

*Sister Louise Szkodzinski, BVM (Christiane)  
Wake Stories/Reflections  
Marian Hall Chapel, Jan. 25, 2017*

**Sister Susan Rink, BVM (Michaela)**

I was introduced to Louise during the first week of the novitiate. She was one set ahead of me. The congregation had recognized her musical talents already, so she was giving music lessons to people in my set and teaching music classes. Music is not one of the areas in which I excelled, but nevertheless, I got to know her.

More importantly, I knew Louise at Mundelein College. I recognized her as a wonderful presence on the seventh floor of our skyscraper building. The seventh floor was the floor where the music department was housed. She was there constantly giving lessons. Most of the sisters who were teaching at Mundelein during my time were either elderly and lived in the building or lived outside in apartments. Louise lived in the one apartment that was actually in Mundelein College. The apartment was on the 10th floor. Occasionally, I would go visit the folks up there.

What I found out about Louise was that she was a great connoisseur of food. She paid a lot of attention to the health benefits of foods. She frequently purchased food for the people on that floor. Actually, I was not able to see much of Louise here, but I often wondered whether or not she was satisfied with the quality of the food.

**Sister Marjorie Heidkamp, BVM (Herberdette)**

Louise, or Sister Mary Christiane as we called her, was a bright light in my novitiate days. She had an office on the novitiate floor so she was one of the few professed sisters we were able to talk to. She took our untrained, raw, young voices and created music that was spectacular. I used to love Holy Hours at the age of 18 just because the music was so marvelous. This was spring of 1953 and my set was newly-received. We were getting used to our new names. I had expected to be Bridget, but I was being called Sister Mary Herberdette, a little different. We were getting used to navigating around wearing the hood and the veil. We were getting used to working in the deep, deep silence of the novitiate.

Well, in the midst of all that, Sister Mary Hogan (Leo) called me into her office one day. She said she had a call from my father. My sister had a healthy baby girl, and they were going to name her after me. Well, I was so excited that I could hardly stand it. Of course, there was no one to talk to. I went out of Mary's office and saw Louise's door ajar. I knocked on the door and she invited me in. I said, "I have to tell this to somebody. My sister had a baby girl and they are going to name her after me." And with a horrified look, Louise said, "Herberdette!"

**Sister Judith Callahan, BVM (Eugene Mary)**

Sister Jacquelyn Cramer (John Kathleen) wrote the following two sentences and I want to bear witness that it is true. "It was her mission to develop all the skill and potential of her students, to help them do it right, and to share the beauty she found in the music she loved. She demanded much of her talented students and encouraged their continued pursuit of education and skill."

All my life as a child, I wanted music lessons, but we could not afford it. When I got to Mundelein College in 1961, she was our music methods teacher. We had paper pianos on our desks that we practiced on. She spotted in me a keen interest, a desire to learn, and an enthusiasm for teaching music in schools. She took me for private lessons for a whole semester. But as I said, she wanted the best out of her

students. I would have had to drop French and philosophy. The directors of the Scholasticate did not appreciate that idea. I had to drop the music.

However, she taught me to spot the talent and interest of students and to go the extra mile to help them. I learned enough skill and enough music theory to direct confidently a 50-plus children's choir when I first started teaching. Later, I learned the guitar. Then I led liturgies with the children and taught them guitar.

When I went to Ecuador, I was able to participate in the liturgies there and taught a number of Ecuadorian young people how to play the guitar. They passed me up in probably two months. Eventually in Kankakee, Ill., I led the music for the Spanish liturgies and activities. I think of her as an inspiring teacher who can spot that little gleam in the eye and follow through. I'm grateful for her and all of the people she has touched not only through her own ministries, but through mine as well.

### **Sister Ann Daniel O'Neill, BVM**

I entered with Louise. I am one of two piano pupils she had in the novitiate. We would spend the whole morning removed from the rest of the set and off in our own area. She was a marvelous teacher. She taught me how to memorize music—one measure at a time backwards.

