

In Loving Memory

Sister Sara Jean Donegan, SSND



Birth

July 20, 1935

Baptism

August 11, 1935

Profession

July 17, 1957

Death

July 11, 2012

Burial

Notre Dame of
Elm Grove Cemetery
Elm Grove, Wisconsin

*Precious and blessed is
the death of the faithful
before God... for
they die in union with
their dear Jesus, in the
grace of God, in peace.*

Blessed Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger
Foundress of the School Sisters of Notre Dame
Letter 11, September 10, 1831

In her short autobiography as a novice, Sister Sara Jean describes herself at birth as a bouncing, five-pound, carrot-topped baby girl to be named Evelynne Jayne. She admitted being spoiled by her parents, John and Myrtle Donegan, until five years later when her twin sisters, Colleen and Cathleen, made their appearance. Growing up in the small town of Pittsville, Wisconsin, attending St. Joachim Grade School and Maryheart High School provided her with many activities which she entered into whole heartedly. She became known all over town when she delivered groceries door to door from her Aunt Eva's grocery store. Nicknamed "Taters," Evelynne easily lifted heavy bags of potatoes (potayters) as part of the delivery. During those years she also learned how to play the piano, the organ and the accordion.

It was in her second year at Mount Mary College that she finally gave in to God's Holy Spirit, whom she described as "plaguing" her with the idea of a religious vocation. She entered the School Sisters of Notre Dame, pronouncing her first vows in 1957, a month shy of being 22 years old. As Sister Sara Jean, SSND, she finished college at Mount Mary, and in 1958 began teaching mathematics and organ at McDonnell High School in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin. Two years later she was enticed by a request from the Mother Superior of the Province for a sister to volunteer to study dentistry and serve the congregation as a dentist. She volunteered, and in 1960 she, along with Sister Gloria List, began their four-year daily commute from St. Joseph Convent in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to Marquette University. Both graduating in 1964 as a Doctor of Dental Surgery, they immediately set up a dental clinic in the Mequon Motherhouse, and then later, at Notre Dame of Elm Grove. It was there that Sister Sara Jean served her sisters for 48 years, right up to the month before she died.

For 34 of those 48 years, Sister Sara Jean also took on the job of teaching the all-male freshmen class of future dentists at Marquette University. Sister loved teaching and it showed. When speaking about her, the young men credit her for preparing them well for what lay ahead. They admit that she was strict but fair, expecting a lot from them. She challenged them to do right and to do it well. Her intelligence, organization and professionalism were their guides through the difficult concepts they had to learn. They respected her for that. They also appreciated the fact that they could go to her for help and it would be graciously given. Hundreds of practicing dentists in Wisconsin proudly claim Sister Sara Jean as their first teacher of dentistry.

Those career facts about Sister Sara Jean tell you what she did, but *who* was she? When asked to describe her, everyone — the sisters, the dental staff, her students, her friends — all used the same adjective, "private." Sister was a private person, not as in recluse, but private as in self-contained, not calling attention to herself, not sharing much about her life. Another common response was "perfectionist." Both in the convent and at work, environment was important to her. In a quiet but firm way, she wanted things to be where

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they were supposed to be, and in an orderly way. She expected others to do the best that they could do, do it well and do it right the first time. One of her frequent comments was, “When you do a job, do the dishes.”

Sister Sara Jean lived for many years with Sisters Ingrid and Margit. They appreciated her kindness to them, her witty sense of humor and her fun-loving spirit and, especially, her prowess as a good cook and baker. Working in her garden was a favorite pastime: raising flowers and vegetables, and even planting trees. She enjoyed making wine and sharing it with other sisters. She loved to sing and volunteered to sing at Notre Dame of Elm Grove for the Sunday Mass. Visiting her sister up north was a treat, especially in winter when she could go snowmobiling with the family.

Suffering from cancer, Sister Sara Jean died at home on July 11, 2012. A wake service and Mass of Christian Burial were celebrated on July 14, at St. Therese Parish, Wauwatosa, where the community of three sisters was well known. (Sister Sara Jean was a member of the parish council.) On July 17, a memorial service was held at Notre Dame of Elm Grove. Sister Sara Jean is survived by her sisters Colleen (David) Zieher and Cathleen (the late David) Pavloski, nieces Mary (Steve) Zelich, Lori (Daniel) Devine, Amy (Victor) Slattery, Julie (James) Hanneman and Jean (Gary) Smith, two great-nieces and eight great-nephews, other relatives, friends and the SSND Community.

In her autobiography, Sister Sara Jean wrote about her special devotion to Mary and the Holy Spirit. The result can be seen in her care for others, her dedication and her prayerfulness. Within a line from her autobiography, she revealed her life-long goal: “I hope my obituary writer can say nothing else about me than that I was a fervent religious, striving for a deep interior life.” As that obituary writer, I probably wrote more than she wanted, but I could not have spoken about her dedication to serving others had she not been the fervent religious, striving for a deep interior life, that she described. So, I said what I had to say, did it right the first time, and washed the dishes!

By Sister Marie LeClerc Laux, SSND