

Remembering Sister Judith Ellen (Marie Jerome) Dutka, IHM

March 22, 1946-May30, 2009



It's no surprise that Judy Dutka was so incredibly good at the important business of relationships. After all, she started nine months ahead of most of us — in the womb with her twin brother, Jerry, recognizing early, no doubt, the need to make room, to accommodate the other, to share space and life.

And so it has been for 63 years. In so many relationships with her family and her IHM Sisters, especially the Night Travelers; with professional colleagues, the city pastors of Detroit and her Jesuit co-workers; with singers and musicians, the Wild Women, her close friends and healthcare providers; and, of course, with Detroit itself, Judith Ellen — Sister Judy, Sister Marie Jerome,

our dear sister and friend — created a warm, welcoming space and pulled people into it with ease and grace.

Born in 1946 with her twin, Jerry, as the eldest children of her parents, Hank and Mary Dutka, Judy was ever and always a Detroit girl, her path to the Monroe IHMs moving from Epiphany Parish to Immaculata High School and then to the Motherhouse in 1964. Those who knew her parents could easily discern the genetic and social roots of her friendly personality and love for music.

For her younger sisters, Loretta and Faye, their husbands and her brother, Jerry, Judy became the glue that bound this good family more closely to one another, especially after the death of their parents.

Judy shared her parents with many friends, especially with folks like me who did not have parents close by. Both her mom and dad came to hear Judy sing at my final profession, and, some years later, her mom and I used two VIP tickets I had come upon to attend the liturgy of Pope John Paul in the Pontiac Silverdome. For the record, I did offer my tickets to Judy, but she had a wedding to sing — or so she told me. It was a thrill for Judy's mom and a joy for me to see my good friend's mother so happy.

On Thanksgiving a year ago, Judy's sisters, brother and brothers-in-law brought an entire home-cooked Thanksgiving dinner to Monroe and, once again, created a Dutka party that brought joy to all, in spite of Judy's deteriorating health. Her extended Polish family often came together for occasions like the Christmas Eve *vigilia*, where music, food and family took center stage, and Hank and Uncle Barney's band accompanied much happy singing. No surprise that Judy's life was full of the same.

Judy's earliest assignment as an IHM took her to Ionia, far from the familiar urban neighborhoods of her youth, but that did not deter her from making deep and lasting friendships there.

Years of exceptional service as a math teacher, counselor and administrator in Detroit and Judy's deep love for students and their parents, especially those at East Catholic High School and Loyola Academy, best reflect her powerful legacy as an educator. Judy guided hundreds of young people, many with few of the familial and economic assets we take for granted, toward significant academic and athletic achievement, post-secondary education and career success.

I know this to be exceedingly true. Like many Detroit mothers, I raised a young African American son alone. And like many East Catholic and Loyola moms, I know all too well that, although our sons love us more than life itself and would die defending us, they do not always *listen* to us and sometimes come late to realizing that our advice is worth heeding. When our sons wouldn't or couldn't hear what we had to say, many moms, including me, were immensely grateful for the Judys of the world. Each of these young men who has gone on to college, to responsible life choices, to parenthood and employment owes a piece of that success to Sister Judith Dutka. I know mine does.

One couldn't be around Judy for long without realizing that, despite professional success as a teacher, counselor and administrator, her passion wrapped itself most profoundly around music. She offered her lovely, clear and resonant voice unselfishly on hundreds of occasions to make the most meaningful moments of our lives — weddings, professions, jubilees and funerals — more joyful, more beautiful, more comforting, more replete with meaning.

Would that she could sing for us tonight!

Judy's instrument was her voice, a gift from God that she recognized, developed, loved and shared joyfully with others. Although her singing seemed effortless, those who knew her best realized that hours of disciplined practice, repeated playing of practice CDs in the car and meticulous score marking, as well as formal rehearsals, allowed her natural talent to shine and shine brightly.

Judy was equally at home singing second alto in the Archdiocesan Choir as she was singing wedding solos or serving as lead cantor, as we IHMs and so many others have experienced. I often accompanied her, and on the rare occasion when she missed a note or a word, Judy became visibly distressed, not because she thought herself incapable of making an error, but because she believed her mistake disrupted the prayer of others. Judy Dutka's singing was prayer, not performance, and that about says it all.

All of us who sang or played with Judy — Rose Carmel, Mary Fran, Rose Ange, Angela, Pam, Carrine and I — know this to be true, and so do countless IHMs for whom she sang professions, jubilees or funeral liturgies, for our own sisters as well as for our parents or siblings. I met Judy when I was planning my final vow

ceremony. When she began to sing — “*Born of the earth, a child of God, just one among the family*”¹ — I knew this woman saw her voice as a gift that longed to be shared.

Later, it was Judy’s voice raised in one of the great psalms of condolence that set us on the path to healing following John Clement’s death. More recently, just before her health began to decline for the final time, Judy came to the College of St. Catherine intending to sing the “All That I Am” *Magnificat* she had sung so many times, only now to sing it as a duet with the composer, David Haas.² Although Judy was still strong enough to travel — this time for *my* mother’s memorial — she was not strong enough to sing, nor could she sing at my son’s wedding, as she had hoped. On those days, I knew with sadness and foreboding that when Judy’s splendid voice would finally go silent, our loss would be incalculable. Judy Dutka’s mark in the congregation, her singular, unique and lovely gift to every IHM, was her voice: her sweet, pure, magical and holy voice.

