

Sister Gladys Marie, CSC

(Laura Maureen Martin)

July 7, 1930 – January 30, 2023

These memories were written by Sister Gladys Marie with assistance from Sister M. Michaeleen (Frieders), CSC, and her friend Kathleen Brunton, who read them at Sister Gladys Marie's memorial Mass.

My name is Kathe Brunton. A few years ago, Sister Gladys Marie and Sister Michaeleen asked me to help write the story of their ministry in southern Maryland, and we put that story into a book called *Mary's Song*. It was a privilege for me to do that for these two wonderful women.

Prior to her death, Sister Gladys Marie also asked me to assist her in writing this memento. I was honored to do so, and I am honored to read her words today.

Young Laura Maureen Martin grew up during the Great Depression in the coal-mining mountains of Utah. Everyone was poor; she didn't know there was anything else. Her parents, Edward Martin and Gladys Bowcutt Martin, worked hard, though neither was in good health. Edward had an illness that prevented him from working in the mines. Instead, he drove a bus to get children to school down the mountain.

The baby of the family, Laura came late in life to her parents. The oldest child was Margaret, then Dorothy, Jerry and Dan, who was two years older than Laura. She and Dan were close companions in their early years. But before Laura was born, her mother had two miscarriages, which grieved her deeply. When the doctor said she could not have any more children, Gladys Bowcutt Martin refused to listen. She adamantly determined that she would have more. And so, baby Laura proved the doctor wrong.

When Laura was around 9, the family moved down the mountain, where Laura and Dan attended a Catholic school. The teachers were Daughters of Charity. They were strict, but Laura liked them.

One evening, the parish invited families to a party in the church basement. Young Laura felt an urge to leave the party, so she went upstairs to the quiet of the sanctuary. She talked to God. At that moment, she knew she wanted to be a nun. When she told her dad about this decision, he said, “Don’t even think about it.”

In high school, Laura met the Sisters of the Holy Cross at Saint Mary of the Wasatch. She was inspired by their welcoming spirit and joy. After high school, Laura again told her parents she was going to join an order. Her dad again said, no. She said right back, yes.

Well, Dad thought a long visit to family in Florida would cure her of that notion. So she spent a year in the Sunshine State with her sister Dorothy and Dorothy’s family.

After that year in Florida, Laura became a registered nurse because she wanted to help people. But even while working in hospitals, the thought of entering the convent didn’t stray far from her mind. Much prayer and discernment led her to the decision to join the Sisters of the Holy Cross. Her first visit to Indiana in 1955, however, was a letdown when she saw the flat land. She questioned herself. “What am I doing here without my mountains?” But after a month or so, she rallied and didn’t look back.

Laura made her first profession on August 15, 1957, receiving the name Sister Gladys Marie in honor of her mother. She was happy to soon find herself back in her beloved mountains, nursing at the Congregation’s Holy Cross Hospital in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Over the coming years, at Holy Cross Hospital and at Saint Alphonsus Hospital in Boise, Idaho, her take-charge capabilities became evident and she moved into administrative roles.

Sister Gladys Marie completed a graduate program in hospital administration at Xavier University in Cincinnati. She then went on to become an assistant CEO, first at Saint Agnes Hospital in Fresno, California, and then at St. Mary's Hospital in Cairo, Illinois.

Her three years at St. Mary's were trying ones. This southern Illinois city, site of the Congregation's first hospital, was rocked by racial violence. Cairo was in such a deplorable state that the head of the Civil Rights Commission — Father Theodore M. Hesburgh, CSC, president of the University of Notre Dame — came to evaluate the situation. The commission commended St. Mary's Hospital as the only facility in the city having no civil rights violations.

People's basic rights were always a concern for Sister Gladys. When the National Migrant Worker Council — co-founded by Sister Michaelleen — was being organized, Sister Gladys Marie was called on to help set up satellite health units. She drove her little Volkswagen Beetle throughout several states to determine how best to serve the people who harvested the nation's fruits and vegetables.

