

THE CAMPANILE

MOUNT SAINT JOSEPH ACADEMY

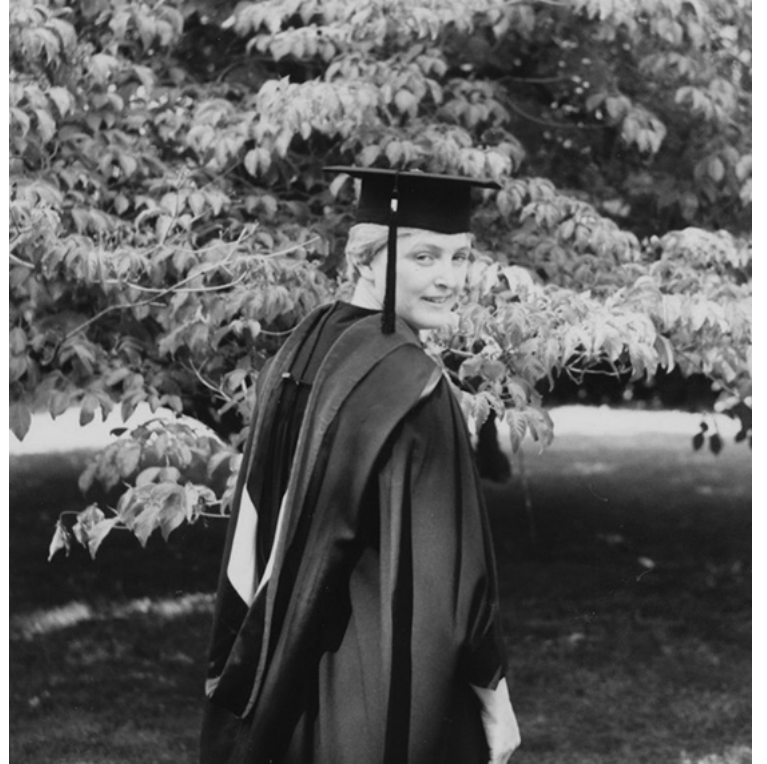
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Remembering S. Kathleen Brabson



In this issue of the Campanile, we remember Sister Kathleen Brabson. Inside are tributes, memories and pictures from students, colleagues, alumnae and family. Below is a reflection delivered by S. Kathleen's close friend, Sister Mary Dacey, former MSJA Principal and President, at S. Kathleen's memorial service.



"No one has within themselves all the pieces to their puzzle... Everyone carries within them at least one and probably many pieces to someone else's puzzle. Sometimes they know it, sometimes they don't. But when you present your piece to another, whether you know it or not, you are a messenger of God's grace." - Lawrence Kushner

Sister Kathleen Brabson, Kathleen, Kath, Kathy, Aunt Kathleen, Sister Thomas Audrey was such a messenger. And all of you present here today, those who gathered at IHM yesterday, and so many who could not be present, were messengers of grace to her. You loved her, you supported her, you respected her and you challenged her—you gave her a piece of yourselves, even as she shared pieces of herself with you. Hers was a story of relationships that evolved without edges, without boundaries.

Kathleen's life began in Brooklyn, New York, where she was born, but it took shape when her family moved to the Philadelphia area, her home for most of her life. She loved her family passionately—her parents, Tom and Audrey, and her siblings—John, Patty, Audrey and Angel. In time that love would extend to nieces and nephews, grandniece and grandnephews, in-laws included. Family was one of her three great loves—along with her ministry of education and her vocation to the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph.

I could say that Kathleen was an exceptional teacher who served in a number of schools, from the Philly suburbs, to McSherrystown, to Jersey and Delaware—with studies at Villanova and Fordham in between.

But that hardly captures the impact she made.

This from a parent: "When she was an eighth-grade teacher, my first grader somehow developed the biggest crush on 'Sister Kathy.' He bought her a Christ-

mas present with his own money (a Nerf dart game) and kept a picture of her in his room. Once when he was leaving Mass in the pouring rain, she covered him with her big umbrella. Driving home I remarked, 'That was nice of Sister Kathy.' His response: 'Mommy, I'm too excited to even talk about it right now.'"

