

Obituary

Sister Genevieve Sullivan, IHM, 98, died Saturday, Sept. 12, at her home, IHM Senior Living Community, Monroe.

Mary Genevieve Sullivan was born on Jan. 5, 1922, in Barry's Bay, Ontario, Canada, into the family of Michael and Catherine (Quilty) Sullivan. The family moved to Detroit in 1927, where she attended St. Boniface, St. Gregory and St. Cecelia elementary schools. In June 1940, she graduated from St. Cecilia High School and entered the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe, receiving the religious name Sister Mary Clifford. Religious life was part of the Sullivan family as four of her sisters also joined the IHM community.



Sister Genevieve taught elementary education at St. Joseph (Monroe), Saints Peter and Paul, (Ionia), St. John (Benton Harbor), Sacred Heart (Dearborn), St. Patrick (Wyandotte) and in Detroit at Holy Redeemer, St. Vincent, and St. Thomas Aquinas. Missioned to Mobile, Ala., from 1958 to 1962, she taught first grade at St. Monica Parish School. Sister Genevieve enjoyed being an educator of young students and often assisted in training altar boys at the parishes. She earned a bachelor's degree from Marygrove College, and later, a master's degree in education from Wayne State University.

In 1972, Sister Genevieve's ministry focused on parish and pastoral ministry, beginning at St. Thomas Aquinas, Detroit, for many years, Our Lady Queen of Heaven and St. Benedict, Pontiac. In 1983, she joined Our Lady of the Lake parish in Holland, where she thrived as pastoral associate and enjoyed over twenty years of ministry.

Sister Genevieve retired to the Motherhouse in 2006 where she enjoyed the community of sisters, community events, spiritual growth and connections to many friendships formed during ministry assignments.

Remembering

In one of my visits with Sister Genevieve Sullivan, I asked her about all the precious little things she had placed around her room so purposely and about some treasured sayings and poems and Scripture texts she had pinned to the bulletin board that hung on the wall. What followed of course was such an enriching time of listening to so many stories about where all these treasures came from. They all had to do, of course, with people and places so precious to Gen – her family, students, parishioners and friends who she came to know in her long and loving life. In vivid memory, the

handmade quilt and other cherished things kept her connected and she told me she continued to love and pray for all these cherished people.

Some words pinned to the bulletin board caught my eye immediately:

Be still and know that I am God.

Create a new heart in me, O God, and renew your Spirit within me.

Behold! I am with you always. You are mine, and I love you.

To these words, drawn together from Psalm 46:10, Psalm 51:10 and Isaiah 43:1, she added her own: "My God, I love you! Give me love for all." How compellingly does this text reveal to us who our dear Gen was and is, a God-hearted person who loves so fully because God gave her loads of "love for all."

Gen experienced this love of God first in her beloved family. She was born Jan. 5, 1922, to Catherine (Quilty) and Michael J. Sullivan in Barry's Bay, Ontario, a small town, about 200 miles north of Toronto, where many Irish immigrants had settled after the 1840s potato famine. She was baptized three days later in St. Lawrence O'Toole parish church, the eighth of the eventual 12 Sullivan children. There were four boys and eight girls, five of whom in due time became IHM Sisters, including our dear Sister Janet here with us today.

Gen's early days in Barry's Bay were difficult ones – no electricity, no indoor plumbing, no central heating, no automobiles. Nevertheless, her family home was a gathering place for friends and neighbors who often showed up in the evenings to play cards or on weekends to say that they were ready for a party. And so, the rug was rolled up, the fiddles were tuned up, and the dancing began and continued well into the night. Gen retained this love of dancing all her life, and card playing, too! Tales are told still about how she loved to dance and especially with her older brother, Clifford, who excelled at it and how competitive she was at card playing! In fact, I've heard that she seldom lost!

But when Gen was 4 1/2 years old, the family endured a shocking occurrence, the death of her oldest brother Cecil, who, while swimming with some of his brothers and sisters, was overcome by a strong and surprising current that pulled him far out and underwater. Tragically, no one was able to reach him. We can only imagine the grief that overtook the Sullivan family for a long time.

