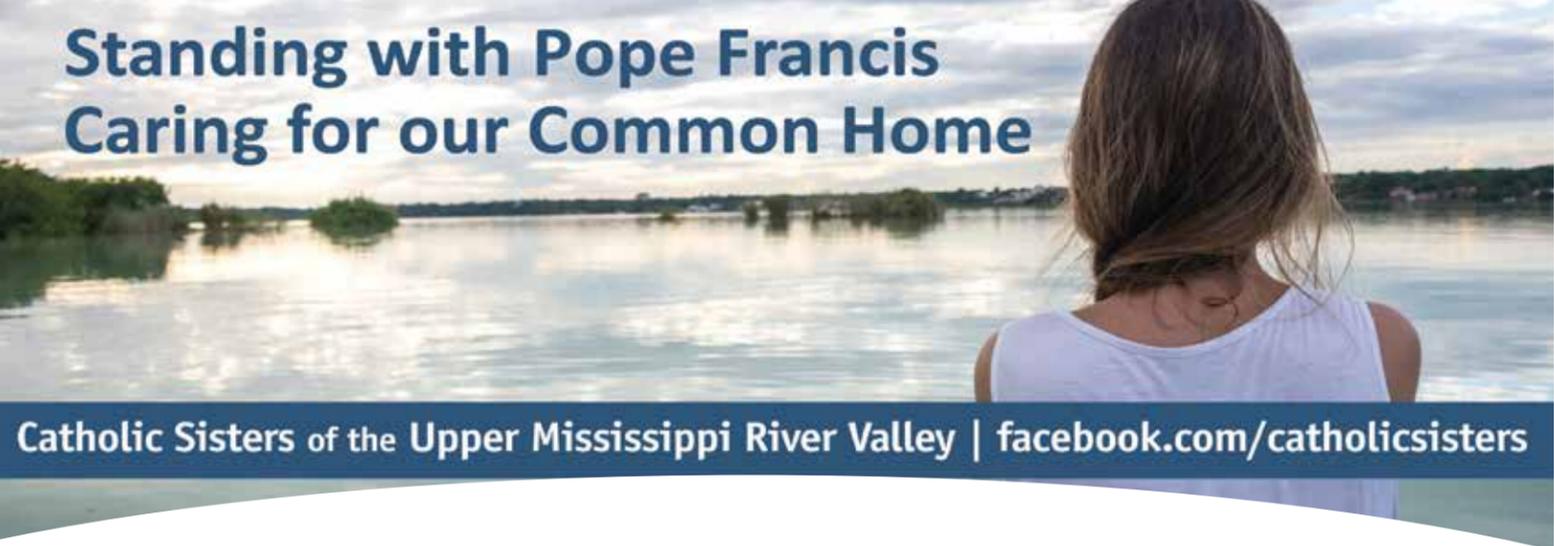
Sr. Liz said she grew up in Nashville, the child of a Baptist mother and Catholic Father. “I was educated by the Mercy and Dominican Sisters, but got to know the CHM Sisters when I came to Marycrest College. I fell in love with them and haven’t looked back.”

Sr. Stefanie remembered getting into an argument with a boyfriend that resulted with a surprising realization. “He asked, ‘Don’t you want to get married?’ And I blurted out, ‘I might want to be a Sister!’ I was shocked. I didn’t expect to say that. I ended up discerning with the Franciscans and a somewhat cloistered community in Nebraska. But when I came to St. Mary Monastery, I felt peace. I felt home.”

Inquirers can learn which Upper Mississippi River Valley community might provide the best fit for them by taking the Midwest Vocation Match quiz, at [smmsisters.org/vocations](http://smmsisters.org/vocations).

Or contact Sister Stefanie MacDonald, OSB at (309) 283-2300 or [smacdonald@smmsisters.org](mailto:smacdonald@smmsisters.org).

# Standing with Pope Francis Caring for our Common Home



Catholic Sisters of the Upper Mississippi River Valley | [facebook.com/catholicsisters](https://facebook.com/catholicsisters)

## Monastery Notes, SMA News

### Ad, Billboard Support Care of the Earth

Area Catholic Sisters shared their support for Pope Francis' environmental message through a national commemorative edition of USA Today. It ran for two weeks prior to his historic U.S. visit in September.

The Sisters who signed the ad comprise 12 communities from the Upper Mississippi River Valley region, including the Benedictine Sisters of St. Mary Monastery.

