

Memento for Sister Maura Brannick, CSC

(Mary Louise Brannick)

February 8, 1926 - October 18, 2019

These memories were lovingly prepared by those who knew Sister Maura and shared their reflections. They were written and read by Sister Maureen Grady, CSC, at the wake on October 22, 2019.

Mary Louise Brannick was born in 1923 on a farm in Minooka, Illinois, the only daughter of Nell and Charlie Brannick and sister to her older brother Joe. She was educated in local public elementary school during the 1930s, and then met the Sisters of the Holy Cross when she attended Saint Angela Secondary School in Morris, Illinois, and graduated in 1942. The next year, 1943, Louise followed her call to religious life when she entered the novitiate of the Sisters of the Holy Cross. Following a period of religious formation at the motherhouse, now Sister Maura was missioned to Saint Mary's Hospital, Cairo, Illinois, from where she earned her nursing diploma and initiated her clinical practice. Maura professed her final vows in 1948 and subsequently began a health service career that took her to various hospitals and facilities in the Congregation where she ministered in nursing service, nursing administration and community-based health care for the next 70 years.

Perhaps a measure of her legacy may be noted through the acknowledgement of her accomplishments. There is a long list of awards and honors that have followed Sister Maura's ministry. The health center bearing her name includes a room full of trophies and tributes. I know Sister Maura would be embarrassed and bored if I expound too much upon the Point of Light Award presented to her by the president of the United States; the honorary degrees conferred upon her from Saint Mary's College, Holy Cross College and the University of Notre Dame; the presentation of the Key to the City of South Bend; the bearer of the Olympic Torch; the Catholic Hospital Association Lifetime Achievement Award; and so many more citations and decorations.

However, I will speak about one gift that Sister Maura cherished. When asked about all of the tributes bestowed upon her, Maura told a story. It occurred on the occasion of her reception of the Sagamore of the Wabash, the highest award that the State of Indiana can bestow to a private citizen.

The night of the ceremony, among the many dignitaries and officials present, there was a woman in the crowd who had listened to all of the speeches and witnessed the governor's presentation. Maura was sitting in the place of honor on the podium when this same woman approached her and leaned over to whisper in her ear: "Thank you, Sister Maura. Thank you for helping my son. He had an addiction until he came to your clinic. Because you helped him, he is no longer addicted and is back in school. You saved my son's life."

Of all the recognition received by Sister Maura, that is the one that stayed in her memory. And this, of course, surprises no one who knew her.

I came to know Sister Maura on the first day of my first mission with the Sisters of the Holy Cross. She was my first boss. She held the position of director of Nursing Service in the hospital where I was assigned.

I arrived at the hospital with another young sister, a business major, who was designated for the Accounting Department. I recall that Sister Maura came outside on a third floor fire escape, leaned over the railing, smiled, raised her eyebrows and asked: "Which one is the nurse?" She couldn't wait to get her hands on me, because she realized that she had an unexpected new RN dropped in her lap whom she could train and direct to help accomplish her nursing care plans. That did happen; she did whip me into shape professionally, but there was so much more. Meeting her was the beginning of one of the best things that ever happened to me.

I could not have imagined then, all those years ago, as she spoke about me from the balcony, that I would be speaking about her here today—a day of such mixed feelings for all of us, but a day of glory for her.

I once asked Sister Maura what I should say about her on the occasion of her wake. She replied by sharing that she had listened to a great many eulogies where she did not recognize the person who was spoken about, and then added: "Just tell the truth. Just say that I rolled through life kind of messy." I thought to myself, I can't say that. But I was hesitant to ask her for additional ideas, thinking she might say something even worse.

However, the more I reflected on what she said, the more it spoke to me about her. She did roll. She was always on the move, connecting with and caring for whoever dropped into her life. She never stopped ministering to those in need. She was tireless in her efforts to help, no matter who or what.