This from a former high school student: "Since our relationship began when I was in high school, she has been a part of every special event I have experienced over time. When I heard she was sick, I wanted to just get in the car and drive to her sister's. She is my hero and has been for most of my life."

This from a recent Mount grad: "I hold an extremely special and dear place in my heart for Sister Kathleen—I was fortunate to become very close to her during my senior year. She wasn't just someone I would see in the halls. Rather, she became a friend, and more specifically, a mentor for life."

Mount Saint Joseph Academy acquired an extraordinary administrator in Kathleen.

As the Dean of Students, she had a unique gift for ferreting things out, getting to the heart of the matter and more importantly getting to the heart of the person. Many of the students who spent more time in her office than they should have, became some of her best buddies. And really, what dean do you know who was a favorite and willing subject for student skits on Spirit Day?

Then, she became President. She hired the first lay principal, fine-tuned technology, built turf fields, renovated the auditorium and science labs...and more. Yet these accomplishments did not come close to her real passion—ensuring that the mission of the Sisters of St. Joseph and the Mount was the centerpiece, the core of the Mount community—that it permeated every aspect of Mount life—from board meetings and strategic plans, to the

committee on Mission and Membership, to student retreats and student-initiated projects like "I Am Malala," and exchange trips with LePuy, France, the foundation of the Sisters of St. Joseph. She worked diligently to provide financial aid so that the Mount was affordable for many. This past week, messages of admiration and loss have poured in from professional colleagues across the Philadelphia area.

So, who was the person when she wasn't official teacher, Dean or President and how would her friends describe her?

One word would be GRACIOUSNESS. She was gracious to everyone and in all situations! She was literally, full of "grace." You just got used to how she reached out with a hug or with open arms. She was also fiercely loyal to and passionate about anyone or anything she loved or believed in. And—she was a VERY prayerful woman. She was funny, but she preferred to be called quick and clever, like her Mom. She loved to read—about everything from politics and current events, to sports and entertainment. We always wondered how she found the time. And she loved maps and globes—perhaps inherited from her father—her world would never be small. She loved the shore, and of course Cape May, her sacred space for retreat each summer, for many summers. She loved walks on the Wissahickon path, spending time with friends, and although she enjoyed shopping, movies, and going out to eat, if there was time, she would inevitably draw you into probing conversations with more questions than answers.

She had a serious and intense side. One summer Kathleen and a friend took a break from studying to go to the Jersey shore. After enjoying a perfect beach day for hours with no sign of Kathleen, she went back to the house to see where she was. She found her pacing the floor and when asked

what she was doing, Kathleen responded: "I'm pondering the Paschal Mystery!" She laughed at herself that day, but her serious side was always there—questioning, preparing, planning, working hard to accomplish what she set out to do. She made it look easy, but she was not exempt from the crises and challenges that every school administrator faces today. She often carried these with a heavy heart. And the sensitivity that consoled so many others could easily turn back on her.

Daughter, sister, aunt, friend, teacher, administrator. Kathleen was all these pieces—but she held these pieces together in one identity. She was a true Sister of St. Joseph. I often think that the graciousness for which she was known even as a young woman was the budding of the SSJ charism planted deep within to reach out to the dear neighbor, to be about relationships, to live and work so that all may be one. If you read her reflection on Wonder, you know that she was "Always drawn to the kind of wonder that takes us deeper into mystery." As a high school student pondering her future, she encountered a sister who would become her sponsor, someone who raised deep questions within her. Had mystery found her heart, called her into being, formed her true self? And Kathleen asked herself, "Was this the same mystery that caught and was wedged in my heart, which continues to mold and shape me to become my best self? And how do I live a life of wonder and mystery and invite others to do the same?" I think we can all answer Kathleen's last question.

