Dear Friend,

We all have our favorites, and those favorites say a lot about us. For Sister Laverne Sommer, one of her favorite foods is fish. That may not seem so surprising until you learn that she grew up on the Plains outside of Parkston, South Dakota. Her favorite involvement since she retired is helping serve the Wednesday lunch at St. John the Evangelist Cathedral in Milwaukee. Each week, Sister Laverne said she finds that the experience of encountering so many persons with so little keeps her grounded.

Putting life in perspective is a way of life for Sister Laverne. Life in South Dakota provides a far-off horizon across the Plains every day. We are conditioned by our surroundings, and in this case, it appears that vision was stretched for Sister Laverne beginning in her childhood.

Sister Laverne was born to Katie and Andrew Sommer in the Parkston hospital on September 25, 1934. She was the first child, followed by three younger brothers, Francis, Charles and Alois (Al). At baptism at Sacred Heart Church, she was given the name, Darline Theresa.

Home was on a farm about 10 miles from Parkston. Grain and corn were the main crops; pigs and 10 milking cows were raised. The cream from the milk was sold and some of the milk fed to the pigs. Darline learned to milk the cows, and she said the cats were always around at milking time waiting for squirts of milk diverted from the milking can. Darline’s mother tended the vegetable garden with indoor help from Darline, who watched the younger children and did some housekeeping.

Among Darline’s favorite childhood memories are her grandma’s homemade bread and small rolls with sugar. Sister Laverne said she could never replicate those rolls. Perhaps this was a case where
were not in favor of this. In spite of her Dad’s three cousins who were sisters in our community, they weren’t ready to let Darline leave for Milwaukee. The compromise was that she should attend freshman year at Parkston Public High School. Darline’s Dad bet her a $50 bond that she wouldn’t go to the convent, but pursuing a goal won over getting a $50 bet. Darline arrived in Milwaukee with Sister Kathleen Nuebel (†2008), who was returning from her home visit in Parkston, and started sophomore year at St. Mary’s Academy as an aspirant. Her schooling was accelerated and she finished high school in three years by attending summer school.

Darline became a postulant in 1951. At reception to the novitiate in August of 1952, she received the name Sister Laverne. She liked this name very much, and since her name day would be celebrated on the feast of St. Francis receiving the stigmata on Mount La Verna, it would be a day that talking was allowed at all meals. Her first profession took place on August 12, 1954, and final profession was August 12, in 1957.

Sister Laverne spent the beginning years of her ministry serving at bishops’ houses and at St. Francis de Sales Seminary. She jokes that she childhood taste buds didn’t translate into adult taste buds!

Playing with three younger brothers had its interesting times, such as tipping over the dog house or the duck house. Least favorite was getting chased by the boys at school who taunted her by waving a (dead?) mouse.

First grade was a traumatic experience for Darline. Only German was spoken at home so she did not know English, and in the rural public school she was attending, the classes were all in English. So Darline spent the day listening and gradually picked up English as a result. Children learn languages quickly and, by the end of the year, Darline could navigate conversation in English. Each day, after the students were dismissed, her teacher taught her all the lessons in German so that she could master the content.

By second grade, Darline was speaking English and began attending Sacred Heart School in Parkston where she got to know our sisters as her teachers. She liked school, except for math. Sister JoCele Zak (†2012) recognized her spelling ability and entered her into a spelling bee. ‘Speckle’ was the word that took her down. “I couldn’t remember if it ended in ‘le’ or ‘el’!” After graduating from eighth grade, Darline wanted to enter the community, but her parents
spent 12 years at the seminary, but didn’t get ordained, so she left!

She left to attend Cardinal Stritch College (now University) to get an associate degree in food service, but nearing the end of that two-year program, she was encouraged to work toward a four-year degree. In 1973, she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in dietetics. In 1975, Sister Laverne was accepted at St. Michael Hospital for an internship in dietetics. Two years later, she passed her state board exams and became a registered dietitian.

Sister Laverne worked as a dietitian at St. Ann Health Center and was the director of nutritional services at St. Joseph Nursing Home in Freeport, Ill. The interaction between her and the person she was counseling about nutrition gave her great joy and was a catalyst for building relationships. She found that, at the end of the day, she really felt like she had done something and could sleep well. Yes, there were setbacks at times, but those were spark plugs to do better and go beyond the setback. Her perspective on this is that “nothing is gained from being down in the dumps.”

Nutrition was a mission for Sister Laverne that went beyond her formal dietetic positions. She found it life-giving to enable people to understand how good nutrition helps us to be the healthiest person we can be. At one time, she visited local communities of our sisters with a team of health professionals to discuss health and nutrition. She also created a program for helping persons with developmental disabilities who had weight problems at St. Coletta of Wisconsin in Jefferson.

In retirement, as was mentioned earlier, volunteer service at St. John the Evangelist noon luncheon on Wednesdays is a highlight of Sr. Laverne’s week. For 10 years, she tutored English as a Second Language (ESL) at Milwaukee Achiever Literacy Services. Her memory of learning English as a first grader was a motivation for helping others learn English now that she had the opportunity to do so. She found nothing more rewarding than when a student grasped a concept and then could move on to the next concept.

At any congregation event that involves sisters helping with the food preparation, Sr. Laverne (Left to right) Sisters Edna Schadegg (†1990), Laverne (dietitian) and Mariette Krommenaker (†1995), and Berdia Charlie (head cook) at St. Ann Health Center in 1973.
is among the volunteers. At Christmas time, and especially for the Christmas Boutique, she has been in charge of the three commercial ovens in the bakery, getting everything in and out at the right times. But there was one time when the monitoring of the ovens got out of her control. Sister tells the story that there was a batch of cookies that got over baked – really over baked. She put the burnt cookies in the garbage can unbeknownst to anyone. However, at the end of the day when the garbage can was emptied, the black plastic bag liner gave way because the hot cookies had melted the plastic and the weakened bag released the garbage on the floor. Then the story came to light and a confession made!

Sister Laverne is open and eager to try new adventures. A poster hung in her office when she was working as a dietitian that read: “God never asks about our ability or inability, but our availability."

Through observation and interaction, Sister Laverne recognizes the needs of our retired sisters who do not experience the health and energy she has. The frailest of our sisters now have a safe and homelike setting in which to live, but the need for help with funding for health care and living costs is still a challenge. We hope we can count on you to help us with this. There is no gift that is not the right size. Your support of us with an amount that fits in your budget is all we ask. God is not outdone in generosity and will reward you.

Our sisters pray daily for our benefactors, so you can be assured of their prayers for you and your intentions. May God bless you abundantly.

Gratefully,

(Sister Marcia Lunz, OSF)

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