Sister Judy’s love for Detroit was as strong and passionate as her love for music, perhaps felt more intensely than by almost anyone in the Congregation. She understood viscerally what it meant for the IHM congregation to say it was for, and in and with Detroit. She learned at the feet of great Detroit school women like Mary Louise Affholter, and whether it was East Catholic, St. Mary’s of Redford, Marygrove, Our Lady of Guadalupe, Corktown, Gesu, the Cathedral, Loyola or Redeemer, Judy’s love for the city, its people, and for the culture and spirit of the African American community was as true and good as anyone could imagine.

Who wouldn’t respect Judy’s absolute reverence for the African American community; for its women and their resilience; its men and their courage; and for its young people and their potential? I think her love came from sharing so much of the African American eye for justice and exuberance for life, and from carrying that community’s hope and unquenchable optimism within every fiber of her being.

That hope and optimism would become the engine that powered Judy’s long, valiant struggle against an ugly disease. It finally took her body, but it never had its way with her spirit. Judy knew she was at the center of my prayer — each day, every morning, as I am sure she was for many of you — but could not understand right away that my prayer was not that God would take away her disease, but rather that Judy would realize she would *have* whatever time she needed, that her life would be long enough to complete the work God intended for her on earth. During our many conversations, it was clear that her determination and strong spirit made this understanding hard to come by. Why wouldn’t it be for someone so full of good energy and zest for life?

Our wonderful friend and sister — the one who loved shopping, whether she needed something or not; the one who saw to it that her friends never failed to receive a green card on St. Patrick’s Day, or a red one on Valentine’s day, or an orange card on Halloween or Thanksgiving, always written in her near-perfect penmanship; the one who never failed to make it to wakes and funerals, basketball games and rehearsals, parent meetings and Night Traveler weekends — through all of it, our

beloved Judy has been spot on, faithful and supremely attentive to her many relationships.

Most lovable about Judy was her effortless engagement of others through simple human contact — her sisters and brother, her close friends, the Night Travelers, her accompanists and choral directors; her president and colleagues at Loyola; the nursing staffs at Henry Ford and the Motherhouse; Doctors Anderson and Fleece; her aunts, the Wild Women, her Ionia, East Catholic and Dayton friends; her IHM Sisters, so many singers and musicians; and the young men of Loyola and of Detroit.

I saw for myself that a new kind of peace had entered Judy's soul, sometime between Holy Saturday and May 19, the last day I spent with her. It was a lovely day that included a lot of talking and hugging, three cherry popsicles, a little counsel for our novice, and even some singing. That day and, as I am told, from then on, her peace was lovely to behold; unmistakable and reassuring like a long-awaited dawn. One could mistake the glow on her face for a reflection from the pink outfits she wore and came to love; but I think, rather, it was a reflection of her tranquil soul, a new place of the heart toward which she was moving. One could actually sense her growing awareness of something beyond, of something more; that something was finally beginning to make sense, to become clearer. And then, all of a sudden, grace and peace were everywhere, even though all was awash in sadness. It seemed possible to her that day that everything could be all right, all good, all OK.

And so, at the break of dawn, she *"climbed up out of a narrow darkness on to a ledge of light,"* as Jessica Powers says³, and we can easily imagine Judy there — bright, alive and singing her heart out for the love of God. Such an image is so easy to conjure and, together with the reassuring certainty of our faith in the Risen Jesus and His promise of the same for us, makes this intensely sad moment more tolerable.

Our Judy auditioned for a first-class, very big and important choir, and she made the cut. She heard the Conductor say, "Come in, I've been looking forward to seeing you. We need some strong altos! There's a place right here for you. It isn't Detroit, but I think you're going to like it."

"Time has one song alone," Jessica Powers says.⁴
*If you are heedful and concentrate on sound with all your soul,
you may hear the song of the beautiful will of God,
soft notes or deep sonorous tones that roll
like thunder over time.
Not many have the hearing for this music
and fewer still have sought it as sublime.*

*The saints who loved have died of this pure music,
and no one enters heaven until she learns,
deep in her soul at least, to sing with God.*

My dear friends, my sisters, Jerry, Loretta and Faye — our colleague, our counselor and guide, our sister, our sweet maker of music, our dear Judy is singing with the God she served so well. Praise God for such awesome mercies.

Written by Andrea Lee, IHM
June 2, 2009

¹ Williamson, Chris. "Sister." The Changer and the Changed, Special Edition. By Chris Williamson. Wolf Moon Records, 2005.

² Haas, David. "Magnificat." Rec. 1990. Celebration Series # G-3447. By David Haas. GIA Publications, Inc., 1990.

³ Powers, J., Siegfried, R, Morneau, R. (eds). "The Ledge of Light" in Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers, Institute of Carmelite Studies (ICS), 1999. p 19.

⁴ Powers, J., Siegfried, R, Morneau, R. (eds). "The Will of God" in Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers, Institute of Carmelite Studies (ICS), 1999. p 22.