Sister Mary Ellen Brodeur, OP
1928-2018

When a Sister from Dominican High School dies, I generally post it on Facebook so former students are aware, and a lot of times they respond. When I posted that SMEB (they called her that because she signed her hall passes SMEB for Sister Mary Ellen Brodeur) had entered eternal life, many students responded to my post. One of the things they wrote over and over was “Great teacher! RIH SMEB.” At first, I thought that was a typo but then it kept appearing over and over and finally, one of the students wrote, “Rest in Heaven, SMEB.” I like that. To me, it signified their confidence that she had indeed gone to her eternal reward and now rests peacefully with the God who created her.

These words were part of the remembrance of Sister Mary Ellen Brodeur that Sister Mariane Fahlman shared at Mary Ellen’s wake on September 16, 2018. Sister Mary Ellen taught at Dominican High School in Detroit for twenty-nine years, capping off a teaching ministry that spanned a half-century.

Sister Mary Ellen was born on June 10, 1928, in Detroit to Edward Joseph and Anna Marie (Ternes) Brodeur. Edward, who was born in Hancock, Michigan, was a foreman at the Packard Motor Car Company, while Anna, a native of New York City, was a homemaker. The family lived down the street from Guardian Angels Church, and the children all attended the parish grade school. Sister Mary Ellen, the second oldest child, was the only girl in the family; she had four brothers: Donald, the eldest; Bob, Norm, and Charles.

“They were all great,” said Sister Mary Ellen in her life story, referring to her brothers. “We had our own baseball team and during the winter my dad fixed an ice rink in the backyard and the whole neighborhood came to enjoy it. We had a good time when we were kids.”

When it came time for high school, Sister Mary Ellen went to Dominican High while the boys went to St. Joseph High, which was run by the Christian Brothers.

The family was no stranger to religious life; two aunts were Sisters of St. Joseph, four third cousins were Adrian Dominican Sisters, and two first cousins were priests. And, at just fifteen years old, in the last half of her sophomore year, Mary Ellen wrote to Mother Gerald Barry requesting permission to enter the Congregation that June, when she would be sixteen. Permission was given, and she entered on June 25, 1944. Classes at St. Joseph Academy served to complete her high school education.

She received the novice’s habit and her religious name on January 3, 1945. Her religious name was actually suggested by one of her aunts in the Sisters of St. Joseph, who wrote to Mother Gerald making the request. “None of us received a parent’s name,” she wrote, referring to the six women in all who were already in religious life. “Would it be asking too much to petition the names of Mary Ellen’s parents for her?” For whatever reason, however, the aunt gave her sister-in-law’s name as Ann rather than Anna. “I think Ann Edward would be a beautiful name,” she continued. “I am taking a great liberty in asking this consideration. If so, please disregard this request.”

Mother Gerald clearly saw fit to grant the request, for Mary Ellen became Sister Ann Edward.
Her first appointment after her canonical novitiate was to Blessed Sacrament School in Toledo, Ohio, where she spent three years (1946-49). Next came six years (1949-55) at St. Carthage, Chicago, during which time she completed her bachelor’s degree in mathematics from Siena Heights College (University).

Sister Mary Ellen then began forty-one years of teaching on the high school level, spending six years (1955-61) at Hoban Dominican High School in Cleveland, Ohio; two years (1961-63) at St. Augustine High School in Detroit; one year (1963-64) at Bishop Gallagher High School in Harper Woods, Michigan; four months (November 1964 to March 1965) at St. Thomas Aquinas High School in Fort Lauderdale, Florida; and two years at St. Lawrence High School in Utica, Michigan (1965-67). She earned her master’s degree in mathematics from the University of Detroit in 1960, and over the summers of 1961 and 1962, she taught math at Siena Heights.

During her time at Hoban Dominican she suffered two unexpected personal losses: her father died suddenly in December 1955, at the age of just fifty-seven, and her youngest brother, Charles, died in July 1957, in a trench cave-in while on the job for the city of Detroit. Her mother lived until February 1978.

Sister Mary Ellen’s nineteen years at Dominican High began in 1967. Along the way, at least one of her students was not a high schooler at all, but rather one of her compatriots on the faculty: Sister Mariane, who, in her reflection at Sister Mary Ellen’s wake service, not only shared students’ Facebook posts about their former teacher, but discussed her own experience as well.

