

*Sister Helen Maher Garvey, BVM (Robert Joseph)*  
*Wake Stories/Reflections*  
*Marian Hall Chapel, Aug. 17, 2017*

**Kathleen Garvey, Sister**

When members of the community returned home from visiting Gayle and Helen in Kentucky, they wrote, "Helen, we understand you took a vow of poverty, but you have got to get some new towels."

**Sister Kathryn Lawlor, BVM (John Laurian)**

I was appointed the Secretary of the Congregation by Helen during her second term. I loved the job. I loved Helen. She was open and creative, unassuming, and she had a great sense of humor. During that period, I said to Helen, "The Motherhouse is a hundred years old. Shouldn't we celebrate the centennial?" Helen agreed, so I went to Sister Jean Monica Lanahan, BVM, who was the curator, and she ran with the ball. We redecorated the parlors into heritage centers, we made the former library into a prairie room, we upholstered furniture, we hung lace curtains, we redid the main corridor.

Afterwards we invited the city in for tours and published a newspaper that had features about the sisters who built the Motherhouse. Every month we planned a special celebration with hired speakers from throughout the country. We invited the sisters from the missions to come and celebrate with us. It was a fantastic year of restoration and celebration. After it was all over, this is how Helen summed it up, "When it was suggested that we celebrate the centennial of the Motherhouse, I thought that meant a tea on a Sunday afternoon. One hundred thousand dollars later, I realized I was wrong." She greatly exaggerated the cost, but she had a point. It was due to Helen's wonderful openness that it all happened.

**Sister Eileen Powell, BVM (Robertrese)**

In 1943, when Helen was in third grade and I was in first, we met on a little yellow school bus going to our favorite school, Our Lady of Loretto in Hempstead, N.Y., to be taught by our favorite sisters. In those days, Helen was quiet and serious. It wasn't until she came to the BVM community that she found her voice. I suspect the reason, and some of you may have discovered it if you have met the Garvey family, was that she was overshadowed by those brothers. I suspect that when Helen left us, she was greeted by a gang of Garveys, many of whom would never again deny her the podium.

**Sister Mary McCauley, BVM (Mercedie)**

As many of you know, I have known Helen since my early teaching days in New York. She was teaching at St. Thomas in West Hempstead and I was at Our Lady of Loretto in Hempstead. Later, she began as principal of Our Lady of Loretto and I became principal of St. Thomas. What a wonderful mentor she was from my early days of educational administration. I shall always be grateful for her assistance during the days of what we called "Zone 10 Principal Meetings."

In 1976, Helen was elected vice president of our congregation and came to Dubuque, and I missed her. Then one day, I got a phone call, and I always dreaded phone calls, but when I heard on the other end, "This is Helen Maher Garvey," I thought, "What does she want now?" Through her persuasive power, her wisdom and her wit, she convinced me that I should leave New York, a place that I loved, and come to Dubuque, leave the elementary school playground and serve as the administrator of our nursing home. It was quite a move. Helen and I have a very long history for which I shall be eternally grateful. I have innumerable memories and stories that I could recount, but the memory that will remain in my

mind and heart for the rest of my life, is the memory of the last two weeks of her life, when she lived most faithfully one of her presidential addresses, entitled “Grace Is in the Struggle.” How true!

Grace was evident in her struggle to continue to live life to the full, and then again, so very evident in the manner in which she accepted her impending death. She died as she lived—with integrity, simplicity, kindness, love and humor. She exemplified the phrase in our well-loved hymn to Our Lady of Mount Carmel “and to learn that love is loss,” even telling us that it is much easier to sing that song with fervor in one’s youth than to experience the reality that love is loss. All of us are going to miss her intensely, but fortunately, all of us all have a strong and firm conviction in the communion of saints. So, Helen, we are going to continue to seek your advice, we expect you to make us very happy and to help us laugh, and please know of our constant love and gratitude.

#### **Eugene Garvey, Brother**

Many years ago, I went to the same high school where three of my sisters set scholastic records. You don’t want to go to a high school where your sisters set scholastic records! There was a Latin teacher named S.M. Virgine Beveridge, BVM and she knew Helen well. “I was just told that you are Helen’s brother.” “Yes.” “You are not Helen Garvey’s brother!” I barely made it through. I said, “Well, we have the same parents.” She was a very good student.