In 1972, Sister Gladys returned to Fresno, this time as the CEO. There, she founded the Holy Cross Center for Women to help single women, mothers and their children who lived on the streets. She also started a daycare facility for employees, understanding that women would be less stressed at work knowing their children were nearby and well taken care of. Eventually, the childcare facility expanded to include daycare for the elderly. Both were novel concepts in the 1970s.

In fact, in every ministry, Sister Gladys Marie employed what she called her "little streak of feminism." She was well aware that highly qualified female candidates were systematically overlooked when it came to management positions. She felt women simply needed an equal chance to prove themselves.

So wherever she went, she built her executive teams with women and promoted women whenever possible. At one hospital, she knew

of at least four nurses who would be excellent managers. In time, she promoted each one.

When she was appointed CEO of Mount Carmel Health in Columbus, Ohio, Sister Gladys again noticed there were no women on her executive team. When a position opened, she hired a recruiter to provide a list of qualified candidates. But they were all men.

Handing the list back, she said, “I believe that very good talented women are bypassed.” After some hesitation, the recruiter searched and found an excellent female candidate, who Sister Gladys Marie hired. The recruiter later told her he had never recruited a woman for an executive position before.

Sister Gladys Marie once said she liked being a hospital administrator because “You have the ability to make changes.” Were truer words ever spoken?

But not every situation was about promoting women. Sometimes, it involved protecting them. One day at one of her hospitals, two young housekeepers came to her office and asked to speak confidentially. They told her a terrible story of abuse by their boss.

Sister Gladys was horrified. She sent the women home and said she’d take care of it. And she did. She began a discreet inquiry, and by day’s end, the housekeepers’ stories were shown to be factual. Both the supervisor and his assistant were fired immediately.

Sister Gladys was always attuned to the hundreds of employees under her care. In every ministry, she made a practice of meeting with every employee in the hospital at least quarterly. She cared deeply about people and was known to be inclusive and welcoming.

When Mount Carmel Hospital celebrated its 100th anniversary, Sister Gladys Marie didn’t invite just the few sisters who had served in management; she invited every Sister of the Holy Cross who had ministered there in any capacity.

Her time in management took an abrupt turn in 1989, following the Congregation's General Chapter, which focused on a "preferential option for the poor." Sister Gladys Marie was wrapping up her term as Eastern Region superior for the Congregation and she felt a tug on her heart.

She had long worked in institutions that provided care to thousands of people in poverty, but could she do more? And could she do it more directly? She gathered together a few other sisters she knew who were feeling the same way.

Together, the three of them — Sisters Gladys Marie, Michaelleen and Mary Louise Full — spent a day of prayer and discernment to seek God's will for them. Their prayers were answered.

To find a location where they could serve people who were poor, they took weekend trips to Mississippi and Alabama, where poverty reigned. They met with the bishops of those dioceses to determine where their call was leading them, but it was a disappointing venture. Sister Gladys suggested meeting with Cardinal James A. Hickey in Washington, D.C., whom she knew. He shared that, yes, there was poverty in the diocese, and he would be happy to support them. So they went to southern Maryland to visit a parish as the cardinal suggested. They were taken to a ramshackle trailer, where they were welcomed by an 80-year-old man on crutches who was an amputee and his petite wife Teresa.

After the sisters shared their desires, Teresa, with tears in her eyes, said, "Sisters, please come." That was the answer to their prayers. Later, they moved to southern Maryland and responded to this call by walking the back roads and knocking on doors to determine the needs of the people and how they could help. They called their ministry Mary's Song.

Over the next 13 years, they created a host of social structures and safety nets — like the Mary's Song Soup Kitchen, the Values Program

for African American Girls, and the Health Partners clinic that, 30 years later, is still going strong in serving the underserved.

In her last couple years in Maryland, she and Sister Michaelleen began offering vocation programs for young women interested in religious life. An invitation from sisters at the motherhouse led them to take their vocation program back to Indiana.

But Sister Gladys' desire to work with those who are poor soon took her to South Bend's west side. She was happy in that ministry until pending surgeries necessitated her return to the motherhouse.

Toward the end of her time here on Earth, Sister Gladys Marie spent considerable time reflecting on her days. She was particularly grateful to God for her vocation to Holy Cross and had deep appreciation to the community for all the opportunities to serve others, especially those who are poor.