Remembering Elizabeth Mary Larson, IHM
Jan. 20, 1928 - March 8, 2015

In the home that I – and for much of the time, Amata and my son, Lahens – shared with Elizabeth Mary, “That’s going in your menology!” was the way we labeled and categorized any of the notable, laughable, idiosyncratic or otherwise quirky ways in which one or the other of us would speak, act or behave. So our repository of memories is robust, deep, filled with the stuff of daily life and spans everything from efforts to recover a burned pot of rice (“throw out the pot and start over” if you’re Andrea, or “keep scrubbing, it’ll come clean” if you’re Elizabeth) to our love of our own and each other’s families; from the cascading array of celebrations, births, marriages, deaths, career transitions and the daily meanderings of life, to the deeply personal insights into one another – glimpses into the soul – because our time together spans well over three decades and the nowadays rarified experience of religious community at our local level has been easy, whole, authentic and the place where we became who we are. It’s a good thing we have only a few minutes because there would be so much to say about the woman whose life we remember today – Elizabeth Mary Larson, IHM.

Born in Detroit in 1928, just before the Great Depression, Betty Jane Larson was welcomed into a Prevost Avenue family of loving parents, Elizabeth and Walter; her older and revered sister, Marion, a noted concert pianist; an older brother, David, respected dentist, pilot and – sometimes to Elizabeth’s consternation – full of jokes and fun; and later, her younger brother Bill, easy-going, funny and a natural entertainer. Elizabeth loved them all, as she did the folks they married and the next generation and the next. And how they loved their “Aunt Sister!” Elizabeth was extraordinarily proud of her father, a teacher at the renowned Cass Technical High School in Detroit, and spoke often of the deep bond she shared with her mother. During her last weeks, Elizabeth’s most tranquil moments came when I read aloud letters to and from her mother, written mostly during Elizabeth’s years in Puerto Rico.

Perhaps her father’s teaching inspired Elizabeth toward a career in education. After graduating from St. Mary of Redford, she spent a year at Marygrove College before entering the congregation in 1946.

The highlights of Elizabeth’s early ministries came at Girls’ Catholic Central and the Hall of the Divine Child which, for those who might not know, was a boys’ military boarding school right here on the Motherhouse grounds. How Elizabeth loved to tell stories of trying to get 6-year-olds into dress uniforms at the crack of dawn, combing down the cowlicks of these often motherless boys on the morning of a review! Perhaps this experience forecast her future with another young boy who came into our lives, who, like the Hall boys, was not always thrilled with the “up and at’m lifestyles” of nuns and the military.

Even years later, you’d never know from Elizabeth that the transition from life in the Detroit she knew so well to Puerto Rico was probably both life-altering and difficult for one who did not know Spanish and had not been one who yearned “to go to the missions,” as we said then. Puerto Rico marked the evolution of Elizabeth’s career into higher education. Her letters at the time
reflect her precise and meticulous approach to life and overflowed with lovely descriptions of poinsettias, warm breezes and newly experienced foods, cultures and people.

Elizabeth Mary studied, then taught, sociology at the Catholic University of Puerto Rico. When she returned to the states, she completed her doctorate at St. Louis University, before dedicating her formidable talent as a professor of sociology to unbuckling and unwrapping difficult abstract concepts about population, demographics, social norms and behavior. Her early college teaching was, no doubt, a prelude to her irreplaceable contributions to the core curriculum at Marygrove, where students were guided to view the world and its people through integrating the lenses of sociology, economics and political science.

Elizabeth spent 33 years at Marygrove beginning in 1965, and I cannot recall a single time during the 19 of those years that I spent with her there, when she failed to hold class due to illness; or failed to prepare meticulously – for hours and hours – each and every class; nor failed to swoop in to help any student floundering in the muddy waters of sociology’s difficult constructs. On the other hand, and probably reflective of Elizabeth’s deeply practical side, she made seminal contributions to Marygrove’s noted social work program, many in concert with her mentor, Christina Schwartz, IHM, and to the city of Detroit itself through her work with the mayor’s office and numerous city initiatives around housing, poverty and race. Following the tragic murder of Sister John Clement Hungerman in 1983, the third member of our local community at the time, Elizabeth set her mind and energy on addressing Detroit’s perennial scourge, i.e., the almost limitless proliferation of handguns.

Sister Elizabeth Mary served not only as a sociology faculty member and prized student advisor, but as mentor to many young faculty and a valued advisor to the president on complex and difficult personnel matters.

Elizabeth’s connections to Detroit and social justice work there are of note, as are her work with female offenders and “lifers” at Jackson State Prison and later, as a prime mover in the establishment of programs for senior citizens at Theresa Maxis and McGivney Bethune Apartments and in her work on gun control with Clementine Barfield. Elizabeth was loved and accepted by Detroit “folks” because she was competent, she was dependable and she was completely nonjudgmental.