#### **Sister Bernadette McManigal, BVM (Lucinus)**

Helen often spoke of the fact that she came from a very lively family. She told the story that her father had set up a cart where they sold fruits and vegetables. That money paid for the education of the Garvey children. Well, as they were all out there and time was a little lagging, she told of playing ball with the peaches, apples, etc., and spilled them on the ground in the mud. They washed them off, raised the price, and sold them as hand-washed fruit.

#### **Nancy Seruto, Walt Disney Imagineer**

I’ll speak for another kind of community—a community of artists, writers, designers and musicians that were fortunate enough to work with Helen on the “Women & Spirit” exhibit. Helen came into our lives over 10 years ago, united our community with your community, and changed all of our lives in a very fundamental way. We remember the whole experience as joyful. At each opening of the exhibit, Helen would come and give an opening speech. Usually, I, or one of my coworkers, would have to follow, which was impossible. At one point, one of my colleagues said, “You would have to set this place on fire to get attention after Helen has the microphone.” She was remarkable. I will always take with me and it will always echo in my ears, Helen calling to me from across one of the museums, “Seruto, do your job!”

#### **Sister Catherine Dunn, BVM**

Some of us are here today who entered with Helen. She was a joy and fun. However, Helen came to us a very strong Republican and it was an election year. All we talked about at the table was politics. It got very heated. Our postulant mistress said, “That’s it! No more politics.” So we did not talk politics; we barely talked at all!

#### **Sister Therese Mackin, BVM (Jeremy)**

I’ve respected and regarded Helen highly for ages. One of the really nice things I loved about her was her ability to speak directly to us. My last contact with her was in the dining room. She saw me across the dining room, not very far, but she raised her hand, looked at me and she smiled. That last smile I will always cherish.

**Carol Fehringer, Lexington, Ky.**

I walked many years of joy and trials with Helen. Her famous saying at every event that was very, very difficult was, "Ah, the life we have chosen!"

**Sister Karen Conover, BVM**

In 1987, when Pope John Paul II was in San Francisco visiting the United States, Helen Garvey was then the president of LCWR (Leadership Conference of Women Religious). Many of us serving there had ringside seats in the Cathedral that evening. An oft-told story is of Helen rising to address the pope and greeting him by giving him a little kiss. Later, we all said to her, "You kissed the pope!" She did not believe it until she saw the replay of the newsreel and, indeed, she had kissed John Paul II. That's probably what made him holy.

**Sister Margaret Sanasardo, BVM (Paul Joseph)**

I was a new regional in 1986 and Helen was the president. The first LCWR meeting I attended was in Milwaukee. Helen made it a point that I was met, greeted, and taken out for dinner. We were standing in the midst of an overwhelming crowd. All of a sudden, we saw this little person standing by the side and Helen said, "Oh, that sister is an Irish Dominican from New Orleans; Helen Hermy was her name. "Let's ask Helen to come and join us since she's all by herself." Well, we went to dinner and neither Helen nor I got in two words. This Irish Dominican talked circles around us. Helen said, "I can't believe this." I said, "That's the way they are. The Irish are very lively and affective." It was a fun time and a wonderful experience being with her on the Council when she was president. Very special.

**Sister Mary Martens, BVM (Loras)**

Helen started her professional life teaching children in a classroom. One of the last places that she graced was a classroom in the Roberta Kuhn Center at Mount Carmel. Helen and I (I won't really say taught) facilitated what in effect was a book club of seniors. There was nothing to teach because all of the content came from the students themselves. Invariably, Helen would show up with a New York Times article that was pertinent to what we were reading. One time she brought a cartoon that showed several women in a car who had just robbed a bank and the caption was, "And to think we started out as a book club." Her sense of humor! Just before Thanksgiving, Helen had to leave the book club. She was quite supportive and regretful that I had to do the last classes without her. She really touched the whole group. She was a joy to work with no matter whom she was teaching.

