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Dear Friend,

A sense of adventure and a willingness to risk can take you on a life journey that is quite unimaginable when you are nine years old, but from the perspective of age 90, it is quite remarkable. And if you are from Maine, where folks that are born in Maine tend to stay in Maine according to Sister Margaret Gardner, her life's journey is even more remarkable.



Lubec, Maine, the most eastern point of the United States, is where Sister Margaret was born. And she says with a smile, "Probably during a blizzard!" She grew up 20 miles inland in a small village clustered around a sawmill where her father worked. The men worked hard sawing the trees with a large circle saw run by a water mill. When more trees were needed, they went into the forest, even in the dead of winter, to chop and cut down trees by hand. All of this was very dangerous work, but her father never had any mishaps. Sister Margaret remembers visiting the sawmill as a child and can still smell the odor of sawdust.

She grew up with an older brother and two younger sisters. They all attended a one-room schoolhouse just a stone's throw from their home, and their mother was the teacher. The attendance averaged about 20 students spanning the first eight grades.

Arithmetic was her favorite subject. She loves numbers. Sister said that, while her father had not had much formal education, he would sit for hours with her and her brother working out word problems from math books. The answers were given and the challenge was to work out the solution to arrive at the answer. When her mother couldn't keep her busy in school, the superintendent said, "Give her more arithmetic!"

To this day, numbers hold a fascination for Sister Margaret. Give her a piece of paper and she will work out square root problems. License plate numbers prompt her to consider whether they are divisible by two, three or



another number. What fun it would be to travel by car with her!

For three years, Sister attended a high school about 10 miles from home. It was comparable to what we would call a consolidated school today. Then she attended St. Joseph's High School staffed by the Mercy Sisters in Portland, Maine, while she lived with a cousin and helped her out with her five small children. Since Sister Margaret had begun school at age five, she was just 16 when she graduated from high school.

After high school, she could have gone to Normal School and followed in her mother's footsteps as a teacher, but she knew that the family finances were limited, so she applied to go to nursing school at the Mercy Hospital in Portland. There tuition was free, but she was too young to be admitted. So Sister Margaret stayed home and her mother paid her three dollars a week to keep the house running. That included everything from cleaning to cooking and baking and garden work.

When she was old enough, she started nursing school but Sister says, "It wasn't for me." After

that she managed with small jobs and some house-keeping work, but life would be changing for her.

When did she begin to think about becoming a sister? Sister Margaret says that the idea began when she received the sacrament of Confirmation at age 12. But aside from the Mercy Sisters in Portland, her only other contact with sisters was through the *Sacred Heart Messenger*.

A Passionist priest friend encouraged Sister Margaret to visit the Franciscan Sisters on Maryland Avenue in Baltimore. She met Mother Mechtilde and her visit ended with Mother Mechtilde saying to her, "Well, dearie, if you want to come in February (1941), you can come."

Looking back, Sister Margaret says that, if she had known about the war, she would have joined the WACS, because she loved adventure and she would have had security and gotten an education. It is fortunate for us that Margaret chose to enter religious life. And because she didn't really know any congregations in Maine, she became a Franciscan in Baltimore.

After entering religious life, she earned a bachelor of arts degree in education from Mt. St. Agnes College and a master of arts degree in special education from Loyola College.

As was written earlier, the people in Maine stay in Maine, but Sister Margaret pleaded in a letter to her Dad to come to her final profession. She was overjoyed that her Dad did come, and not only that, but he brought her mother and sister with him.

Her life in community held many adventures for her. After first profession, Sister Margaret was sent to Harlem to substitute for a sister in a second grade classroom that had 60+ students.

After Harlem, she went to Wilmington, North Carolina, where she had a class of only 16 second graders. She remembers them as wonderful chil-

dren who came from very impoverished families. The children would walk barefoot to school and put their shoes on in school in order to make them last longer. Her next assignments were in Richmond, Virginia, and then in Norfolk, Virginia, where she taught for several years and was the principal for a couple of years.

Her last teaching position was at Sacred Heart School in Danville, Virginia. Sister Margaret had visited this school while she was at St. Elizabeth School in Richmond. Sacred Heart was going to close, so she asked if she could go with some other sisters to keep the school open.

With Sister Mary Ann Glinka as principal and Sister Dolores Zack, the three of them worked to keep the option of Catholic education open to their students.

Sister Margaret would spend 10 years at Sacred Heart as a pastoral associate. This position included finding homes for the homeless and securing jobs for the unemployed and all the other details that that entails. "It was most challenging but very rewarding," Sister Margaret says. However, when she turned 70, she felt it was time to come back to Baltimore to St. Elizabeth's, now the Motherhouse, where she felt very much at home.

Between 1949 and 1959, when the building had been an orphanage, she had spent 10 years working with boys ages 5 to 12 on the third floor. Sister Margaret says that growing up she always planned to have 10 children, all boys, but never said she would be married. God saw to it that it all worked out. *(Photo at top right shows Sister Margaret with the orphans at a party in the 50s at St. Elizabeth's Home in Baltimore.)*

Not too long after her return to the Motherhouse, circumstances changed and she became the Motherhouse Coordinator, assuming all the responsibility that came with that position.



Above: Sister Margaret visits with a former orphan and his grandson.

Her adventuresome spirit would take Sister some years later to Washington, D.C., where she lived for three years, and then to Arizona Avenue in Baltimore for a couple of years before returning to St. Elizabeth's, now renovated and renamed Clare Court – a supportive living home for our retired Sisters and in addition, under the auspices of Homes for America, 30 apartments for low income households, which results in a multi-generational setting.



While the turn of the century was momentous for everyone, for Sister Margaret and the other Franciscan Sisters of Baltimore, it was also the time in which they were moving forward with merging with the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. October, 2011, marks the 10th anniversary of the merger, and a celebration close to the feast of St. Francis of Assisi is planned.

What sustains a person through 90 years of life? It would seem that those who nurture life learn how to live through good times and bad times. In addition to the nurturing that Sister Margaret did with students and the people she encountered, she has had a life-long love of nurturing the growth of flowers and vegetables. Sister remarked that her last name is 'Gardner,' so it is only fitting that she should like to garden. She has also devoted much of her time in retirement at Clare Court to crocheting caps for kids, large and small afghans for gifts, and sewing tote bags by machine.

When I asked Sister what her greatest blessings in life are, she had four responses. The first was community. The sisters have been with her through all the events of her life, including two

serious bouts with cancer and, currently, a broken hip socket. She spoke of her faith and her reliance on the Holy Spirit. Prayer is an integral part of her life, as well as a spirit of adventure. Her advice is: "Try it. Launch out into the deep, let down your net and then accept what happens."

And after reading a draft of this letter she said, "My words throughout this paper do not/cannot express my years of satisfaction and devotion to the work of living with and loving the poor, which was always my goal.

This year, a total of eight sisters in our congregation celebrate a 90th birthday. Each of these sisters has a remarkable life story. While their stories may differ, today they remain united in community through prayer and participate as volunteers to the extent that their health allows.

Moving out of full time ministry is not easy. These sisters were once so active in helping others better their lives; now the costs of health care and retirement place them in a position in which they hope that others will help them with their needs.

If you would like to nurture the faith and hope that our retired sisters have in your generosity, please send a contribution. Your donations are received with great gratitude and you are remembered in the daily prayers of the retired sisters.

Thank you so much.

With gratitude and prayer,

Sister Marcia Lunz, OSF



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