So... What can we say about January 23? That our world seemed to stop. That we could not believe or take in the tragic news we heard about Kathleen. That we were in disbelief, anger, shock and surprise. That as Father Olivieri said yesterday—it was all so surreal. There was an explosion of phone

calls, emails, texts and messages on social media that went viral.

We said all the things we say, when we don't know what to say in the face of mystery.

Two things about the shock. First, the cancer was worse than anyone thought and had probably been developing long before anyone knew. Second, Kathleen was intensely private, and this is one time, if we truly love her, that we honor her choices, even if they were not our own.

I offer three images for us to ponder as we celebrate her life today.

The picture of her three sisters—Pat, Audrey, Angel—whom she so dearly loved, keeping vigil at Kathleen's bedside throughout the night. Witnessing a final calm and one last smile.

The picture of the flag at half-mast at La Salle High School. Who elicits that kind of response? A hero perhaps?

The image of the puzzle—the interconnecting pieces that were Kathleen and all of us—messengers of God's grace for one another, realizing that as much as she shaped our lives, we helped to shape hers.

What would Kathleen say to us now?

I think that Kathleen would challenge us to carry that piece of her within us, to honor her legacy of spreading the mission of unity and oneness.

I think that Kathleen would encourage us to ask the questions, to ponder the mystery together, to share our individual and collective stories and memories.

I think that Kathleen would invite us to say the prayer that she repeated each day throughout her illness. Kathleen's weakness is lost in God's strength. Maybe that's where we take those unanswerable questions...

Whatever our response, we join together to tell her we love her, we will miss her and we will carry her with us always.



I often placed a plastic container of Twizzlers in my classroom. There were a number of times, while I was in the midst of teaching a history class, that I would see or hear the front door open. An arm, moving as quickly and as stealthily as a cobra, would reach into the container and take a Twizzler. Then, I would see S. Kathleen through the window above the filing cabinet as she smiled, waved and went on her merry way.

On other occasions, such as the start of a semester or when we returned from a holiday break, S. Kathleen would often take the time to stop by my room during a history class to say hello to the Mounties and welcome them back.

Major John Turner

On the Disney trip, I was stopped by TSA for having my water bottle filled with water. So, Sister came with me to leave security and dump the water out. I was so scared because this had been my first time being with her by myself. We couldn't go back outside because that was too time consuming, so I had to drink it all. I didn't know what was worse: having Sister stare me down or having a TSA worker stare me down. When I was allowed to go back through security, she started a conversation with me. Soon we were joking about the incident that had just occurred.

Lauren Parker '20



Sister Kathleen, Ms. Sharon and I went to a grade school in Kensington to talk about expanding horizons in high school. We talked and laughed the entire car ride there. I enjoyed having a conversation with her that wasn't school-related. She told me the reason she chose me was because I have the ability to grab people's attention when I speak; I had never believed that about myself until she said it. I got to school at 7:45—which has never happened in my four years here—just to make sure I wasn't late for this day because it meant so much to her. Sister Kathleen saw something in me that I am still trying to find in myself. I will forever be grateful for that car ride, the kind words she gave me and those bear hugs she gave.

Temeiah Peete '19



Being on retreat with Sister Kathleen was one of my favorite experiences. One year, S. Kathleen came to JTR full-time and since there aren't as many students on JTR, we both had a lot of down time between activities. We were able to share a good number of stories and laughs. She always challenged me to look deeper into myself and to get to know the best self that God created me to be. I think often about the words she has said on retreat and I revisit my reflections often. I am always the one running the show on retreat, but in those small moments she lead us in reflection, I found myself able to retreat, too.

Mrs. Rebecca Conte

Sister Kathleen Brabson noticed everything—untucked shirts, holes in the elbows of our sweaters and when we stepped on our shoes hoping NOT to be noticed! However, by the end of my Mount career, I realized that in her attention to detail, she also noticed struggling students, the girls who sought guidance and when any one of us needed her. Not only did she notice, she worked tirelessly to listen intently, ask meaningful questions and remain connected.

