

Oral history: Sister Joyce Brophy, inspiring confidence in others

December 28, 2021 | Debbie Griffey (<https://spsmw.org/author/dgriffey/>) | 5 Comments (<https://spsmw.org/2021/12/28/oral-history-sister-joyce-brophy-inspiring-confidence-in-others/#comments>)

“Have confidence in Providence that so far has never failed us. The way is not yet clear. Grope along slowly. Do not press matters; be patient, be trustful.”

Saint Mother Theodore Guerin, letter to the sisters at Jasper, Indiana, 20 March 1842

When I interviewed **Sister Joyce Brophy** (<https://spsmw.org/sister-profile/joyce-brophy/>), SP, in October, I asked her what words of wisdom she could share: “Grove along slowly,” she said.

During our nearly two hours together it became apparent to me that this phrase has defined much of her life. Sister Joyce is the oldest of four children in her family. A first-born-daughter’s characteristics emerged in conversation and in life.

Irish Catholic

Sister Joyce was born in March of 1929. She had a younger sister and brother, all three born two years apart, and a brother who died in infancy. A family of strong Irish Catholics, her very early years were a study in conflicts as they pertained to her later years. Sister Joyce was born in Joliet, Illinois, full Irish blood on both sides of her family. She was born early and at her aunt’s home, delivered by the neighborhood midwife before the doctor arrived.



Sister Joyce in 2021



Sister Joyce's parents

"Dad was a romantic, he wrote poems to my mother. I grew up being loved and comforted and cared for." Sister Joyce was born at the beginning of the Depression and describes both of her parents as wonderful people. When the Depression began, her parents lost what they had in the bank when the bank failed. Her father, one of the younger men on the EJE – the Elgin, Joliet and Eastern Railway – was one of the first ones laid off. He took any job he could get and finally joined the Work Progress Administration (WPA). His skills enabled him to become a manager there.

Her mother would refer to the time "when we were poor," but Sister Joyce has no memory of being poor because the family always had what they needed. In addition, both of her grandfathers would come to the house each week with a bag of groceries as if it was what all grandparents did.

Her mother's mother had died in the flu epidemic of 1918, followed by the death of three of her eight children within a couple of weeks. Sister Joyce described her maternal grandfather as a wonderful man whose oldest son was in World War I in 1918; his oldest daughter was married, lived nearby, and provided a home for the family following the death of their wife and mother. Thus, this aunt became like a grandmother to her and her siblings.

Strong family ties

"I'm from a family who will stand for the good." Sister Joyce has had a remarkable career and achieved much. She equally brags on her brother, who became a Joliet Fire Department Lieutenant. Her sister also had an accomplished career, rising from surgical nurse to teacher, then head of the School of Nursing, then CEO of St. Joseph Hospital. She shared how her sister refused to accept a salary that was less than her male predecessor, and how she refused to allow the hospital board to release employees early to avoid paying them retirement. Her love and the closeness she had with her brother and sister is evident.

"I am the only one in my immediate family and my mother's generation living, other than one cousin." A large poster of smiling family members graces



A young Sister Joyce with family members

most of one wall of Sister Joyce's room. She is a treasure to her siblings' children and grandchildren, a much-loved aunt and great-aunt to them. Her love for them was evident when we spoke, and it came up more than once in our time together.

"I am very much remembered and loved by them, and I have a close relationship with all of them. I'm blessed in the family I have, and in the opportunity to be close to them. I know all these kids intimately. They used to come visit here and they've always spent time with me at what they called, 'Aunt Joyce's farm.'"



Sister Joyce makes Christmas cookies with young relatives.

Called

"My dad was a wonderful, wonderful man. He knew no stranger. People really loved him." Sister Joyce comes from a very faithful Catholic family. Both of her parents attended Catholic schools although her father attended public high school because his father was concerned he was the kind of fella who might go fishing on a school day if he had the opportunity, and the public high school was nearby. Priests would often come to the house when Sister Joyce was a child to play cards with her father and enjoy an evening. She was comfortable from a young age with priests, face-to-face confession and the Carmelite priests who had a great devotion to Mary and were natural in their dealings toward women.