She took to heart the advice given to her by her infamous novice director, Sister M. Rafaelia (Brower), CSC, who said: “It is better to wear out than to rust out.” No one can claim that Sister Maura was in any way rusty: not physically, not intellectually, not emotionally, not spiritually.

As for the messy part, her life was messy because she dedicated herself to those whose lives were shattered. She entered their pain, she embraced their brokenness, she attended to their suffering. Maura noticed them. She was grateful for them. She was always looking for them, especially for those who were lost: the underserved, the downtrodden, the most vulnerable. Those who knew violence, those who suffered prejudice, those who felt indifference. It could be said that Maura was their Good Shepherd.

A picture of the Good Shepherd hung prominently on a wall of the Brannick family farmhouse. Maura spoke about how this image brought comfort to her parents, and how the meaning of the Good Shepherd deeply influenced her own spiritual core.

Her devotion to the Good Shepherd was tested early in her life. At the age of 8, she accompanied her father to the fields on a hot autumn Sunday, not a usual workday, but Charlie had to respond to the needs of crops regardless of time and circumstance. While waiting for her father, she witnessed a crisis. Her aunt, whose pride and joy rested upon a group of baby ducks, discovered that some puppies had gotten loose and raided the duck pen, and the ducklings were found dead. The aunt, in her shock and anger, had ordered the puppies to be taken to the river and drowned. This is where the Good Shepherd comes in. When Charlie came out of the fields tired, dirty, finally done for the day, he got into his car to drive home and found Maura in the back seat with her arms around six puppies. She didn't need to be on a hillside in the Holy Land to launch her shepherd career. She did it from the back seat of a '31 Plymouth.

As she recounted it, Charlie said not one word all the way home. How can you have the Good Shepherd as the foundation of your faith and drown six puppies?

It doesn't end there. The next day, Maura rode her bike home at lunch hour to check on the pups, and she got into trouble at school and at home. Doesn't that just sound like her? And it didn't end there. That kind of devoted care for others continued for a lifetime.

I once observed Sister Maura in a restaurant as she was enjoying a meal with a group of friends. The conversation was light and engaging, but then I noticed that Maura had stopped conversing as she happened to look out the restaurant window to the street. She saw a frail, thin, unkempt homeless man shuffling by. As her eyes followed him down the street, I heard her mutter to herself: "I wonder where he is going." And I knew that in a short while she would be out there looking for him. She would find out who he was and where he was going, and she would help to free him from whatever burden he carried.

The shepherd is one who protects and provides.

How many of us have been the recipients of her generosity?

How many of us have been defended or even saved by her kindness?

When a sheep is sick or in special need, the shepherd will put it around her neck for extra care.

How many of us has she carried on her shoulders?

When a sheep is lost, the shepherd will leave the flock and follow the lost one until it is found.

How many of us did she never give up on when we were lost?

I once asked Sister Maura what she thought heaven would be like. She told me that, of course, she didn't know and that she didn't like surprises, but it would surely be something beyond her imagination.

I am imagining what heaven is like for her. I think it will be something like this: When the Good Shepherd, the Lord God, greets our Good Shepherd, Maura, he will give to her that which was envisioned for those who would shepherd in his name, as told in the words of Ezekiel and paraphrased for us.

God will say: "I myself will look for Maura and take care of her... . I will bring her back from all the places where she was scattered when it was cloudy and dark. I will gather her and bring her back... . I promise to take care of her and keep her safe... . I myself will be the shepherd of Maura, and I will find her a place to rest ... says the Lord God."

Imagine that, Maura. That is your heaven. It is surely our comfort.

St. Matthew's account of the last judgment tells us what Jesus has to say about the ones who have a radical, lifelong, passionate commitment to

shepherding those who are hungry and thirsty, strangers, naked, sick and imprisoned. Jesus will say: "You have my Father's blessing."

Indeed.

Bless this inspired woman of God.

Bless this gifted daughter of the Church.

Bless this faithful Sister of the Holy Cross.

Bless our dear shepherd, Maura.