I think of her as a realist and an idealist. As a realist, she knew what ordinary living was. She knew what it was before she ever entered since she worked in her father's bakery. She was at work at 4 a.m. in the morning before she started the rest of her day. In the community, she was very ordinary, doing ordinary things. As an idealist, she had hopes of being a professional pianist, but that did not happen. Yet, she did so well. You could see her love and unity with God. She was a very prayerful woman. Thank you, Louise, for all you did for me.

### **Sister Mary Crimmin, BVM (Agnes)**

My connection with Louise goes back to the 1940s when I was a student at Our Lady Help of Christians grade school. We had a lay teacher for music that we fondly referred to as Miss Louise; we never had to deal with Szkodzinski. I really do appreciate my love of music and the beat I have in my feet because she taught us how to beat rhythms on our desk until we were dead. I love to dance, I love to sing, and I am grateful to Louise for all of those loves. Thank you, Louise.

### **Sister Therese Jacobs, BVM (Therese Carmelle)**

I am the other piano student to which Sister Ann Daniel O'Neill referred. Louise was meticulous and challenging, but always encouraging. When we took piano, we learned all the theory that goes with it. We often were busy with Louise when the rest of the set was at recreation. We did learn from her and loved her.

Another thing I remember about those very early days was being up until 8 p.m. at night and outside singing. She would teach us a round, "My Hat, It Has Three Corners." She was just an inspiring woman. I was not doing music consistently during the years, but when I was in Ghana, I was doing music for the liturgy. I asked her for some simple things I could play ahead of time. She gave me copies of several pieces of music. She was charming.

Two days before she died, I went into her room. I knew she was quite frail. She was getting into her bed after lunch and she looked tired. I said, "Louise, do you know me?" She looked at me. I said, "I'm your old student." Yes, she knew me. Thank you, Louise.

**Sister Bertha Fox, BVM (Dolorose)**

All that everyone has said up to this time, I duplicate. Louise was an example not only as musician, but also by being a priest server, helping in the bake house, always doing things like that. I am so privileged she taught me. She taught me something about the psalms that has stayed with me to this day. She taught me about the spirituality of teaching music, about how to find God in all things. She taught me piano pedagogy, how to teach piano. She taught me how to conduct. She prepared me for all the things that I had no idea that I was going to have to do. What she taught has been my guiding light all these years. For that, I am very, very grateful. She was a good, spiritual BVM and a superb teacher of everything.

**Sister Mary Alma Sullivan, BVM (Robert Emmett)**

This is a secondhand story. Several decades ago, Sister Louise French (Anne) told me this about Louise. When she was completing her Ph.D. at the University of Indiana, she had a choice of where she would focus. She chose performance. Her advisor was very concerned that she would choose a discipline that difficult. She stuck with it and gave her final performances as part of her Ph.D. program. It explains why she was as thorough as she was, as disciplined as some of the stories told here suggest. If there is anyone here who would like to confirm this story, I would appreciate it.

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

We have spoken before of the many times Louise taught us, especially when we were in the novitiate. Birdie (Sister Bertha Fox) mentioned her love of the psalms. Louise had a special two-line psalm with which she began class. I don't remember the whole thing, but I connect Louise with "sweet it is." Those were the first words of the psalm translation that she used. She saw life as sweet in the sense that she was always happy. That she has passed on to us.

**Sister Ann Harrington, BVM (St. Remi)**

I lived with Louise at Mundelein for quite a while. I was struck this morning as I looked through the pictures at the chapel entrance. Louise was smiling in every single picture; I didn't see one where she wasn't smiling. It reminded me that when I saw her at Mundelein, she was always smiling and she was always animated.

**Sister Mary Alma Sullivan, BVM**

I forgot to add that according to Louise, she was the first woman to graduate with a Ph.D. and an emphasis in performance at the University of Indiana. That's quite a thing.

**Sister Vivian Wilson, BVM (Lauren)**

I entered in February 1948, six months after Louise. My first time in choir I stood in front of her. She kept hitting the top of my hood with her finger. I didn't catch on to what was going on. She told me that she would see me afterwards. She took me to a room and said to me, "You know you sing flat." I did not know that. She said, "We need to work on it." Every once in awhile she would corral me and, finally, she got me right on. I didn't know that just before you hit a note there is a dissonance that doesn't match. She wanted me to hear that and get up to where I should be. I spent many an hour with her working to get on pitch. I was happy the day she finally let me go.

