

Words of Remembrance

Elenor McLaughlan rsj

Jan Tranter rsj

Who was this little gifted woman we farewell today? She has so touched us, passed through our midst and gone from among us. What has she left among us?

Much of what I share comes from Elenor's own words and the reflections of other Sisters. Thank you, Sisters.

Elenor was the only surviving child of William McLaughlan and Jessie nee Henderson. She was always known as an only child, but told Kath Mernagh a few months ago that there were two baby brothers who died before she was born. She was born in Gosford, but six months later, when her father lost his job in the Depression, the family went to West Wallsend to live with grandparents. Hoping for work, Bill and his family moved to Swansea when Elenor was three. They lived first in a house owned by an uncle, while Bill bought land at Swansea St, cleared the land and built first a blacksmith's shop, then their own small home. Elenor said it was 'one single room with a verandah where my parents and I lived until we could afford a bigger home'. She wondered how they and all the furniture, finely made by her father, fitted here. As work came, Bill built a larger home, and had the first dwelling moved and added to it. Close by was the young Henderson family. Genevieve remembers playing with Elenor in Uncle Bill's shop on non-working days, having fun banging the anvil. In 2007, Elenor wrote with due pride that the blacksmith's shop built seventy years before and the home were still standing. Elenor's parents, of strong faith, took Elenor to Mass usually at the local Ambulance Hall, or sometimes as far as Belmont. Her parents were not young when she was born, so she was relatively young when they died. She was thirty seven when her mother died. Her father died five years later.

This was the atmosphere of Elenor's childhood: family bonds, close in affection and deep Catholic faith, loving care for family, hard work, hope and determination in the face of adversity. This gave Elenor her grounding in simplicity, constancy, a happy constancy and an affinity of heart with the needy and the struggling.

In all this there was the sign of another gift, an extraordinary gift of music. From early childhood, she showed interest in music. This is one story. When she was about two, she said,

living at Westy, her father took her to hear the local band practising. On return she entertained her mother, humming the complicated tune. Recognising her gift, her parents had her taught music from the age of seven. She said she was never given to regular practice, but had 'natural talent, a good ear and the ability to play a tune after one hearing' and she enjoyed playing. She was taught by local music teachers till the arrival of the Sisters of St Joseph. Then her teacher was the maestro herself, Sr Angela Baker, in 1941/42. She attended the local Public School the only school nearby, till 1943, when she went to St Joseph's Secondary at Merewether. During the year an eye specialist found her sight poor and recommended that she leave aside most school subjects and concentrate on music. It seems that by the age of fifteen, she made the decision to join the Sisters. She wrote that she went to Lochinvar from 1944 till 1946 and took up 'music seriously for training to be a music teacher after joining the congregation as a Sister of St Joseph'. Her teacher was Sr M Cecily, another musical genius. By the end of 1946, she had gained her Associate Diploma in Music, in piano, as well as Honours in Grade 3 in Singing and Musical Perception. (Several of our Sisters here today, including Clare T, gaining her Assoc Dip then too, Florence, de Porres, Denise, Cath Sheedy, Betty Brown, Anne Gallagher, Cabrini and others, including Pat Curran, our violinist today, gained musical awards at the same time.) The young woman who didn't practise regularly till then, showed she was capable of discipline and distinction in any musical award.

Her life as a Sister of St Joseph began when she entered on 13 June 1947, aged eighteen. As a postulant and novice, she learned violin and taught piano, singing and violin. 'It was a full and busy life', wrote Elenor, 'and I loved it'. She professed her vows on 4 January 1950. A year later came the happy day when her cousin and Swansea play mate Noelene joined the Sisters as Sr Genevieve.

After her profession her music ministry expanded from private pupils to Primary and Secondary group work, choral teaching, Liturgical music and eisteddfod work, while living in many communities. Each move gave further challenges. After some years, her growing interest in the healing power of music led her 'to follow her dream to be a music therapist'. With courage, determination and also fear, with no academic experience at this level, she commenced this study in 1992. In 1998 she gained her Bachelor of Arts through the University of New England and the next year her postgraduate Diploma in Music and Therapy at Sydney University of Technology. Thus she became a registered music therapist at the age of seventy. She made no fuss about the work or indeed her success, quietly

applying what she had learned in continued visits to Dungog Hospital and Nursing Home and to Stockton Centre, where she ministered to people with intellectual and physical disability. She 'retired' to Tenison Apartments, Swansea, back to her origins, in 2003. Here again she was constantly sharing her gift of music in the Swansea Catholic and Uniting Churches, at Belmont, wherever she was asked, and at Tenison, with prayer gatherings of all denominations, Singalongs and celebrations, making music to suit each person.

