

# Remembering



Sister Eugene Francis Wedige, CSJ

December 8, 1930 ~ September 2, 2016

Clarice Eugenia Wedige, Gene to her family, was born in San Francisco on December 8, 1930 to Lelia Lafayette Calais, from Atlanta, Georgia, and Eugene Clarence Wedige, from South Dakota. She had four half-brothers Earl, who died as an infant, twins Fletcher and Frank who are also deceased, and Paul, known fondly by the family as "Snookie," who died in 2013. Mr. and Mrs. Wedige had two girls, Clarice Eugenia and Kathleen. Gene loved and delighted in her brothers and tells tall tales of their teasing and playing jokes on her. Laughing, she would recall her mother saying, "Be careful, you're going to ruin that child." Their legacy instilled in her a great sense of humor and a propensity for tall tales and practical jokes for the rest of her life.

Gene's love for music and for learning came from her mother who played both the violin and the piano. She instilled the discipline necessary and the inspiration

needed for Gene to pursue her education and love for the arts including, music, poetry, drawing and painting. An inscription written inside the cover of The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson reads, "Given to me on my 13th birthday from my mother with the advice: 'READ so you will speak and write correctly.'"

She learned early on about generosity and service from her father. Many sisters may recall Mr. Wedige, accompanied by Gene, bringing a turkey to Star of the Sea Convent during the holidays. Through these many visits during her early years, Gene came to know and love the Sisters and eagerly looked forward to begin school.

Gene attended Star of the Sea Elementary School and then went on to graduate from Star of the Sea Academy in 1949. In class she was outstanding in math and science. She had a love for sports and excelled as a star athlete. Prior to entering religious life, Gene

worked summers as a nurse's aide at French Hospital in San Francisco. In a span of four years, she also had experience as a shoe salesperson, "soda jerk," PE director for the Filmore area, French bread delivery person, and ranch hand.

On September 15, 1949, along with two of her best friends, Carolyn Marie Armstrong and Joan Glostein, Gene traveled by train from San Francisco to Los Angeles to enter the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet. She received the habit at St. Mary's Academy on March 19, 1950, and was given the name Sister Eugene Francis, Eugene for her father and Francis to honor St. Francis of Assisi, to whom she had a great devotion. She retained this name her entire religious life. On March 19, 1952 she pronounced her first vows, and on August 15, 1957 Sister Eugene Francis made her final vows.

Sister graduated from Mount St. Mary's College in 1956 and received her California lifetime Teaching Credential in 1969. In 1973 she was certified as a Reading Specialist through Holy Names College in Oakland and in 1975 earned an M.A. in Special Education also from Holy Names.

From the years 1952 to 1998 Sister Eugene Francis was dedicated to teaching not only the three R's, but most importantly, teaching each child to know their importance as persons of dignity, and self worth.

Sister was assigned to her beloved St. Patrick's Parish in Oakland three times, for a total of 18 years. While at St. Patrick's for the second time, a period of 7 years, Sister served as principal, while at the same time also teaching in either the 7th or 8th

grade, as needed.

Aware that many of her students were from families struggling to give their children a Catholic education and having very little income for anything other than the necessities of life, she would take small groups of 8th graders out for lunch or dinner. She also arranged field trips to expose them to nature and beauty, which even included walking across the Golden Gate Bridge.

Her dedication to ministry in the Black community included a passion for doing justice among some of the poorest of the poor. Perhaps her most challenging endeavor, amidst controversy, was working with the newly formed Black Panthers, who had set up headquarters in the neighborhood. Bonds were forged that provided much needed assistance to the people in the neighborhood. Many a time you would find sister out on the front porch steps comforting a stranger who came for food. One night returning from a late meeting, she met a man obviously inebriated. He wanted to go to confession; and so right there on the front porch, she graciously obliged.

Other interesting things happened to Sister while she was living in West Oakland. Once, her T-shirts were taken from the backyard clothesline. A few days later, while riding the bus, she saw her nametag peeking out from the collar of the man in front of her. In the midst of this hectic life and schedule, you might find her tending the beautiful rose garden in the back yard. She had a green thumb and loved gardening and caring for the houseplants that brightened many rooms in the

Convent.

Sister Eugene Francis loved the time she spent in Afro-American communities: the people, the culture, the gospel music and traditional Negro spirituals. She once said she loved teaching and making a difference in peoples' lives. John Guillory, one of her students from St. Patrick's, said of her, "She changed my life."

Many of her other missions were also in inner city Los Angeles, at schools familiar to many sisters: St. Eugene's, St. Vincent's, St. Cecilia's, Transfiguration, and Holy Cross.

In 1985 Sister was missioned to Bishop Conaty Memorial High School in Los Angeles to teach religion. She served as the chairperson for the Religion Department from 1991 to 1997. She was well loved by her students because she dealt with their "pranks" with a sense of humor and

deep concern for their well being.

After retiring from the classroom, it became apparent that Sister Eugene Francis was experiencing the onset of Alzheimer's. She went to reside at Our Lady of Grace Convent in Inglewood. There she shared her gifts generously serving anywhere in the hospital where there was a need. She welcomed new patients and quickly made them feel at home. Frequently she could be found in the maintenance area sharing a coffee break with the workers. Sister was loved by the employees and other volunteers.

With the closing of the convent and hospital, Sister Eugene Francis moved to Holy Family Community where she began her ministry of prayer and witness. Soon she was welcoming visitors in the hallway and helping others get around by pushing



Some plants are exciting growing stretching toward sun sweating dewdrops

and I sit like a cactus watching quietly growing and blossoming in the dark of winter a magnificent blossom.

~ Eugene Francis Wedige, CSJ

wheelchairs. As her illness progressed, the decision was made for Sister to transition from Holy Family to St. John of God Memory Care unit where she enjoyed special attention and programs for three years. When she became more physically frail she returned to Holy Family Community and accepted the support from Vitas Hospice. She enjoyed being back at a familiar place with many good friends.

Sister Eugene Francis loved to travel. She and her dear friends Sr. Angela Faustina and Victory Noll Sister Pat Heaney, enjoyed many car trips together, where her role was “manager of snacks” from the backseat. For her Golden Jubilee, Gene celebrated with a trip to Alaska where she reveled in the scenic beauty and even risked a raft trip on the Mendenhall River. These experiences nourished her spirit and provided the opportunity for her to indulge her life-long joy of writing. Angela says, “Gene was an observant and reflective person who wrote notes of interesting things she saw, and later wrote poems about her experiences of beauty.”

**D**escribed as independent, questioning, kind, and holding her own opinion, Sister Eugene Francis was able to care for the marginalized, to offer unearned warmth and to freely give to students and families. Her many kindnesses gave strength to others who lacked confidence and also gave hope to the powerless.

She generously used her gifts to pray, heal, teach, love and forgive with gentleness, peace and joy. An insight into Sister’s spirituality greeted visitors at the door of her room, where a joyful banner proclaimed: Live for today, laugh for the moment, love forever. It was under this banner that God called Gene home on Friday, September 2, 2016 surrounded by friends. Thank you, Sister Eugene Francis for your many kind deeds over the years. May those you served now welcome you into Paradise. ✨

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*Written by Sisters Frances Baker, CSJ  
and Angela Faustina, CSJ and Pat  
Heaney Wiedower*