**Sister Mary Paul Francis Bailey, BVM**

I can verify the story that Mary Alma told. It really is a fact that Louise did train to be a concert pianist. That was her ambition; it really was her dream. Part of the problem was that every summer she went back to school at the university, they would have a different professor in charge. Each professor wanted

her to do music in his way. So she learned it this way and then the next one would come in and she would learn it that way, and Louise wanted her way.

When we were novices, Mary Judine Wolfe (Nicodema) and I were taking a course in Latin from Sister Mary Joseph Aloysius Buck. On summer afternoons when we did not have a class, we were so beautifully chosen to go Terrance Donaghoe Auditorium at Clarke University and sit in the back while Louise was practicing. I got tired of Bach fugues.

Louise also did a lot of cute things. She had a habit of holding up a little chakra over her food. She did this in the dining room at Marian Hall also. Whatever ever happened to that chakra—if it moved you should eat it; if it didn't move, you shouldn't eat it. It would go over every bit of her food.

One thing that was not mentioned was that while we were at Mundelein, a very famous, well-known Polish choir was welcomed to stay at Mundelein as their home. Louise was of Polish ancestry but had not been using much of her Polish. While they were there, she proceeded to study Polish so that she could be proficient in it. My mother was Polish, but we did not speak Polish at home because of my father's Irish ancestry. However, I did learn a few phrases, some of which I would never repeat. Whenever Louise would meet me, she would always say "Dzień dobry," which means "Good morning," or another phrase in Polish. I was smart enough to be able to answer that.

So last week when she was really low, I went up several times to visit her. Each time I went in, I would speak to her in Polish so that she could answer me. Well, she was just finishing breakfast one day and they told me that she was not too good. I decided to sit and talk to her so I spoke to her in Polish. No answer. I said, "Hey, Louise, did you hear me say 'Good morning' in Polish?" She opened her eyes and looked at me. I said, "Well, you certainly know who I am, don't you?" "Franya," she said. That's Polish for Francis. She never called me Francis; she always called me Paul Francis.

One other story. When we were in the novitiate, she decided we needed to learn how to sing even if we were not in the choir. She said to me, "I want you to learn a song." I said, "You are really funny, aren't you." She said, "You are going to learn it." I could sing a little bit at that time. If we practiced that little song once, we practiced it a million times. Then she said we were going to have a recital. I think she was teaching some other nuns a different song. My heart was actually broken when we never had that recital.

#### **Sister Jeanne Granville, BVM (Suzette)**

I am another member of Louise's set. This is bringing back such wonderful memories. Since we weren't the same height, we never got to be partners, but we did get to know each other. I met her rather recently in another situation. We recalled and reflected on all our wonderful memories. I had hoped to visit more with her, but I didn't realize this was going to be it. All my memories of her are very positive, very joyous, very happy.

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

Louise was my piano teacher at Mundelein College. As others have said, she was outstanding. She wanted the music played well, understood well, and interpreted well with real depth, not just the notes, but as close to perfect as possible and with real musicianship to back it up. Louise often performed in a lecture-recital format. I think that was something that served her perfectly. She was able to explain the music, to teach actually, before she performed it. It was very satisfying to both her and the listeners with understanding being the key to what she was playing.

The Mundelein music faculty at the time I was there were always learning new music, new skills, branching out beyond their comfort zone. Louise even took guitar lessons for a while when guitar became a staple at liturgical celebrations. I don't know that she ever played in public, but she admitted to taking guitar lessons.

She was interested in many, many things; it would be an extremely long list. She read very widely and was sometimes out of her comfort zone with things that she read. When Louise moved to Mount Carmel, she was an accompanist for the choir and our liturgies as long as she was able. At that time, I was directing the choir. You can imagine, I was a bit nervous at the role reversal where I would be in charge and Louise would be the accompanist. She put me at ease about this because more than once after a rehearsal, she said to me, "Was I OK?" She meant was I happy with HER playing? She said, "I don't want to disappoint you."