In community living, she shared warm, quiet companionship and joy, often in music. She would hum to ease the burden of another. If someone was in trouble, Elenor might pass humming the 'Dead March'. All through the years, Sisters often heard a tune hummed or played for them. Her wit was never at the expense of others, but rather the ability to see the light side and to flash it to all. She herself said, at the end of her life, that she was a genius, but a lazy one. Whatever about that, her agile mind, her compassionate heart and agile fingers exercised a neural activity that outstripped the normal. She rolled out multiple witty verses and matching tunes. One Elenor production had verses she composed to sources as diverse as White Horse Inn, Kerry Dance, Little Brown Jug, Teddy Bears Picnic, Schubert's Serenade, Waltzing Matilda, Excelsior, Wearing of the Green, Annie Laurie and Rule Britannia. At the Australia Day gatherings of Newcastle Sisters in Pell St days, she would play Aussie tune after tune, with not a page of music, smiling all the way.

What was significant was the heart below the wit, a heart of compassion, a heart of wisdom, a heart that cared, a heart of joy.

What kept Elenor going? Did she ever feel her wellsprings were dry? After thirty three years of ministry, Elenor accepted a period of Renewal at Baulkham Hills. Her words of gratitude for this touch on hidden struggles which she called 'Gethsemanes, Calvaries and Resurrections'. Through spiritual direction and even wider friendships Elenor found herself not re-directed, but rather confirmed in the love and generosity of her ministry and her religious commitment. Finding anew her own wellsprings, she returned with renewed energy to her community life and widening musical ministry. Always, as well, she had a loving care and understanding for the priests in the parishes where she worked. She also reached out to the poor and needy, whom she found and visited wherever she was, in love and simplicity. In her last year, though still responding generously to numerous calls to play, with her health declining, Elenor was often found sitting peacefully in her room, Rosary or prayer book in hand. She drew on the wellsprings.

Looking over her whole musical ministry, there was a creative urge, a newness, an irrepressible energy for others. What was at the heart of her energy? Pat Hayes cut to the heart of this. She said Elenor had her foibles, but these were far outweighed by her charity to her Sisters and everyone, in the wider community, whoever they were. Charity to all was her life, said Pat. Elenor's gift of music was at the service of love.

With her great talent, there was never an iota of the career woman about her. What she was about was being a loving Sister of St Joseph, using her gifts to bring joy, build up, console. The congregation was her belonging, her way of being given to God and all God's people. She was a true daughter of Tenison Woods and Mary MacKillop.

Elenor's last visit here was on her Golden jubilee day, 20th November 2010. It was a huge, painful effort to come but she wanted to be here. She looked in pain, her feet especially, and as if her life in this world was not for long. She said no word of her pain. This day celebrated her life as a Sister of St Joseph of Lochinvar and that is what she had lived, with all her heart. She knew and accepted that her heart was failing. Sisters who knew her well felt her calm acceptance. A few weeks later, in nursing care, when her heart had failed, she struggled in confusion and anxiety. Elenor was always grateful for help. She would expect me to thank on her behalf all those who visited, cared for and comforted her, in these last frail weeks. She would want to thank especially Karen, Ellen Shanahan, Pauline, Norah and Celie Creigh, Kathleen and Margaret Anne.

Some Sisters shared words that point to Elenor.

St Francis de Sales' words, *Joy is a sign of the presence of God.*

Blessed are the feet of those who bring good news. Her feet, often painful and swollen in later years, brought good news to so many.

Love is as strong as death, the flash of it is as a flash of fire,

The flame of God.

I have the privilege of speaking today as I am in one of our Sisters' reflection- prayer groups that has, like others, been meeting for over eight years. Elenor was in this group. Despite failing health, she made great efforts to attend till near the end of last year. We valued her capacity to listen reflectively and to share her wisdom.

Sometimes it's as if we have held eternity in our hand for a moment, and we didn't know. It's like this with all of us. It is like this with losing Elenor.