Sister Joyce in her early years in the Congregation

"Please Lord, don't let me have a vocation to religious life." This was her prayer daily at church when she was nearing high school graduation. The harder she prayed, the more she knew it was her destiny.

Sister Joyce's father was fully supportive of her entry into religious life. Her mother was not. She was the oldest daughter. Her mother felt she had been deprived of a traditional family because her own mother had died when she was only 12 years old. So she wanted Joyce to wait awhile.

"I knew if I waited for a while I wouldn't go. I really didn't want to go then." Sister Joyce's teachers were all Sisters of Providence, and she had always wanted to be a teacher. Her grade school teachers were all wonderful women who were happy all the time and knew all the students by name. She loved them dearly. In fact, the first time she made a May shrine when she was teaching it looked exactly like her first grade teacher's had

looked. Her bulletin boards? The same. It was a testament to what they had provided her in grade school. What she didn't want at that time was to become a nun.

Decisions

"My sister had gentle leadership qualities. I was the mouthy one." Responsibility and leadership began at a young age for Sister Joyce. She was class president her junior and senior years in high school, as was her younger sister who held that honor three out of the four years she attended high school. She believes her sister, being the middle child, was thoughtful and appreciative. Her brother was the youngest and the only son of an Irish mother. So he was naturally spoiled.

Herself, the oldest, fell into the role of oldest child of always thinking their job is to take charge. On a side note, she told of her sister's sewing Sister Joyce's pajamas shut when she would go on a date and leave her behind. Or she would stuff Kleenex in the toes of Sister Joyce's shoes knowing she would get up early to go to Mass. She recalled her childhood and her siblings with great fondness.

"Young lady, you will have to learn to change your ways." In high school Sister Joyce never missed a sock hop on Friday nights, refusing to babysit on those days. She dated. When she asked the senior teacher what she had to do to find out about entering the Sisters of Providence the answer was to change her ways. The teacher knew she dated and knew that wouldn't work at the convent. But a priest who was her confessor and a director encouraged her to keep on dating if she wanted to date. And she did.

"I was having too much fun to become a religious so soon. I prayed and prayed to not become one yet. It wouldn't let go of me."

Finding forever

And so Sister Joyce entered the convent in 1947. What did she find the hardest part of community life? You couldn't go home unless your parents were dying. *"I would pray for an honorable illness like appendicitis to have to go home. I knew I'd let my mother talk me into staying. People around me got all kinds of things and had to go home. Me? Healthy as all get out!"*



Sister Joyce, center, with Sister Anne Marita Wynne and Sister Ann Sullivan on a trip to Ireland



Sister Joyce, right, at the 90s party in 2015 with Sister Mary Esther Lane

"I can't say forever." The day before she took her final vows she thought, "I can't say forever. I put my habit on and I ran down to the Superior General's office. I said I can't do it – I can't take final vows. It's not that I'm opposed to vows, but I can't say forever." They talked for an hour and resolved the concern. She was happy the next day to take her final vows.

"Grove along slowly. Do not press matters; be patient, be trustful." Sister Joyce entered the convent with the intention to become a first grade teacher. She never taught below fifth grade classes, always teaching junior high classes.

Sister Joyce Brophy's (formerly Sister Robert Ellen) ministries through the years:

- Entered Congregation July 22, 1947
- Final vows Jan. 23, 1955
- Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College, Bachelor in Education
- Indiana State University, Master's in Education
- St. Sylvester, Chicago, Illinois, 1950-54, Teacher Grade 5
- Our Lady of Mercy, Chicago, Illinois, 1955, Teacher Grade 8
- St. Elisabeth, Van Nuys, California, 1955-59, Teacher Grade 8
- Immaculate Heart of Mary, Galesburg, Illinois, 1959-65, Principal
- Saint Mary-of-the-Woods, Sisters of Providence Mistress of Postulants, 1965-68
- Saint Mary-of-the-Woods, Sisters of Providence Director of Scholastics, 1968-69
- St. Agnes, Chicago, Illinois, 1969, Teacher Grade 8
- St. Genevieve, Chicago, Illinois, 1969-1971, Principal
- Immaculate Heart of Mary, Galesburg, Illinois, 1971-72, Principal
- Costa Catholic, Galesburg, Illinois, 1972-79, Principal/Administrator
- Saint Mary-of-the-Woods, Assistant Vice President for Development, 1980-82
- University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana, Religious Leaders Program, 1982-83
- Catholic Schools Office, Joliet, Illinois, 1983-84, Educational Consultant
- Saint Mary-of-the-Woods, Provincial, Sacred Heart Province, 1984-91
- St. Dennis School, Lockport, Illinois, 1992-95, Principal
- Sacred Heart School, Terre Haute, Indiana, 1995-99, Principal/Religion Teacher



Sister Joyce

- Saint Mary-of-the-Woods Volunteer, Connecting Link/Providence Center, 1999-2012
- Saint Mary-of-the-Woods, Volunteer, Providence Spirituality & Conference Center, 2012-2018
- Since 2019 Sister Joyce has served out her retirement in the ministry of prayer at the motherhouse.

Never alone

"I have worn many hats. As soon as I finished one job then I got a bigger one." Until 1955, after two years of education studies, one could be licensed as a teacher in Indiana. After two years in the novitiate the sisters took their vows and were sent out on mission. Sister Joyce spent her 21st birthday in a sixth grade classroom. A life devoted to education means that Sister Joyce hears from students to this day, even from students in that sixth grade class. It is a common occurrence for many sisters to hear from students because of the impact they have had, just as Sister Joyce's grade school teachers had on her.



Sister Joyce pins a corsage on Sister Kathleen Desautels at a community event.



Sister Joyce, in yellow, joins other 70-year jubilarians and general officers in 2017.

"I have had a lot of honors in my life. But it wasn't just me, my thing. I didn't do it by myself. It was the people I had. I could not have done it by myself." Sister Joyce was the first religious sister in the state of Illinois to receive the Administrators Certificate for Excellence in Education Administration from the superintendents. She was an advisor on the Illinois Section 5 Board of Education.

"My life has been so good with how things have worked out and the things I would never have accomplished by myself." Sister Joyce praised the wonderful models she had as principals who came before her, and she credits that with why she knew how important it was to mentor younger teachers. Over and over during our

conversation Sister Joyce lauded those around her who had worked with her to accomplish tasks. Any award she received she attributed to those around her, working beside her.

Inspiring confidence in others

"And it was hard." The 1960s were hard with the changes from Vatican II. She was director of postulants in the Sisters of Providence formation program and was in charge of 53 young people at the time. Everyone was impacted by the changes, trying to incorporate what the Vatican Council was putting forth. It was very stressful for the entire community. She felt ill-equipped, but she led with love and grace and supported many young sisters through it. *"Even though I was asked to do hard things, I had a lot of people who believed in me and helped me. I never did it alone,"* she said.



Sister Joyce, center, attends the Golden Jubilee ceremony of 2017 as an honored mentor of some of the sisters she led through their postulancy.

"And young people – young nuns – were more talented than I was. I could never do what they did. I could give them confidence to use their talents. That was my talent: to give them the confidence and praise they needed." Sister Joyce's passion in education has been to lead, to find the talent in others and to help them bring it to full fruition.

"If I hear something good about a person, I tell them. I have tried to do it with others outside of the teaching profession." Identifying the talent, the good works, the good in others and oneself should occur often, Sister Joyce believes. She has always lived with groups who worked together. Being an administrator can be hard work and is not always appreciated. She has seen the good in most people and the challenge in some.

Ministry and prayer

Sister Joyce claims Galesburg, Illinois, as her favorite and best ministry, the best years of her life. California was also a ministry that she loved, but Galesburg tops the list. It was also one of her most difficult. One of her biggest tasks in Galesburg was when two grade schools merged into a beautiful building, bringing 625 students together for grades K through 9. She had been asked to return for the merger, from Chicago where she was principal.

