Sister Ellen Murphy, OP
1936-2019

“We knew Ellen as a Renaissance woman and a leader, who was always ready to build community and to take on any challenge that was given her. She had many talents stuffed in that little tool box of hers. … Ellen led in elegant ways and in simple ways.”

These words began the remarks by Mary “Pidge” Newbauer at Sister Ellen Murphy’s wake service on April 16, 2019. Mary and her husband, John, were longtime friends of Sister Ellen’s.

Sister Ellen Murphy was born on May 26, 1936, in Detroit to Joseph and Cecilia (Kennedy) Murphy. Joseph and Cecilia were both born and raised in Springfield, Ohio, to Irish-immigrant parents, and came to Detroit during the Great Depression in search of work.

Early in their married life, the couple discovered they would likely never be able to have children, due to an injury Cecilia had suffered in childhood. “At first she was devastated, but she had a secret weapon unknown to the medical community: strong, lifelong devotion to the Blessed Mother under the title of ‘Mother of Perpetual Help,’” Sister Ellen wrote in her autobiography.

One week after Joseph and Cecilia’s tenth wedding anniversary, and six days after Cecilia’s fortieth birthday, Ellen Patricia Murphy came into the world at Detroit’s St. Joseph’s Mercy Hospital. Because of complications during the birth, she was immediately baptized in the delivery room. She was the couple’s only child.

When Sister Ellen was three years old, the family moved to Courville Road, on Detroit’s east side and in St. Matthew’s Parish. She entered grade school at St. Matthew’s, where she was taught by the IHM Sisters, and had a happy childhood filled with extended family, friends, pets, sports, dance classes, and many adventures. Some 25 children lived on her block alone, which meant plenty of playmates and parents to create a great sense of community. The only darkness, she wrote, was that growing up in Detroit during World War II meant rationing and the threat of air raids.

Directly across the street was the Craig family, whose youngest daughter, Therese, was Ellen’s “babysitter and idol.” “She was like the older sister I never had and I wanted to be just like her when I grew up,” Sister Ellen wrote. That turned out to be true in a quite unexpected way; Sister Therese ended up entering the Adrian Dominican Sisters, becoming Sister Rose Terrence. “I was shocked,” Sister Ellen wrote. “… My immediate response to my mother was, ‘How can Therese become a nun? She’s a “real” person.’”

Dominican High School was under construction just four blocks away at the time the Murphys moved into the neighborhood, and when it was time for high school Sister Ellen enrolled there. One of her teachers, in fact, was Sister Rose Terrence.

Sister Ellen enjoyed her high school years greatly, finding her “niche” quickly and getting involved in student life. It took until her senior year for her to realize she was being called to religious life; although both her IHM and Adrian Dominican teachers had brought up the idea over the years, she had decided she wanted to be a nurse, even volunteering as a candy striper during her sophomore and junior years.
But then, at a retreat her senior year, she had what she termed her “Hound of Heaven” experience, and she and her best friend both began considering the idea of becoming Sisters. The pair visited both Adrian and Monroe, and when all was said and done the two girls both entered religious life, but “at opposite ends of the Raisin River.”

Cecilia was happy for her daughter but was concerned that Ellen, as a “spirited” girl, would find that spirit unappreciated in a formation program. Joseph, on the other hand, was not pleased at all, but finally agreed with his wife that their daughter could try religious life and, if she turned out not to have a vocation, “there was no shame in returning home” – something Joseph would remind Sister Ellen of on a regular basis for years to come.

Sister Ellen graduated from Dominican High in early June 1954 and entered the postulate that June 27. A couple of days after arrival, she and the other postulants were sent over to Siena Heights College (University) to enroll in classes, and she informed Sister Bertha Homminga, the registrar, that she wished to enroll in the School of Nursing. “Imagine my surprised when I was told there was no School of Nursing, and that I would be trained to be a teacher, not a nurse!” she wrote. “And so the rest of my life began.”

She had only been in Adrian for six weeks when she was sent out to teach third grade at Our Lady of Good Counsel in Chicago. “The seven professed sisters became my formation team,” she wrote. “They were kind, caring, and infinitely patient.”

In December, Sister Ellen returned to the Motherhouse to begin her canonical novitiate year, receiving the religious name Sister Marie Aquino. After completing her novitiate and some of her bachelor’s degree work, she was originally missioned to St. James School in Miami, Florida, in August 1956. But before the school year began, her mother was discovered to be seriously ill with what turned out to be lung cancer, and Mother Gerald decided it would be best to send Sister Ellen to a school nearer her family instead. Sister Ellen returned immediately to Detroit, where she taught at St. Brigid’s School. She was still at that assignment when Cecilia died on May 21, 1958.

Assignments to St. Joseph School in Homewood, Illinois (1959-63), and Visitation School in Elmhurst, Illinois (1963-67) followed, during which time Sister Ellen completed her bachelor’s degree in history from Siena Heights in 1961. She completed her master’s degree in European history at DePaul University in 1968, not long after the death of her father in October 1967.

