



## Remembering Sister Marie (Robert Marie) Sweeney, IHM

May 26, 1937 - Aug. 25, 2009

How do you do a remembering for someone who always had great memories of every family and community event? VERY CAREFULLY! For many of us who hear or read these rememberings today, the words "Community woman" mean a lot. Marie Sweeney was truly a "Community woman." It was in her DNA. She was a community woman in many scenarios. Marie was part of: the Sweeney family community, the IHM community, the City of Detroit community, several Ministerial communities, the Henry Ford Hospital community, The Gift of Life community and a Hospitality community.

Marie was born into the Sweeney-Allen family, the first of the six children of Emmett Sweeney and Marie Eva Allen, on May 26, 1937. She was baptized at St. Brigid parish where she later ministered. Marie was followed by her siblings Margaret, Robert Emmett Jr, affectionately referred to as "Little Bobby" and who died of Leukemia at age 7, "Baby Therese" who died at birth, followed by Kathleen Mary and William Joseph.

The Sweeney family was deeply rooted in their Catholic faith. While the diagnosis of Leukemia for "Little Bobby" was extremely difficult for the whole family, it was also a time where they became very close and their faith was strengthened. Marie's parents were founding members of the Children's Leukemia Foundation and may have been the inspiration for Marie herself, years later, in her work with "Gift of Life."

The Sweeney clan has grown in numbers over the years. The in-laws, nieces and nephews and grandnieces and grandnephews, even those yet to be born, as well as those in the extended family and those so close that they seem like family, are all considered treasures and are held dearly. Marie loved birthdays...and you would never be able to forget her birthday or the birthdays of her brother, sisters, nieces and nephews. Even when she was very sick in her last months, she was worried about how they were going to celebrate the birthdays of the grandnieces and grandnephew: Liam, Kaci and Eva.

Marie grew up in a family that loved the IHMs. Her parents were both educated by IHMs and they bought their home in Christ the King parish so their children would also be educated by IHM Sisters. Marie went to Immaculata High School. She entered the IHM congregation on Sept. 6, 1955, and was received into the Novitiate on June 17, 1956, when she received the name "Robert Marie." She made final profession on June 29, 1963. Her parents were very proud and supportive of Marie's decision to enter the IHMs but that didn't mean there weren't many a tear shed by her siblings following visits to Monroe. Her mother found creative ways of getting around the limited "contact" in those days. She took up cake decorating and would send cakes via the truck that went from Christ the King to Monroe. Of course messages were received with the cake deliveries!

Marie's "roots" were in the City of Detroit. While growing up, her grandparents and most of

the aunts, uncles and cousins were in the Detroit area. Holidays were times of celebration, stories, music as well as good food and drink. Marie lived most of her life in the city and lived her commitment to the city of Detroit in her ministries. While Marie started out as a primary teacher at St. Joseph's in Trenton, she soon went to St. Agnes' in Detroit where she moved into junior high. She later taught at St. Bede's, St. Mary of Redford and Epiphany, and then went into parish ministry at Epiphany. She continued in parish ministry at St. Rose's and St. Brigit's where she later became principal of the school for 13 years. It was here where she was enriched greatly by the experience of working with members of the Jesuit community. From there she moved into campus ministry at Marygrove College for another 14 years. Marie played an active part in all of these scenarios. She was dedicated to the people, the schools and the parishes of the city. She worshiped at St. Leo's parish. The city was part of her life from her earliest years until recently where photos witness to the gathering of folks in the neighborhood in the front yard on Littlefield as Marie and Mary Ann dedicated their Peace Pole.

Marie's lung transplant in 2001 opened the door for another kind of community. When she first went on the list for transplant, she went to a support group meeting where she met some people who had received a lung and others who were waiting for one. This group was very important to Marie. She kept in contact with them over the years. She was always available to listen, encourage and talk about her own experience to those who awaited transplants, their families and others who might be interested. The physical therapy group that met at Fitness Work was a support to her and an opportunity for her to encourage those awaiting transplant. There was a bond there. Marie was proud to have the 10 year anniversary of the Lung Transplant Program of Ford Hospital at Marygrove. It was a great party.

Henry Ford Hospital became another community for Marie. In fact she referred to Ford as "her hospital." The clinic doctors, nurses and staff who took such good care of her always seemed glad to see her because she was interested in their lives. These connections endeared her to those who cared for her. Who else do you know who invites their doctors and nurses to their Jubilee celebration? "Her nurse" Eileen Semonin, IHM, was a great support for Marie as well. As Marie left Henry Ford Hospital this summer, there was a steady stream of staff who came by to see her.

Marie loved being in the Gift of Life program and did countless presentations about organ donation. She was on the Gift of Life Board and served as volunteer coordinator for the Down River area. You could always identify Marie's car in any parking lot by the sticker on the back with the green bow urging us to Donate Life! Marie received her transplant lung from Jeremy, a 15 year old boy active in sports. She always carried a picture of Jeremy and talked about him when she told her story. Marie wanted to meet her donor family. This meeting not only brought them together but also brought about a connection with the heart recipient as well. The connection with the donor family: Troy, Phyllis and Michelle, and the heart recipient Elbert and his wife Diane, were very special to Marie. They would often meet for lunch in Jackson to hear more "Jeremy stories" and, typical of Marie, this brought about stories and sharing about their own lives and families. These friends have been to Monroe and last year they all went to the Transplant Olympic Games where Marie won a silver medal for the baseball throw event which she proudly displayed. (Don't ask how many people participated in that event.)

In later years, strangers who spent only 30 seconds with Marie ( toll booth attendants, people in restaurants, health care workers) would know she was a lung recipient, would know about Jeremy and his family and would be given forms to sign up for organ donation.

Gathering around the table started early for Marie in the family home. Gathering at the table was something Marie continued to treasure, build on and expand. Even when Marie was no longer in formal ministry, she continued to connect with others in a ministry, and yes, a commitment of hospitality with Mary Ann Markel. They had a gift for gathering people together to share faith, fun and food. As many of you know Marie started calling their home, "Littlefield Café." At very short notice they could have up to eight busy people at the house for dinner. One Lent they decided to invite 40 people to the house for soup and salad and faith sharing. Their invitees came from Monroe and Detroit and thus had a variety of experiences to share. Not only that, but they took this experience on-the-road and for two years took their soup and salad dinners to Monroe where they gathered small groups of Motherhouse sisters in January and February to help chase away the winter "blahs" and at the same time make wonderful connections.

Marie, as we said at the beginning, you have always been a "Community Woman." You brought many people together. You have shared your life with them and they shared theirs with you. Your "rememberings" are many. You loved to tell stories, especially those about connections. And so we, too, want to share our stories of connection with and about Marie. You are invited now to turn to the person next to you or a small group around you to share any anecdotes or stories which you might want to tell.

Written by:

Marge Sweeney, Mary Ann Markel and Candyce Rekart