

## Remembering Mary Ellen Loren, IHM Dec. 2, 1942 – Jan. 14, 2014



Before I begin, I want to acknowledge that this Remembering of Sister Mary Ellen Loren, better known as Mel, is a composite of contributions of many of her friends and classmates. I especially want to acknowledge Sister Elizabeth Fleckenstein, better known as Tiz, for her contributions. She was the principal at Holy Redeemer while Mel was there.

Today we gather to celebrate the **gift** of Sister Mary Ellen Loren's life. Gift she truly was to so many people throughout her life beginning with her parents, Bernard John Loren and Frances Elizabeth Pfeiffer, both of whom have passed away. Mary Ellen also had a brother, Robert, who died in 2004. She had a close relationship with her parents and also her brother.

Mary Ellen was known as ME (Emmy) to her family. Later friends began to call her Mel which sticks to this day.

Mel always referred to herself as a "Publican." She had a short stint in Catholic school in first or second grade. She disliked the sisters and would take off for her Nana's house as soon as she was dropped off at school. So... public school was the answer.

When it was time to consider college, Mel wanted one with strong journalism and Latin programs. The college of her choice that met her desires was Marygrove College. A Catholic college with nuns amazed her parents. Mel was living with her family in Italy prior to college because her dad was employed there. Her parents offered the opportunity to study in Greece but there was something about Marygrove that she wanted.

After a year at Marygrove, Mel entered the community. In her Jubilee interview she stated: "I didn't know whether I would stay 60 seconds or 60 years but I knew I had to try. Even the nuns at Marygrove gave me only six weeks, because I was in so much trouble. I mean I had fun." The IHM community has truly been blessed by her presence. She shared in her Jubilee interview, "being part of the community

has deepened her faith and deepened her sense of God's presence. "God is there for me. He won't take anything away. He'll see me through." Mel just celebrated her 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary as an IHM Sister this past year.

Mel's ministries took her to Monroe, Miami and Detroit. She taught students from grade one to college. Although she didn't want to teach first grade, her first mission was teaching first grade. She loved it!

Mel spent several years in ministry at Holy Redeemer. She loved teaching religion and taught all the children from grades one to eight. She was known as the "religion lady." With the help of a former sister, Sister John David, she designed a religion room where children could work in centers. Mel wanted the children to experience the "good news" of Jesus in a way that most spoke to them. So there was a literature center, an art center, a music center and a prayer center. She even had a parakeet called "McGillacuddy" so the children could experience God's creatures.

Mel's first love was preparing children for Reconciliation and First Communion. She wrote the Leader's Guide for a Ligouri publication entitled, *Meeting the Forgiving Jesus: A Child's Book for First Penance*. The editor wrote, "The lesson plans in this book show the fine touch of a religious educator who knows how to teach little children, and who understands the crucial need for forgiveness and healing in a world that is rent with divisions." Mel always wanted to write a book. This was not the book that she expected to write, but it was a very meaningful and practical guide for teachers of religious instruction.

Mel challenged the Redemptorists regarding First Communion. She told them that since she did all the preparation with the children, she should be the one to give them the Eucharist. Father Bob Hirsch finally agreed. This was before Eucharistic Ministers existed in the parish.

Besides teaching school, Mel also did RCIA, Bible study groups for women, baptism preparation and much more. Mel always said her ministry covered the areas from "womb to tomb."

Mel and Tiz had many adventures but their greatest was when they were on their way to school down Vernor Avenue. It was the first snowfall of the season and very difficult to see. The street looked deserted. Since they were right outside of the famous Duly's Coney Island, they decided to stop for a newspaper. They saw no one around. Tiz walked about five feet to the news stand and when she returned

to the car a stranger was in the driver's seat beside Mel. He yelled, "Lady, get out," which Mel did. Tiz yelled, "This is our car" and he took off. Some morning Mass folks were in Duly's and hastened to the church to inform Father Joe Tobin that Sister Tiz's car was stolen with Mel in it. Needless to say, she was not in the car. They lost the car and all of their school belongings. Father Joe Tobin was frantic but glad they were both safe and sound. I wonder what other adventures they had.

Sister Marylyn Russ shared that Mel had no sense of direction. Once she was trying to figure out how to go from her third floor bedroom over to the grade school without going downstairs. Mel would say that she could get lost in a phone booth. Apparently this was inherited from her parents, for they were challenged when trying to give directions.

While working at Redeemer, Mel was on the Southeast Province Council from 1991 to 1994. This was a surprise for Mel but was also a delightful gift. Sister Paula Cooney said that Mel loved to ponder. When Mel pulled her hair back, the Province Team knew that something was coming.