**Sister Donna Day, SL, St. Louis, Mo.**

I bring you warm thoughts from my community, the Sisters of Loretto. Helen was our consultant for a few years. We were dealing with the closing of our retirement centers. When I saw this quote in the program, "Let us trust our experience," it sounded like what she said to us every time she was with us. "Can we do it?" "Where is your courage?" "Take a look at your numbers." You can imagine the challenge and the questions she asked us. Well, Helen, two months ago we did it; we closed them. Thank you!

**Mary Garvey Fox, Niece**

Helen was so many things, but mostly she was such a model of humility. I sent her a note after she received the LCWR award and she replied, "There are so many people who have done so much who are not so honored." In May, she was in the hospital. I talked with her while she was recovering and wished her well. She said, "I am doing well. I am getting better. I have such good doctors. There are so many people without health insurance." She always thought about "the others."

**Colleen Hopkins, Niece**

Over the years, I really grew to admire my aunt. She did so many wonderful things, but first she was just my aunt. When we were children, she and Sister Gayle Brabec, BVM would come to town. It was always great to see them. She was fun loving. She took away any preconceived notions of what a religious sister might be. One time in particular, maybe I was nine years old, we were out and about with Sister Gayle and Helen and we took them to some play structure. We thought we were so tricky to lure them up the steps when sliding down a pole was the only way to get down. I'm sure they could have gone back down the steps, but we barred their exit. Sister Gayle and Aunt Helen were so good-natured; they slid down the pole and chuckled about it. She was always so fun loving and thoughtful. As I grew and learned, I saw so many different facets of her that made me so proud to be her niece.

### **Jeanie Hagedorn, CHM**

My sisters and I were taught by the BVMs from kindergarten through senior year in high school. We knew and loved many of you and those who have gone before us. It was when Sister Dolores McHugh, BVM, our dear friend with whom we lived for nine years, became vice president that we met Helen, who was president at the time. In later years, Helen agreed to work with our community, the Sisters of Humility, as a consultant for our leadership team. Her guidance for the last four plus years has been a real grace for all of the Sisters of Humility.

In their name, we want to thank you, the BVM congregation, for sharing her with us. We also want to thank you, her family. She has been a grace in our life. Elaine and I were so blessed a couple of weeks ago when you celebrated your golden jubilees to be here for those three days of celebration. We had an opportunity to visit with Helen for about 15 minutes. It was such a blessing. We will never forget the grace of spending the years and those 15 minutes with her. As we left, she said, "I want you to know that working with the Humilities has been the capstone of my professional life." The Humilities are watching from the chapel in Davenport and we all say, "Thank you, Helen."

### **Ann Marie Sander, IHM**

I am a Sister of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and on the staff of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). I had the privilege of working with Helen for a number of years. What I will miss most about her is calling her a friend and a wonderful mentor, as I know she has been to so many of us here. When Helen heard from her doctor that she might want to consider dialysis, she called and told me that she was speaking with her friends about whether or not that would be a choice. When I asked her if she was actually thinking about doing that, she said, "No, it is time for me to go." I remember saying to Helen, "I respect that and want to support you on whatever decision you make, but I just want you to go on forever with us." Helen said with such confidence and such surety, "I will be with you forever." I think that is what she means for all of us to hear today. She will be with us forever.

### **Therese Fox, Sister**

Her humor stayed to the end. I had the grace to be with Helen when she died. The day before she was semi-conscious. My son Paul was with me and, at one point, he decided to go for a walk. He told her that he was going to check out the Mississippi. She said, "Well, thank you and goodbye." I said, "Not goodbye. You're not going yet." She said, "You always were bossy."

### **Sister Diane Forster, BVM**

When I was in eighth grade, Helen was teaching fifth grade in Antioch, Ill. The girls were sent to sing a new hymn with her class. We listened to her children sing it as she had taught it. I was racking my eighth-grade brain about how to tell Sister that she's wrong. Finally, I said, "Sister, we know this differently." She said, "How do you know it?" So that solved that problem. Throughout my life in the

community, she has been there for me at some moments of crisis, some moments of decision, and I have always been grateful for her wisdom and insight into the human heart.