Sister Joyce described the great effort made by the teachers, the sisters, to accomplish this task. The group involved the department head of the school of education from Knox College. The nuns and the people made a point to call every Catholic family in the town of Galesburg. And when they had

their meeting regarding the merger, the gym was packed. Only one couple spoke up regarding the merger and that was about transportation concerns which led to a plan being struck with the town to provide free public transportation to the school for students.

"I think it is my Irish heritage. When I get worked up about something I go to Chapel. I say, 'Okay, Lord. You got me into this. It's your job to help me work it out, Providence of God.'" If something bad was there, something good would always come along. Being an administrator, a supervisor, a leader in any capacity brings the challenge with the reward. A school with 1,100 students (a number we agreed is too large for elementary students). Thirty-seven teachers to supervise. The merger of two elementary schools. Difficult and challenging leaders at times were always offset by wonderful principals, co-workers, teachers. And, of course, the students who still write after all these years.



A Providence Teen Ministry volunteer accompanies Sister Joyce to Christmas Fun activities in 2018.



Sister Joyce, center, in 2017 at prayer with the sisters with whom she lives

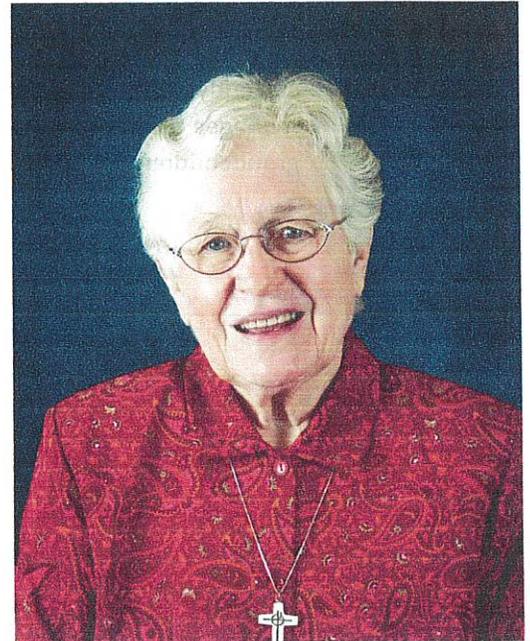
Retirement and reflection

Retirement has brought challenges with mobility and a bout of Covid-19. Sister Joyce is hopeful that people will begin to understand that Saint Mary-of-the-Woods is the home of the Sisters of Providence. Their home. They look forward to not living a regimented life when they retire. Even now as she gropes along slowly, she tries to brighten people's day when she sees them at meals and in the wing, not content to not be doing something. *"I can speak up when others cannot or will not. It's the bossiness in me."*

What brings Sister Joyce wonder? *"Many things. The people who lead seem to be the chosen ones; the talents that are needed come forth at the time they are needed."* She would not say it herself, but she was chosen many times and came forth when she was needed, even now.

What spiritual practice is important? *"When I wake up in the morning the first thing I say is 'Hello, God.' From my mother's teaching, we always went to bed with a rosary, to say it to ourselves. Most of the time I never got mine finished ... but my mother told us not to worry about it, the Guardian Angels will finish it. I still go to bed with my rosary in my hand."*

Sister Joyce became a principal at the age of 29. She continued as a principal for much of her career in education. She was assistant coordinator of the Development Department for Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College; Sister Joyce served in leadership as provincial for eight years at the motherhouse, relating to 300 sisters. Her accomplishments are numerous and she attributes any accolades she received to those around her. Sister Joyce has visited foreign lands, especially the homeland of her ancestors, Ireland. All her experiences have culminated in a life well-lived – a treasure not just to those in her family but to all those around her.



Sister Joyce in 2011



Debbie Griffey

Debbie Griffey has been a Providence Associate since 2009. Debbie is a clinical social worker and a licensed teacher. She has spent much of the past decade working outside the country most of each year. She has worked on military bases in the United States, Europe and Japan. She currently works part-time while residing on the family farm in Shelby County Indiana, where she manages the adult llamas her children showed in 4-H. Debbie has three adult children and five grandchildren.