Emily DePaul '01





Fall in Love



Sister Kathleen included this poem in a speech to Mount students; Sister Mary Butler submitted it as a reminder of Sister Kathleen.

By Fr. Pedro Arrupe, SJ

Nothing is more practical than
finding God, than
falling in Love
in a quite absolute, final way.
What you are in love with,
what seizes your imagination, will affect everything.
It will decide
what will get you out of bed in the morning,
what you do with your evenings,
how you spend your weekends,
what you read, whom you know,
what breaks your heart,
and what amazes you with joy and gratitude.
Fall in Love, stay in love,
and it will decide everything.



Our alumnae who knew Sister Kathleen during her tenure as the Dean of Students often talk about her kindness to them. She had a genuine affection for our students and remained connected to them long after graduation. Her handwritten notes in her tiny handwriting graced thousands of acknowledgement letters over the years, and people often commented how special it was to them that the President of the School personally acknowledged their gift to the Mount. She loved the Mount and strived for us to have "everything that the boys' schools had."

Jill Gregori, Director of Development

I was really nervous to start the school year. While at a study seminar, I began talking to Sister Kathleen. I was telling her how I was really nervous, and she was so comforting and friendly. She told me to not worry, and if I needed anything that she would always be there for me. She even let me walk around the school for a little bit, so that I could get more familiar with it. Sister really made me feel at home.

Mary Kate Duffy '22

Although Sister Kathleen was not at the Mount when I was a student, I had the honor and privilege of working side by side with her as I served on the Alumnae Board for eight years. Under her guidance and her leadership I listened, I learned and I loved. I am a better person because of the influence Sister Kathleen had on my life. I am blessed to have my mentor and my friend as my guardian angel watching over me.

Meghan Romano '94

I remember in freshman year, I was terrified of everyone and everything. I tried to be polite and remember the names of any teacher who came up to me. That year, I passed Sister in the hallway and I said, "Good morning, Dr. C!" I was terrified, but she just started chuckling. She patted me on the shoulder and smiled. As she started to go on her way, I said, "Bye, Sister Kathleen."

Livia Nocito '21



A Sister of Saint Joseph, “Ready for any good work”



Today we come to celebrate the life of Sister Kathleen Brabson, a former Dean of Students and the second President of the Mount. Kathleen was a caring daughter, loving sister and aunt, a faithful Sister of Saint Joseph, teacher, administrator and friend. Her relationship with her “gracious God” was profound and deep. How blessed each of us are to be touched by it!

Each September, except for this year due to the Motherhouse chapel’s being under construction, Sister Kathleen would meet the new class of Mounties or colleagues in the chapel and ask them to look at the sea of stars that cover the chapel ceiling. According to Sister Kathleen, the stars represented each Sister of Saint Joseph, each Mountie that has gone before us and the legacy they left for us to follow. Sister would then encourage each student or colleague to pick a star that would be his or her star on the chapel ceiling.

This past Friday, a few col-

leagues were discussing what star each of us picked, and we began to wonder: What star did Kathleen pick as her own?

To Kathleen, the legacy that has been entrusted to us is to strengthen and protect the mission of the Mount. She truly believed we were each individually picked by the Spirit to be a member of the Mount community—alums, students, parents, teachers, Board members, colleagues—and with that gift comes the obligation to keep the mission of the Mount as our most important focus. Kathleen always began our decision making process with the thoughts: What is best for the Mount’s mission? How will our students benefit? And why not?

During Kathleen’s time at the Mount, Kathleen encouraged us to continue to create a challenging curriculum, strong Community Service Corps, and athletic and arts programs that would nurture the development of our students.

Kathleen took her responsibilities at the Mount seriously, and

she wanted Mounties to do the same. She cared deeply for all those under her care and would do anything to help us grow personally and professionally. At Unitas, our senior retreat program, Kathleen would play the song “By Name I Called You.” She consistently reminded us in words and action that our Lord, her good and Gracious God, is always with us and has called each of us by name.

