

Inviting My Favorite St James Teacher to the 50th Reunion

By John Wavra

Once the Reunion Committee had met, and plans were well along for the 50th Reunion, I thought it might be fun to try to contact my favorite St James sister/teacher and invite her to attend the reunion, I wondered if I could locate her. The idea originated from one of the questions for the Class Book Survey. - "Who was your most favorite teacher at St. James?"

Mine was, without a doubt, Sister John Mary. I was not alone in my choice. She was held in such high regard, the Signet student staff dedicated the [1964 Signet Yearbook](#) to her. She was my teacher in both Junior and Senior English class and my Home Room Teacher Junior and Senior Year.

She was a great teacher! Knowledgeable of the books we were required to read and possessing a fun sense of humor that allowed for a good deal of laughter in the classroom along with serious discussions. It was one of the few classes that I looked forward to attending. She was secure enough in her own person and allowed class discussions to stray from the planned subject when she thought we were learning from it.

I was fortunate, along with others, I am sure, to have her recommend several "non-approved" books, including *The Catcher in the Rye*, to read and report on. In short, Sister John Mary was the kind of teacher and person who really cared about students and was able to place a lasting stamp on many of her students, including me.

Thinking about her now I felt remorse that in all the years since graduating from St James I had let life's normal struggles take precedence, and I had never once made the effort to contact her. I had forgotten the kindness and influence she had shown me in my high school years. I was unsure how to begin to try to find her 50 years later. Perhaps I could find her through the Sisters of St Joseph? I had no idea if she was still a nun, but it was the most logical place to start. So I searched the Internet and soon found the website for the Sisters of St Joseph of Carondelet & Consociates – St Paul Province. Perhaps if I contacted someone there they could help find her, especially if she was still a nun. I sent an email to the contact address on their website and crossed my fingers:

Greetings,

I may not be writing to the correct location, but thought I would start here. I am trying to locate Sister John Mary, Order of the Sisters of St Joseph of Carondelet, who taught English at St. James High School, which was located in Grand Forks, ND and closed in 1969. Sister John Mary taught from 1961 to at least 1964 and was a very respected and well-liked teacher. In fact, the class dedicated our yearbook to her in 1964.

We are holding our 50th reunion of St James High School Class of 1964 in August 2014 and we would like to invite her to our reunion or at least discover where the world has taken her.

Could you provide any information on her or direct me to another contact that would be able to provide us with information as to her whereabouts today.

Many thanks!
John Wavra

Within a day I received a message back from Mary Kraft, the Sisters of St Joseph Archivist:

John,

I do have an address for Sister John Mary now Shirley Klecker. Not sure how current it is. Since we do not release info about former members, I encourage you to send the reunion information to me and I'll forward it to Shirley.

Hope the planning goes well!

mary

Well, I had a promising contact for her and decided I would send the reunion information to Mary Kraft with the hope that the former Sister John Mary, now Shirley Klecker, would receive it and respond in advance of the reunion. Before I sent the information, however, I decided to do some sleuthing on the Web to see if Shirley Klecker turned up in a search so I could contact her directly.

It did not take me long to find the name Shirley Klecker Karel in the search engine results. The first result was a Marquette University's page showing she had graduated in 1968. Then, the same name was listed in another entry. It was an [obituary link](#). I feared I had found Sister John Mary, but still was not totally sure it was really her since Mary Kraft, the SJS Archivist had not used the last name Karel. I wanted to be certain this was indeed, the former Sister John Mary. So instead of sending reunion information to Mary Kraft I sent the following:

Mary,

Thank you for the quick reply. I thought it would be a much more difficult task to find Sister John Mary. Sadly, however, I think I am too late. I did a quick Google for her after I received your message. I came up with the attached obituary which seems to be hers. I did not know she had left the sisterhood, but I am not surprised. I don't suppose you can verify by checking her birth date (I think 1936) in your records or any other information you might have that matches with her obituary?

She was my favorite teacher of all time and she took the time to point me in the right direction. I will forever be grateful to her. I am sad to learn she may have passed as I know all of my classmates will be. I should have tried to contact her sooner.
John

Mary responded the next day:

John,

Thanks for sending Shirley's obituary. And the funeral was held right here at our chapel! You'd think I'd remember that! The two (Shirley and S. John Mary) are one and the same!

mary



I had waited too long to contact her! There is a lesson to be learned in this story, which you all may know, but bears repeating. If you have not contacted an old friend or fellow – don't wait any longer – call them and reconnect. Our time is running out fellow Classmates. Incidentally, that is another reason why you should send in your registration to attend the 50th Reunion today!