This terrible loss was a factor in the family's decision to move to Detroit in 1927, where they had family connections, but the family still struggled in their early years in Detroit, the time of the Great Depression. Mr. Sullivan, like so many other newcomers to the city in those years, walked the streets looking for work. In due time, he found

employment in a factory and thus simple means of sustenance appeared for this large family.

The Sullivan family experienced loving support from several parish communities, all of which, it happens, had IHM-staffed schools. Gen first met our sisters in the first grade at St. Boniface School where she received her First Communion. Then, as the family moved, she attended St. Gregory, where she was confirmed and St. Cecilia, where she graduated from high school in 1940. Shortly after, she entered the IHM Sisters, joining two of her older sisters and taking her dancing brother's name, Clifford. As Sister Mary Clifford, she professed her final vows in 1946. Over several years, she earned her bachelor's degree from Marygrove and her master's degree in education from Wayne State University and, after Vatican Council II, she also took many courses in Scripture and pastoral theology.

Gen's years of IHM ministry spanned 63 years before she "retired" at the Motherhouse in 2005. For 29 years, from 1943 to 1972, she taught in Michigan IHM elementary schools: in Monroe, Ionia, Detroit, Benton Harbor, Wyandotte and Dearborn. She also taught for several years in Mobile, Ala. Recently, one of Gen's 1957 first grade students at St. Vincent School, Detroit, recounted to her in my presence a stirring memory that typifies Gen's wondrous teaching gifts.

This 1957 first grader never wanted to read out loud and sometimes even held or lost her breath when asked to do so, and especially if the page had the word father on it. Sister Mary Clifford called her home and her mother explained that her daughter was still feeling the loss of her father who had died suddenly, just the February before. Sister Mary Clifford assured the mother that all would be fine and that she would not call on her to read out loud. And indeed, all did work out well. By the end of the year, this youngster was able to read out loud very well, and even a page with the word father on it.

Sixteen years later, this first grader earned a bachelor's degree at Marygrove College and then later a master's degree in special education. When she recounted this memory to Gen in 2017, she had just retired from 34 years as a special education teacher and supervisor in the Detroit Public School System. She also told us that during that special first-grade year, Gen discovered that the student's mom's maiden name was Sullivan, and that of course prolonged their conversations and took them into many other directions! (From Anne Tabone Sheehan)

We can only imagine how many more students experienced Gen's great gifts for seeing what each of her students needed to achieve and grow and to become

confident and self-giving. Gen told me that she loved those years. Even before those years, she used to play school with her brothers and sisters, and she did her older brother Cliff's homework when he was in high school for which he would pay her a quarter! That went a long way at the corner store in the late 1930s!

In 1972, Gen's IHM ministry life moved in quite a new direction. She began 34 years of direct service as a pastoral associate in four different parishes. She began first as pastoral associate with Father Thomas Sutherland, our celebrant today, at St. Thomas Aquinas Parish in Detroit for eight years. Sister Janet told me that he has a bundle of stories about Gen's wonderful pastoral gifts and also about her extremely competitive card playing!

In 1984, Gen moved to Holland, Mich. to become pastoral associate at Our Lady of the Lake Parish. She coordinated baptism preparation and followed up with education and care. She visited the sick, both homebound and in nursing homes. She consoled those who suffered loss and she counselled the troubled. She led Bible study sessions and developed prayer groups. She served as staff for the parish peace and justice committees. She encouraged ecumenical relations and participated in shared prayer services with many Protestant ministers in the Holland area.