5 Comments



Peg Benson on December 28, 2021 at 7:51 am

I had just completed the postulancy in 1965 and was a first year novice known as Sister Nora when Sister Robert Ellen appeared as the new director of postulants. Most of my contacts with her were brief moments as part of a small group that fell together after one celebration or another. In those days I knew nothing of her background but saw and felt in the beaming smile directed my way and in the laughter she easily found in response to my sense of humor, a soothing message of approval and appreciation. Now that her character has been laid out in this wonderful portrait, I see something in Sister Joyce I long ago wrote about my own Irish grandmother, "I take comfort in studying the lines of your tender old age, serving me, in need." Yes, it's true, Sister Joyce, serving as postulant director, inspired confidence with her precious stamp of approval on those of us who needed it.

Reply



S. Connie Kramer on December 28, 2021 at 8:43 am

Beautiful sacred story of a beautiful, gentle Sister of Providence I deeply admire.

Reply



Donna Butler (<https://spsmw.org>) on December 28, 2021 at 9:04 am

You have definitely not had a boring life!
Little did you know when you said your “yes” to God what challenges and great blessings would follow. You have been God’s Providence to so many, Joyce.

Reply



MARCIA SARFF on December 29, 2021 at 9:52 am

I am one of those students that still communicate with Sister Joyce. She was my eighth grade teacher in California.
Our birthdays are 1 day apart. She had an impact on my life and I will forever be grateful.

Reply



Barb Krisher on December 31, 2021 at 12:00 pm

A beautiful lady and story. My husband John and I had the privilege of working with Sister Joyce in Galesburg when she worked with Costa. She was always kind, supportive and inspirational.

Reply

Sister Joyce Brophy

March 5, 1929—Aug. 27, 2025

ST. MARY-OF-THE-WOODS – Sister Joyce Brophy died on Aug. 27, 2025, in Mother Theodore Hall, St. Mary-of-the-Woods.

She was born on March 5, 1929 in Joliet, IL to Robert E. and Loretta Corcoran Brophy and was baptized Mary Joyce.

Sister Joyce entered the Congregation of the Sisters of Providence on July 22, 1947 and received the name Sister Robert Ellen. She professed Final Vows on Jan. 23, 1955. She earned a bachelor's degree from St. Mary-of-the-Woods College and a master's degree from Indiana State University.

In her 78 years as a Sister of Providence, she taught for 32 years in schools in Illinois, Indiana and California. She served as principal for 19 of those years. She taught at Sacred Heart School in Terre Haute from 1995 to 1999. Interspersed within her years of teaching, she held a number of administrative positions in the Congregation. She held positions in the formation program for new members from 1965-69 and served as Provincial of the Motherhouse Province from 1984 through 1991. She also worked in the St. Mary-of-the-Woods College Development Office from 1980 to 1982.

Retiring from teaching in 1999, she gave many years of

service to her sisters at the motherhouse as well as volunteering at Providence Conference and Spirituality Center and Connecting Link in West Terre Haute. Beginning in 2019 she dedicated herself totally to the ministry of prayer.

Born into a loving family that celebrated its Irish heritage, Sister

Joyce shared that love with all. Her administrative skills were merged with compassion. Her teaching skills encompassed the total welfare of her students. Her warm smile, her kindness, care and respect for all she met, will long be remembered.

Sister Joyce is survived by nieces and nephews. She is preceded in death by a brother, Robert E. Brophy, Jr., and a sister, Margaret Ann Brophy.

The wake is on Wednesday, Sept. 3 from 2:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. in the Church of the Immaculate Conception with the Wake Service at 4:30 p.m. The Mass of Christian Burial is on Thursday, Sept. 4, at 11:00 a.m. with Reverend Terry Johnson presiding. Burial is in the cemetery of the Sisters of Providence.

DeBaun Funeral Homes and Crematory assisted with arrangements.

Memorial contributions may be made to the Sisters of Providence, 1 Sisters of Providence, St. Mary-of-the-Woods, IN 47876-1007.