**Sister Kathleen Conway, BVM (Richard Marie)**

I was out in New York with Sister Kathleen Franklin, BVM who had decided to return here to Dubuque. Kathleen and I needed some help, so people volunteered. One of those people was Helen. She came out and we packed boxes and cleaned the rooms and other various things that need to be done when moving out of a house that was lived in for a long time. Helen accompanied Kathy and me across country to Dubuque. We chatted, read maps, laughed, and missed motel stops along the way. It was on that trip that I thought, “This woman is exactly the same person whether she is packing boxes or whether she is driving across country or whether she is accepting a leadership award from LCWR or whether she is addressing the community or whether she is talking at the table.

**Sister Irene Lukefahr, BVM**

Here at the Motherhouse, the month of July was filled with one grand celebration after another. We had an outstanding golden jubilee with a wonderful liturgy. I went in to talk with Helen after the liturgy, which she had watched on TV. She said, “We need these celebrations! We need these celebrations!”

By that time, Helen had refused dialysis and knew that she was dying. The next week, we had members of two sets come back for their celebration. I didn’t see her after that, but I’m sure she was saying, “We need these celebrations!” I just have the feeling that Helen did not want to interfere with anyone’s celebration. She passed away about a half hour after most of the guests had left. That was just like Helen—always thinking about somebody else. Thank you, Helen.

**Sister Catherine Jean Hayen, BVM**

I appreciated Helen’s leadership here in the City of Dubuque when she gathered together the congregations of the city to develop the Dubuque Housing Initiative for people who lost their homes due to a widening of a highway, and they couldn’t afford housing. She was marvelous in that leadership. One of the buildings is named after her—Helen Garvey Place.

**Sister Mary Angela Buser, BVM**

I remember Helen from the 1960s as a seventh and eighth grade teacher. She was a wonderful, enthusiastic, creative, fun loving person who was loved by all the students. That relationship of many years has never changed. To me, that was one of Helen’s greatest gifts—that she maintained that relationship. No matter what position she held, it was always the same. Since her death, we have had the privilege of listening to several of her addresses. They are so rich in spiritual leadership that I thank her especially for all of her leadership to us in so many ways. Thank you, Helen.

**Sister Brigid Mary Hart, BVM**

I also was fortunate enough to work with Helen in New York for a year. One of the things I really remember about Helen was her affirmation of us. I again experienced that when I was at Wright Hall in Chicago. When she was in the city, she would come into the dining room and acknowledge all of us. There was always laughter and a movement from table to table where I am sure she was affirming each one and their own gifts. I am very grateful for that affirmation, Helen.

**Tom Fox, National Catholic Reporter**

I had the opportunity for many years to work with Sister Theresa Kane on the NCR Board. When she was ready to retire from the board, I asked her, “Well, who do you want to replace you?” Without hesitation,

she said, "Helen Garvey." So Helen Garvey was chosen by Theresa Kane and I had the opportunity to work with Helen Garvey. We used to have board meetings with a dinner the night before. Everyone wanted to sit at Helen's table because everyone knew they would have a lot of fun. If you weren't at Helen's table, you were always looking over at it because there was lots of laughter coming from that table.

Helen was actually a product of many years of the church and women religious. When I was thinking of Helen, I thought that if you took all the joy of the women religious in this country since the Council; and you took the care these women have had for the church and the poor and needy; and you took the wisdom with which they operated and discerned over the years when things were difficult; and if you took the compassion that they showed and their commitment to justice, to peace and the environment; and if you stirred all of this together and put it in a blender, out would pour Helen Garvey.

She is a quintessential woman religious over these past 50 years. It is really fitting that she had the opportunity to lead the exhibition on women religious. I see the full size photo of Helen at the end of this exhibit, the culmination of the exhibit. I have truly been blessed to have had the chance to work with Helen Garvey.

**Sister Janice Bader, CPPS**

Until about a year ago, I was at the National Religious Retirement Office. Helen worked very closely with us planning workshops with religious communities around the country from 2009 onward. While the retirement office may have been the one providing the funding to the communities for their plans, Helen was really the inspiration and the motivation by the presentation that she gave at every one of our workshops. I know there are religious all around this country deeply impacted by her and deeply grateful to her.