… I had the distinct pleasure of teaching with Sr. Mary Ellen for ten years at Dominican High School in Detroit. At one point during those ten years, I needed to take calculus as a pre-requisite for a program I was entering, and I could not pass it. I knew I should ask Mary Ellen for help but I didn’t want her to think I was stupid; so I struggled, week after week, getting no closer to understanding or passing calculus. Finally, I swallowed my pride and asked her for help. I even offered to pay her, thinking that it makes sense to pay for tutoring, but she laughed at me.

Every afternoon for seven days, Mary Ellen stayed after school and tutored me. For seven days I left feeling frustrated and stupid. But each afternoon before I left, Mary Ellen would say, “OK, just go home and think about this and tomorrow we’ll try something else.” She never criticized or belittled me, just reminded me that tomorrow was another day and encouraged me to stick with it. I was touched by her extreme patience; and finally, on the eighth day everything clicked and I just “got it!” When you finally “get” calculus you really get it, and from that point on, she was my best buddy. She would check in with me constantly asking me how it was going, but once she put me on that road to understanding, I never had a problem again.

… There are a lot of good mathematicians in the world but there’s a world of difference between good mathematicians and good math teachers; that was the beauty of Mary Ellen. She was a good mathematician, but she was a GREAT math teacher. She could teach the high-end student; she could teach the low-end student, and she would give just as much attention to each of them.

After Sister Mary Ellen retired from active ministry, she lived in an apartment in Warren, Michigan, for four years – continuing to tutor and volunteering at the Congregation’s development office over that time – before returning to Adrian in 2010 to live at the Dominican Life Center. She died on September 10, 2018, at the age of ninety.
Her funeral homily was preached by Sister Molly Nicholson, who grew up with the Brodeur children in their east-side Detroit neighborhood. Sister Molly recalled that her home also had an ice rink and that all the children went back and forth between that one and the one that Mary Ellen’s father had made. She also told the assembly about the forts the children built in a vacant lot and about how her own five brothers filled out the Brodeur boys’ baseball teams when needed.

Sister Molly went on to make note, as Sister Mariane had the night before, of the many Facebook posts from Sister Mary Ellen’s former students. “It was evidence that her presence as a teacher was a blessing on many levels,” she said. “…Mary Ellen not only taught, but she listened deeply and patiently and was very present to the deep searching that those young people were going through.”

Sister Molly concluded her homily by noting that as Sister Mary Ellen was dying and a chaplain was sitting with her, a couple of the nursing assistants entered the room and knelt by her bedside in prayer. The chaplain joined them on the floor, and as they prayed together, Sister Mary Ellen went to her God.

“As you have led people in fun and in many facts as they learned from you, you also have taught us what peace means, and the One who remains with us,” Sister Molly said. “So may we join you in life as we pray for you in death.”
Right: Sister Mary Ellen Brodeur with her parents

Left: Sister Mary Ellen Brodeur in her classroom at Dominican High School, 1972
From left: Sister Mary Ellen in her classroom, 1984. Sister Mary Ellen enjoys a Jubilee dinner at the Motherhouse.

Left: From left, Sisters Ruth Rabideau, Mary Ellen Brodeur, and Gloria Kelly in the lobby of Madden Hall, Adrian.
Members of the 1995 Golden Jubilee Crowd are, front row, from left: Sisters Dorothy Jehle, Joellen Reis, Catherine Henry Schmid, Therese Mary Foote, Mary Ellen Brodeur, Ruth Rabideau, Kathryn Lumbrezer, Mary T. Meegan, and Collette Madden; second row, from left, Sisters Connie Kelly, Lois Spear, Margaret Mehigan, Nadine Foley, Marilyn Brown, Margaret Flores, and Adrianna Emery; third row, from left, Sisters Shirley Ruder, Madeleine Sophie McLeod, Anne Gallagher, Mary Therese Golden, and Christine Hoffman; fourth row, from left, Sisters Marie Immaculata Hebestreit, Jean Annette Rudolph, Patricia O’Reilly, Barbara Gass, Gloria Kelly, Joan Murphy, June Marie Howard, and Irene LeDuc; fifth row, Sisters Francis Elizabeth McDonnell and Mary Reilly; and back row, from left, Sisters Catherine Riegel, Helen Walsh, Dolores LaVoy, Alma Marie Messing, Marjorie Ann McEntee, Mary J. Beaubien, and Barbara Hengesbach.