I believe that if we were in the convent chapel today, Kathleen’s star is the one that is twinkling. She would be the first one to tell you that she has walked in the footsteps of giants. And now our good and Gracious God has called Kathleen Brabson home by name, a faithful follower who served the dear neighbor, a Sister of Saint Joseph, who was “ready for any good work.”

Principal Dr. Judith Caviston speaking at S. Kathleen’s Memorial Mass



A friendship forged in Le Puy, France



It is hard to put into words what makes S. Kathleen Brabson such a special person, whose charism left an indelible mark on all of us in our way to carry on the legacy of the Sisters of Saint Joseph in our Le Puy school, and—in a more profound way—in our inner life. We are used to seeing things and say “Why?” while S. Kathleen showed us how to dream things and say “Why not?” as Dr. Caviston pointed out in closing the memorial Mass.

During the Mass celebrated in our school chapel on January 29, the students and the colleagues granted with the privilege of having spent some time with S. Kathleen in the past 4 years, either at the Mount or in Le Puy, were invited to express what they remember from the time shared with her; among the terms used to describe her personality those repeated most often were: “gentle,”

“caring,” “thoughtful,” “simple,” “remarkable,” “kind-hearted,” “respectful,” “friendly,” “great lady,” “humble.”

In addition to all those qualities frequently highlighted on the occasion of her funeral by her colleagues, friends, family and her community, I cannot forget her great sense of humour! I am forever grateful to S. Kathleen for all the times when, as I was at the edge of a nervous breakdown, her amazing liveliness of spirit and her innate kindness managed in a very subtle way to make me smile at myself. Her loving care always knew how to take some of my burdens off my shoulders. All the moments when we laughed together, when we enjoyed good meals and raised our glasses to the partnership uniting her dear Mount in Flourtown with our Saint Joseph Mother-School in Le Puy, encourage us to forge ahead

together in our keeping the Spirit of the Sisters of Saint Joseph alive on both sides of the Ocean.

On our Easter retreat during her last visit in Le Puy, in April 2018, S. Kathleen reminded us that the mission of the Sisters of Saint Joseph is rooted in the Gospel of John: “We live and work so that all may be One in the great love of God.” Then she made us ponder on the way we can live this core value of the SSJ’s, giving us one direction: “Look to Jesus, He teaches us the importance of living in right and just relationships.” She urged us to excel in getting “ready for any good work.” And “just as our Founders to develop a gentle boldness, to take risks and understand that failure can make us stronger for the next bold idea.” Her goodness created around her the most appropriate conditions for each of us to be our best in responding to

this challenge.

Today we must learn how to cope without her soft voice, kindly gesture and smiling eyes, but in the face of adversity, we cannot pretend not to hear her appeal for good manners, greater sensitivity towards each other, and above all her quest for unity and reconciliation. The most unexpected, deeply painful and hardly bearable loss of a highly appreciated partner in advancing the SSJ’s mission in our school, of an unusual spiritual mentor, of a supportive companion in journeying on Christ’s steps breaks our hearts but leaves us nevertheless the consolation to count on her intercessions; we cling to our confidence that she will not let us down and will faithfully continue to help us educate our students on how to become leaders in the world, driven by the desire to serve with compassion our dear

neighbors without distinction.

We will sorely miss you, Sister Kathleen, until our Gracious God brings us together again! Trustful in our coming eternal reunion at the Table of the heavenly Feast, beyond our grief, we want to do our best to please you by drawing strength and hope from your words closing your last Spring letter to the members of our SSJ Team: “My prayers are with you always!”

So it is with infinite gratitude for your grace-filled part in our tireless work to “live from the place of one desire—where God and we dream the same dream.” (Maxim 18), that we believe in your continuous supportive presence by our side.

*Martine Wendzinski
Teacher at Saint Jacques de Compostelle in Le Puy*