"We support Pope Francis' call to care for earth," Benedictine Prioress Sandra Brunenn, OSB says. "His encyclical is quite clear. He says we must change our ways for the good of all creation. As it is, Pope Francis notes, each year thousands of plant and animal species become extinct due to human practices. They are gone forever. We must stop valuing our short-term desires for power and money over the long-term values of life."

The ad has been made into a billboard that the 12

communities will display in January, prior to the Iowa caucuses (above).

"Pope Francis' encyclical, 'Laudato Si,' is enriching," Sr. Sandra says. "I encourage everyone to read it. It is filled with wisdom and insight."

### Make Plans for Your Winter Retreat

Renew and refresh your spirit as you move into 2016! For more information about these retreats and others, contact Sister Jackie Walsh at (309) 283-2108 or [retreats@smmsisters.org](mailto:retreats@smmsisters.org), or visit [www.smmsisters.org/retreats](http://www.smmsisters.org/retreats).

### Silent Directed Retreat

This popular retreat is the perfect way to begin your New Year. You will receive personal time with a spiritual director. In addition to daily Eucharist, there will be opportunity for the Sacrament of Reconciliation, Centering Prayer, personal prayer, silence, rest, prayer with the Benedictines and walking the grounds. Jan. 17-Jan. 20.

### Catholic Sister for a Day

Experience Benedictine life for a day with other single Catholic women 18-50 years. Enjoy prayer, meals and conversation with Sisters, and take the step you need to discover whether God is calling you to religious life. Weekends: Jan. 23-24; Mar 5-6; May 21-22 For information contact Sr. Stefanie MacDonald, OSB (309) 283-2300 or [vocation@smmsisters.org](mailto:vocation@smmsisters.org)

### Valentine's Evening

What if God designed marriage to make us holy, more than to make us happy? Come learn more about how your marriage can become a doorway to a closer walk with God, and a light to the world around you. Facilitators: Bob and Jan Gull. Fri. Feb. 12, 6:30-9:30 pm.

### Sister Michelle Rheinlander 1922-2015

Sr. Michelle Rheinlander, OSB, spent much of her life among people with whom conversation was impossible.



From helping run an orphanage of Spanish-speaking children in Mexico to tending newborns in hospital nurseries, her interactions with strangers often required more than verbal communication.

"I learned how to be present from babies," she said. "In nursing school, we had a book-smart student who, the minute she set foot into the nursery, caused the babies to cry. Another classmate, who was not good at book learning, caused them to just sigh. She was truly present to them. Presence is always an exchange.

"Each interaction depends upon understanding the other person's need. In the orphanage in Mexico, I had 87 kids under the age of six. I held each of them every day. I didn't know their language, but I recognized their need. It was to be accepted and held. It was to be loved."

Sr. Michelle was born on May 15, 1922 in St. Louis, Mo.

She attended St. Mary's Academy, Nauvoo, Ill., College of St. Scholastica, Duluth, Minn., and the University of Illinois Champaign, Ill.

Her ministries after entering the Benedictine Community in 1940 included Pastoral Associate, St. Mary's Parish, Moline, Ill.; Public Health Supervisor and Nurse with Native Americans, Arizona; Associate and Superintendent of Peoria Diocesan Schools, Peoria, Ill.; Director Casa Kinder, Santa Clara, Mexico; and teacher in schools throughout the diocese.

## ALUMNAE NEWS

Alice Gavin Enderlin, '55 retired from nursing and continues to enjoy the cottage on the lake with husband, Larry.

Rosemary Woolley, '58 and husband, Dick, have moved to Atlanta where she is very active in her new church, St. Jude Catholic Church.

Cam Ackley, '60 writes from Minnesota that she is grateful for her time at SMA where she grew to love and respect all God's creation.

Cathy Hines Warren, '65 and husband, Tom, enjoy traveling and watching the grandchildren grow up (too fast!).

Kathy Owens Reuland, '67 says SMA had an amazing impact on her, and therefore on her marriage and family.

Marlene McCloskey Zmia, '70 enjoys Connecting Point.

Theresa Blough Strazzella, '71 reports that she is finally a grandmother. "Dominic Jackson Strazzella is a delight!"

Yoshiko Euchida, '92 writes from Japan that she is studying for computer exams. She also reports that Yoshiko Akai, '91 works in the tech industry in New York.