Elizabeth Mary retired in 1998 at 70 years of age. While deserving a rest from decades of often difficult teaching (the primary course she taught was required so nearly every student who attended Marygrove across those 33 years took Sociological Perspectives from Sister Elizabeth). Instead of really retiring, though, she responded without hesitation to my request that she come to Minnesota when I became president at St. Catherine’s in 1998. At St. Kate’s, Elizabeth managed the president’s home and oversaw countless social events that are such an important facet of a university president’s work. She was the undisputed queen of our kitchen; beloved by caterers, tradesmen, Cabinet members, neighbors, trustees and donors. I truly could not have been successful without her constant “behind the scenes” support. Extravagantly kind, on nights when the “crisis du jour” or other work kept me working late, Elizabeth made countless trips to campus to bring me meticulously prepared and packaged suppers when I could not get home. Elizabeth regarded her work managing the president’s home and the myriad events that take place there as volunteer work. The rest of us knew she was an irreplaceable university asset. Indeed, when Elizabeth returned to Monroe in 2011, we had to change almost everything about
how St. Catherine’s entertains and manages our home, so dependent were we on her contributions.

Sadly, we don’t have any animals in our home now – and that’s because Elizabeth is not there. One of our neighbors wrote to her, “I’ll forever remember with great fondness you walking Farmer and helping Danny and Katie get comfortable with dogs.” Another said, “It was such a lucky day for us when you moved to our neighborhood and, over the years, we have witnessed your kind, good nature and, of course, your wisdom.”

Elizabeth’s care for Farmer – everyone’s favorite dog – and her willingness to put up with my penchant for finding stray animals are legendary. As is the time we both – in our adjacent bedrooms – cringed behind mattresses, barricading ourselves from a wild and angry cat I had brought home. Once, Elizabeth got up at midnight and came with me down Wyoming Avenue to St. Bridget’s to pick up a wounded cat I’d seen lying in the street there. She found an all-night vet in Dearborn and we took the fatally wounded animal there. So, you can see why, every time I burst into the house and said “Guess what?” Elizabeth answered, “Does it have two legs or four?”

And, of course, there were some two legged creatures of God – beautiful ones we came to love and cherish; Saba and Bethlehem, sisters from Ethiopia, who needed a loving home and remained with us for five years. And, of course, Lahens.

How many people do you know who, at age 68 and after 50 years of reasonably calm religious life, would readily agree that “Yes, we could parent a young Haitian orphan, a child who did not speak English, had not been to school, and was seriously ill.” I am Lahens’ mother, but there is no way I could have raised him to be the beautiful person he is today without Elizabeth’s steady and loving presence.

That love is what prompted Lahens to post on Facebook at 3 a.m. on Sunday, March 8. I don’t know – perhaps Elizabeth is the first IHM to have her death announced to the planet on Facebook. Lahens’ post yielded well over a hundred comments of respect and love from across the country, including parents and relatives of his friends and his wife, high school friends who frequented our home during his school years, including a Notre Dame All-American and now NFL offensive lineman who Elizabeth fed regularly and amply during his high school years. Who do you know who, at an age when a life of peace and contentment was more than deserved, would willingly engage in the very full-time business of being an “auntie or grandma” as Lahens terms it, including welcoming and loving the woman he married and their beautiful young sons into our home – diapers, high chairs, car seats, toys all over the place and all of it. Our Elizabeth did.

As we marvel at her life, we hold reverently the deep places of Elizabeth’s soul that she unwittingly revealed through the very things she loved. I’ve been riveted on hundreds of notes Elizabeth wrote over the years, handwritten ones I keep finding everywhere. While you might conclude they’re just snippets of paper to be tossed or notes to remind herself of this or that, for me, they’ve become sacramental manifestations of Elizabeth’s generous engagement in the work of the Gospel outside the academic world. Simple, funny, engaging, intriguing, indisputably Elizabeth – they are words and very human gestures of her participation in God’s work. A bowl containing some of them will be brought up with the gifts this morning. Here’s just a sampling:
Lots about food and cooking:
Ed’s pot roast – add Mrs. Dash – lots of it … red wine – very good … Jewish coffee cake (really tastes better as muffins) … Millie’s crispy chicken – be sure to put on wire rack to prevent soggy bottoms … walleye cakes (fronts and backs of three post-its for that recipe) … 3 vinegars, 2 oils, I sugar … chicken fingers – perfect for little hands … put pomegranates on the salad; don’t spill the juice – it stains … Father Larry’s pot pie … bake the salmon don’t kill it … all day beef stew tonight – start early … grill hamburgers – room temp, sear, season, don’t stick with fork, one turn …