Mel spent 13 years at Marygrove College as an instructor. In addition to teaching, her love was being a writing assistant. She read and edited papers for students in all the programs. In order to do the papers justice, she took time to research the topic. Mel shared, "I loved it because it was such a challenge. The students had to write for people to understand it. Simplicity was the key." (As noted in her Jubilee interview)

Tiz shared that "Mel was a very fun-loving person and loved a good party. Even though she could not cook, she always managed to have a good spread when she entertained company. Because she did not drive, she was great at delegating errands to friends who always took care of her." Recently she wanted a party with pizza and beer but she could not partake in such a party. Her remark was "it's pretty bad when I can't have a Heineken or Skittles." Her classmates may have a party with pizza and beer in her honor.

Mel had a marvelous sense of humor. Even in the midst of a serious conversation, she had the gift of making a comment that had everyone in stitches. Her wit and humor are truly gifts that she shared right up to the last days.

Throughout Mel's life she suffered from health issues. At birth she had cerebral palsy and wasn't expected to live. It is amazing how well she overcame its effects. As her Mission Councilor, I was called by a friend to say that Mel was very sick.

When going to visit her, it was obvious that she needed to come to Monroe and she was admitted to the hospital the next day. During this time it also became clear that Mel needed more than physical care, so I approached her regarding going to Emmaus House in Ocean Grove, N.J., for an assessment. Emmaus House is a wholistic center for women religious that provides nourishment, personal enrichment and spiritual growth.

Recently I asked Mel if she wanted me to share this part of her life journey. Mel's remark was. "Oh, yes, Emmaus saved my life."

Mel agreed to go for the assessment but was not a happy camper when she learned that she needed inpatient care and would be staying. Mel had an addiction to credit card use. She shared that it was not a recent phenomenon. When she was "knee high to a grasshopper," she had problems with money and there was always someone to bail her out.

Mel had a very challenging experience at Emmaus House but one that transformed her life. They brought back her hope and heart, although she fought it tooth and nail. She was dearly loved by the staff and her humor delighted them. When I talked with staff members recently to let them know that Mel was doing poorly, each one commented on how much they loved her.

When she returned to Monroe, she attended support meetings. Once after the meeting she shared with her driver that it was a very challenging meeting and she wanted to say something. Instead she prayed her favorite new prayer: "Lord, place your arm around my shoulder and your hand over my mouth." She prayed this often when she wanted to keep from saying something she was tempted to say.

Tiz wrote, "Mel was always a woman of faith. Her spirituality was very important to her. Like Mary and Joseph in the Christmas readings, she had to say 'yes' many times – sometimes in blind faith. She has allowed the Spirit to lead her sometimes where she did not want to go."

The core of Mel's 19th Annotation Retreat (a Retreat in Daily Life) centered around Pentecost. Pentecost became her favorite feast day. The celebration of Mel's Jubilee in her Mission Unit focused on the Gifts of the Spirit.

Just as Mel was very direct in all aspects of her life, she was the same with God. She was very frank in her relationship with God. She said, "He wanted everything

and he got everything.” She recently shared with a number of people, “I believe that God is present. I believe that God loves me. But his timing sucks!”

Over the past couple of years, she was very nourished by the prayers of Joyce Rupp, in *Prayers to Sophia*. Music also has been a significant part of her spirituality. She was able to make the retreat with Jan Novotka and Marie Larkin, “Awakening into Great Communion: Living from the Depths.” She was very moved by this experience and, with her health issues, very grateful to have been able to participate.

When she returned to Monroe from New Jersey, she was very concerned about how to fit in to life at the Motherhouse. Fortunately Donna Westley invited her to work in Archives. She could use her gift for writing. She would interview Motherhouse sisters and write up their reflections. She wrote Rememberings for sisters and found it so rewarding. We were ready to line up to have her write our Remembering.

Mel wrote on her Commitment Form for 2009-2010, “Helping with oral histories in the Archives, giving presentations on IHM history to new employees, taking a stand on issues as an armchair activist and living at the Motherhouse give me an opportunity to be an affirming and encouraging listening presence. These ministries also are my way of living out Chapter One of our Constitutions, which for me, is a call to discipleship. They challenge me to not only talk the talk of discipleship but walk the walk as well with joyful love, gentle courage and creative hope.”

After Mel learned that her time was short, she wanted to connect with people who were significant in her life. I wish you could have seen how big her eyes got when she heard Archbishop Joe Tobin’s voice on the answering machine.

Mel thanked people for the blessing that they were in her life and expressed her love for them. This was coming from a very genuine heart, for she was a very grateful person.

Mel’s page in the IHM Book of Life speaks volumes about the person that she was:

BLESSED ARE YOU

WOMAN OF STRENGTH

WRAPPED AROUND  
ORDER AND CHAOS  
HOLDING FIRM  
TENSION'S PIECES  
FORGING NEW DREAMS  
AND PROMISED TOMORROWS

Mel, you will be dearly missed! But we rejoice with you as you join your family and our sisters in light. We rejoice that you are now meeting and being with the God who was your constant companion through the ups and downs of your life, the God who loves you so dearly and the God who welcomes you with open arms.

Written and delivered by Barbara Weigand, IHM  
Jan. 20, 2014