Anne Michelle Nelligan, '83 came from Florida in May to visit Sr. Mary Core and to see our new Monastery for the first time.



Four members of the Class of 1953 (and spouses) celebrated their 80th birthdays at Benet House in September. Front row l-r: Mary Lou Hecks Goebert, Sheila Cain Butler; Back row l-r: Rosie Huffman, Bob Huffman, Joe Goebert, Bob Baxter, Don Butler; not pictured: Pat VanOpdorp Floming.



## SMA Reunions, cont'd.

**The Class of 1965** (above) met in Nauvoo during April, 2015. Front row l-r: Desnie Perez Leander, Diana Cathelyn Dilitkanich, Suzanne Stickelmaier Schierer, Rosie McBride Ossont, Becky Lanza Trautner, Sister Marilyn Ring (Sr. Stephen); Middle row l-r: Peggy Weber Siegfried, Joy Schierer, Barb Glueckert Bryzgalski, Andrea Abrams Corbett, Kathi Haas Rogers, Linda Sullivan Owens, Cathy Hines Warren, Pat Haas Henson; Back row l-r: Linda Mitchell, Mary Croegaert Buysse, Paulette Hansen Fisher, Dianne Wood Adkisson, Carol Cruse Maloney, Kathy Kelley Lee, Jane Amann Wolgemuth, Elsa Sastrias de Monroy; Kneeling: Shirley Pecharich McElvain; not pictured: Ruth Ann Lewis and Marie McHarry.

**The Class of 1959** met in October in Rock Island. Front row l-r: Nancy Tully Louthan, Cecelia Alberts McLaughlin, Janice Cvelbar Skaggs, Gayle Lewandowski Bakouris, Carolyn Caldwell Nicholson; Back row l-r: Sue Johnson Doran, Rosalie Schmidt Cavanaugh, Helen Myers Burrow, Joann Lang Kernick, Miriam Harrison, Barbara Roman Carper, Mary Rita Dean Krolicki, Audrey Koors; not pictured: Jill Murphy Schultz, Diane Petrotte, '60; Patty Harrison, '61, Amy McLaughlin.



**Three Members of the Class of 1955** enjoyed visiting Sally Hanrahan Hedgepeth '55, who had been unable to attend her reunion in April. L - r: Sr. Marilyn Roman, Suzanne Martens Floming-Deskin, Sally Hanrahan Hedgepeth, Patricia Winters DeReu. Sally continues to recuperate from serious back surgery and is doing well.



Four members of the Class of 1957 spent the day chatting and sharing at Benet House last August. Standing l-r: Mary Anne Dunne Abegg, Lois Fister Steele, Rosanne Barnes Myers; seated in front: Mary Cox Schulze.

Lois "Lucky" Fister (above) spent her working career as a college teacher and physician, putting in 26 years with Indian Health Service. She spends most of her time with her family now, with some swimming and tap dancing on the side. Her tap dancing group performed three times at Disneyland in 2013!

Shirley Wieland Skroski '57 was unable to travel to her reunion, but was with her classmates in spirit. She now volunteers in her local hospital's spiritual services and palliative care departments, takes Eucharist to homebound parishioners, serves as the secretary for a nature preserve and spends time with grandchildren and gardening.

## In Memoriam ...

**Stacy Kathleen Steele**, daughter of Lois Fister Steele '57, died Nov. 10, 2015

**Ana Laura Gonzalez, '94**, died Aug. 2015

**Dr. James Paul**, father of Laura Paul Schwartz, '82 and SMA Board of Directors member, died Oct. 15, 2015

**Lewis Jordan**, husband of Martha Vilchis, '53 died Sept. 26, 2015

**Alma Wyffels**, mother of Joan Van Lauwe, '60 and Judy Ahearn, '62 and Janice Ralph, '64 and Joyce Kuhne, '69 (deceased), died Feb. 2015

**Diane Shiminak, '87** died Nov. 2015

**Roberta Jenkins, '46** died Nov. 2015

## Reunion Announcements

### In Rock Island:

**Class of 1952**  
May 14-15, 2016

**Class of 1996**  
July 22-24, 2016

**Class of 1970**  
Aug. 12-14, 2016

**Class of 1976**  
Sept. 9-11, 2016

**Class of 1962**  
**(72nd Birthdays)**  
Sept. 30-Oct. 2, 2016

**Class of 1981**  
Nov. 4-6, 2016



**Connecting Point**  
Winter 2015/16

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

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