By that time, Sister Ellen was serving as the principal and superior – at the age of just thirty-one – at St. Vincent de Paul School in Fort Wayne, Indiana. It was there that she not only met Sister Peter Anthony Schulte, who became her lifelong friend, but also met the Newbaurers, both teachers there. John, who preached the homily at Sister Ellen’s funeral, recalled that he was hired in as a lay teacher by Sister Ellen’s predecessor and went over to the convent in late summer of 1967 to find out where his classroom was so he could begin setting it up, and there he met a Sister who was down on her knees scrubbing the floor. He asked for the principal and was told, “You’re looking at her.”

Mary Newbauer noted in her remembrance of Sister Ellen that she was the kind of principal who “led by doing”: she greeted children by name as they arrived at school, cheered them on at their basketball and football games, was present at their parties, and was always ready to offer comfort and wisdom to students and teachers alike.

In all, Sister Ellen was principal at four schools: St. Vincent de Paul (1967-72), Queen of Angels in Chicago (1972-79), St. Joseph in Wilmette, Illinois (1980-83), and St. Catherine of Alexandria in Oak Lawn, Illinois (1983-92). During the 1979-80 academic year, she was the assistant director of the
Catholic Association of Student Councils and in that capacity traveled to schools around the Midwest working with principals and teachers on revitalizing their schools’ student councils.

After a lengthy recuperation time due to having both knees replaced, Sister Ellen found what she called her “dream come true.” She became the program coordinator for a new initiative first envisioned in the Dominican Midwest Chapter and then funded by the Congregation in keeping with its Vision Statement on Women from the Chapter of 1992: to establish a center for women. The result, Centerpointe in South Holland, Illinois, offered retreats and other programs for women. It operated from 1995 to 1998, with Sister Ellen and Sister Jane Zimmerman in charge.

“Although it was only open for three years, I like to think we helped many groups as well as individual women focus and strengthen their lives,” Sister Ellen wrote in her autobiography.

She became “semi-retired” in 2000 by becoming an educational consultant, which she did for the next five years. She later assisted for several months at the Dominican Midwest Chapter Office.

Sister Ellen became a resident of the Dominican Life Center in late 2013. Even as her health declined, she became a regular fixture in the DLC lobby in the evenings thanks to Sister Peter Anthony, who would see to it that she got down there to visit with other Sisters.

On April 11, 2019, at the age of eighty-two, Sister Ellen Murphy went to the God whom she had served so faithfully throughout sixty-four years of religious profession. Among those who gave remembrances at the wake service, in addition to Mary Newbauer, was Sister Joella Miller, who told a humorous story about the summer they lived together at St. Philip Neri Convent in Chicago and recalled the work that went into creating Centerpointe, which began during Sister Joella’s time as Chapter Priorress.

Said John Newbauer in his funeral homily for his and his wife’s longtime friend,

> Jesus tells us in John’s Gospel passage this morning, “Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” Sister Ellen was a woman who was at times afraid but her faith in God and her faith in the adults and children that she worked with allowed her to do some great things despite any fear she might have had, for she trusted in God and in the communities she belonged to and formed. Her message of encouragement, of joy in life, of the importance of community, lives on in those whose lives she touched. May she rest in the peace that comes from God and may all of us who have been touched by her life be at peace.”

1 John 14:25-29.
Left: Sister Ellen Murphy with her parents

From left: Sisters Joyce Rybarczyk, left, and Ellen Murphy in Watervliet, Michigan, where Sister Joyce ministered on a reservation. Staff members of St. Catherine of Alexandria School and Parish, Oak Lawn, Illinois are, from left, Sisters Helen Sorich and Ellen Murphy; Father Mark Walter; Father Joseph O’Brien, Pastor; Byrnie Sniernciak, Director of Religious Education; and Sister Kathleen Harkins.
Sisters Patricia Walter (left) and Ellen Murphy stand in front of CenterPointe Women's Center. Sisters Norlee McDonnell (left) and Ellen Murphy

From left: Members of the Sophia Mission Group celebrate Christmas, early 2000s. Shown are, standing, from left, Sisters Ellen Murphy, Peter Anthony Schulte, and Mary Alice Hoff and seated, from left, Sisters Jean Keeley, Sally Fergus, and Juliann Flynn. Standing in the Dominican Midwest Chapter Office are, from left, Sisters Louise Borgacz, Helen Therese Mayer, and Ellen Murphy.
Chatting in the Dominican Life Center lobby, from left, are: Sisters Mary Singer, Mary Ellen Youngblood, Theresa McCall, Joan Sustersic, Peter Anthony Schulte, and Ellen Murphy.

Members of the 2004 Golden Jubilee June Crowd are: back row, from left, Sisters Marianne O’Neill, Ellen Murphy, Marlene Ptaszynski, Marilyn Francoeur, Clarice Moyle, Esther Kennedy, Margaret Andrezik, Rose Ann Schlitt, Jeanne Marie Stickling, Gail Himrod, and Norlee McDonnell and front row, from left, Sisters Evelyn Piche, Teresita Ruiz, Mary Ann Letzgus, Ellen Schmitz, Therese Reynolds, Rose Irene Calvert, Joan Baustian, Kathleen Watt, Virginia Kleckner, and Janet Capone (Prioress).