It is literally impossible to measure the impact of Gen's competent and compassionate work in this parish. Some of the parishioners are here with us today, and so many others have shared, with Janet and myself this week, stirring memories of Gen's many gifts given so freely to them. One woman recounted the impact of being in a prayer group that Gen formed. In her words:

Gen modeled for us a spirituality that spoke of love and acceptance and openness to change and to new ideas. She supported us through the hard times life brought to each of us. Gen became family to me, part of my chosen family. To me, she is mom/sister. And my children and grandchildren think of her as their 'Holland, Michigan grandmother.' When my then 5-year-old granddaughter visited Gen in Monroe, she said, "Oh Gen, you live in a castle ... and you are the Queen!" You can imagine Margaret's response to that! And Gen is a Queen in all our hearts. (From Olivia Nowack)

Another wrote how she witnessed Gen with the sick and dying who let go of their fears and anxieties when she entered the room so quietly and then cared for them, blessing them and exuding the Spirit of love to them. Even more, Gen gifted this parishioner with the ministry of visiting the sick herself, one that she has continued for more than 30 years. (From Elizabeth Kovacs)

A couple emailed us yesterday, saying that they first met Gen as newcomers to the area through the parish pastor, Father Lawie. This young couple had two children under 2 and immediately Gen linked them up with other young couples. The husband wrote:

As a physician, I often struggled with challenging moral or ethical issues I encountered in my practice. Sister Gen was a great listener. And she was even better at sharing her thoughts based on decades of practical experience of serving the Body of Christ. I found her wisdom captivating. Years later, while visiting her at the Motherhouse in Monroe, I still found benefit in sharing the challenges of living out my faith in challenging times. My wife, Margaret, fell in love with Gen for other reasons. She had a lot of spunk and feistiness — no doubt her Irish blood contributed to those traits. But Margaret found it refreshing to visit with a Religious not afraid to speak her mind about issues confronting the Church that were not being appropriately addressed. Gen indeed had her ways! (From Dave and Margaret Young)

Another parishioner called Janet this week from New Zealand on a prolonged visit there, saddened that he could not be with us today because of all that Gen had done for him, beginning with his parents as they were dying and then his own family. He respected Gen so much that in 2008, he brought her with him to New Zealand for his marriage to his wife in her homeland, and that was then celebrated again back in Holland. He spoke too of how his whole family loved to come to visit Gen here in Monroe and especially when Michigan played Ohio State and there was roaring laughter from both sides in the Community Room. His family met our IHM family and the bond continues, so appreciative of Gen for enhancing their lives with wisdom and compassion and always joyous love. (From Tom, Megan, Patrick and Isabel Nelis)

Gen began the last phase of her ministerial life when she returned to our Motherhouse in 2007. She continued visiting the sick both here and in the local hospital for many years, right up until she needed such care herself, and that only so recently. On her bulletin board, I saw her Nov. 10, 2016 commissioning to ministry by our President Jane Herb. It read: "On behalf of the Leadership Council, I mission you, Genevieve Sullivan, IHM, to the ministry of prayer and presence. May you continue to be a blessing to those you minister to and with on your journey in the IHM Senior Living Community."

Just two days before Gen died, she had a loving visit with her nephew, Jim, and on the morning of her death, she looked out at the morning sky she so often talked about, while Janet read this prayer:

Spirit of the morning hours,
bless the work I have begun,
that it may serve the larger world.
Transform my work into a morning song of love,
a melody of love.

Before Janet finished the prayer, which ended with the phrase, "As I pause to receive your holy breath, I embrace your Eternal Now," Gen did take her last breath and passed into Eternal life. Can you believe that? So tuned was she to God!

It is time now for all of us to let go of our dear Gen who is now fully at rest in the Light and Life and Love of God. The Sullivan and Quilty clans and all whom she has loved and have gone on before her have already rolled up the heavenly carpets and tuned up the divine fiddles, and Clifford is ready to scoop you up into a grand dance to welcome you! We say to you now: Let your eternal dance begin and keep up your card playing, too! In the words of an ancient Irish blessing that was pinned to your bulletin board:

And when Eternity beckons
at the end of a life heaped so high with love,
may our gracious God embrace you
with the arms that have nurture you
the whole length of your joy-filled days.

Be sure, though, to leave plenty of that joyous love here with us and all whose lives you changed and who treasure you still, and especially with your dear Sister Janet and all your nieces and nephews and their children and their children's children! How we have all loved you, dear Gen!
Amen! Alleluia!

Written and delivered by Mary Ellen Sheehan, IHM, Sept. 16, 2020