Or Elizabeth’s directions to just about everywhere: works of art and wonder, often embellished with her intricate doodling. But she always got there and always got it done – no GPS either:
directions to Lahens’ first apartment … to countless repair shops … 35 S to C Rd 42 make R to stop, mall on L, park … and my personal favorite: Vasko Rubbish and Recycling with directions scribbled in three different inks on the tiniest snippet of paper ripped from the daily newspaper …
________________ (her SS number) … Linda the gardener … call and inquire why the IHM check did not work … Heating problem in Tony’s room taken care of – temporarily … house money $5.97, all still there …
Find the passcode for the alarm system … McQuillan $120 per hour base rate – expensive … 24 hour emergency vet … Plaza TV & Appliance – talk to Mike … Parkway Autocare – talk to anyone … Car winterizing list – buy a red bandana … rental dishes coming at 3 … directions to Hanky’s … Irv – nice wardrobe consultant for Lahens … recycle pickup – they charge – take it there – free … put in direct sunlight for 4 hours every 8 months … Pat Curtin in CA – Honey’s sister … Joyce Matthews, Roger and Barb … check if the sprinklers all work … Amata in St. Joe’s at 2M310 … can you re-cover nonstick pans? Clothes to flatter older women: wear skirts with slanted pockets … waist to hip ratio should be .8 or less - 36/42 (long division is worked out) equals .85 – uh oh … Aunt Mary’s son, Michael would be 49 now…. and on a 3x2 inch sheet – her entire employment record …
CTRL AL T Delete – hold down together; double click on what you want;
emlarsonihm@msn.com no spaces … buy Scratch Doctor for car … Beth’s had a baby …
Thank John Newman for his letter … The contents of my purse are the following … Cousin Beverly in Menominee Falls is living … new black shoes 11/06 … taupe shoes 5/07… emergency preparedness in the house for bioterrorism … to Honey’s – 2 speed bumps right before her house … Ed died at 1:20 PM on 2/13 … new form of Sacrament of Reconciliation … A one page list of family significant events …

And, finally, those refrigerator notes we ignored at our peril, as Amata and I discovered about three months ago when we failed to heed her note to flip the switch in the guest bathroom when the garage freezer light goes out.

Reviewing hundreds of these papers put new meaning into words found in one of Elizabeth’s journals: “The local community is where we are most capable of hearing the Word of God and acting on it.”

This is why it’s so hard to come to grips with Elizabeth’s physical absence, even though she’s been here in Monroe and not in our home for more than three years. Her imprint is that deep. All those years of Thanksgiving and Christmas gatherings; of birthdays and weddings, graduations,
concerts and games; of being right at the heart of the “family with no boundaries” will pay dividends now. Her devoted care, meticulous attention to our every need; her years of loving us more than we deserved – comforting us in sorrow and trauma; welcoming people of every range and walk in life; stocking the fridge and freezer; making sure the lights were on and the laundry folded; and the lovely memories that she created will wrap themselves around us and carry us through and beyond this.

Last Sunday, as Elizabeth approached her last moments on Earth, dozens of young women of exceptional promise and no puny dreams gathered with their mentors at St. Catherine University for a discernment weekend around religious life. May every one of them encounter, as I did, an Elizabeth on her pathway to God and a full life.

Betty Jane, BJ, Elizabeth Mary, Elizabeth, Sister Larson – our dear sister and friend – pulled people into a warm and welcoming space with characteristic ease and grace. She was a supremely intelligent academic, a keeper of the hearth and a loving presence in our home – the woman of a thousand notes and a thousand kindnesses. How we will miss her!

Early on Sunday morning, as Elizabeth’s labored breathing ceased and the warm breath of God took up its rhythm, this good woman was known in the twinkling of an eye, bathed in love, embraced warmly, welcomed home. Our colleague, our sister and aunt sister, our grandma, our dear Elizabeth is with the God she served so faithfully.

In leaving with you my best memory of our sweet Elizabeth, I offer this slight paraphrase of Gerard Manley Hopkins:

I say more, the just woman justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all her goings graces;
Acts in God’s eye what in God’s eye she is –
Christ – for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of women’s faces.

* “As Kingfishers Catch Fire, Dragonflies Draw Flame” (undated poem, c. March - April 1877)

May God be praised.

Written and delivered by Andrea Lee, IHM, March 12, 2015

* Hopkins’ poem, “as kingfishers catch fire” offers perhaps the most direct illustration of Hopkins’ theory on “inscape.” The term is hard to define precisely… Coined on the model of the word “landscape,” the term refers to the unifying designs by which the unique interior essences of a thing (person) are held together. The word does not merely refer to what is particular and individual about an object (or person) but posits a kind of inner order or pattern by which these individual essences form a kind of harmonious composition. Moreover, inscapes imply a Creator; by paying close enough attention to observe inscapes, one might hope to be lifted to a closer contemplation of God. (SparkNotes, Gerard Manley Hopkins, sj)