

Four Nuns in One Family: Reflections on a Mercy-Filled Life

April 10, 2019

DONATE *Shirley Walsh, Northeast Community Communications Specialist*



Sisters Mercedes, Anita, Mary Ann and Kay in modern habits in the early 1970s.

Sister Katherine “Kay” Graber, 82, is the youngest and only surviving sibling of 15 children, in a family that included four Sisters of Mercy.

That’s right. One family. Fifteen kids. *Four* nuns.

“I like to say that I was born into the Sisters of Mercy,” says Sister Kay with a chuckle. “I grew up visiting my sisters in the convent.”

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The Graber children lineup. All 15 kids posed for this photo in 1938 when Sister Kay (in front) was one and a half years old.

Home for Sister Kay was, and still is, Albany, New York, where she is well known from having served as president of the Albany community of the Sisters of Mercy and as a leader of St. Peter's Hospital for over 50 years. Her family moved to the area in the 1920s from Brooklyn, after finding the city a tough place to raise kids. Her father, a voracious reader and artist, worked as a printer and her mother ran the family household with humor and the organizational skills of a general. "She had to be organized with 15 kids!" Sister Kay says.

The Sisters of Mercy that educated the Graber kids were, and still are, one of Albany's predominant order of nuns. They founded or staffed numerous schools in a far-flung diocese that ranged from suburbs to the Adirondacks and attracted vocations among the girls they taught.

That the two eldest of the nine Graber girls—Anne and Martha—joined the Sisters of Mercy after high school, taking the religious names of Sister Anita and Sister Mary Ann, wasn't a surprise to her family, says Sister Kay. "My parents emphasized the Mercy values of service and looking out for one's neighbors. They would tell us that we were rich in the blessings and gifts that really mattered—faith and family."

DONATE Anita and Mary Ann were 23 and 21 respectively when Kay was born and were notified of her arrival by postcard. "They were more like aunts than sisters to me," Sister Kay recalls.

But her relationship was different with 11-year-old Agnes, who would later become Sister Mercedes. Agnes was the older sibling assigned by their mother to help care for Kay as an infant.

Loved by a 'fairy godmother' turned nun

Agnes wanted to be Kay's godmother but hadn't yet made her confirmation. "She told my mother, 'Well, I will be her fairy godmother!'" says Sister Kay.

Agnes took little Kay everywhere she went. She braided the child's hair and oversaw her clothes. Notes Sister Kay, "My mother would say to her, 'Agnes, now that's the fourth outfit you have had on Kay today.' And my sister would say, 'That's all right. I'm taking care of her laundry.'" Once Agnes over-starched Kay's toddler dress and matching pantalettes. "I was squirming as I walked until Mom discovered what was wrong," says Sister Kay laughing.

When Kay was in the second grade and had just made her First Communion, Agnes entered the convent. "I was *heartbroken*," recalls Sister Kay. "I cried



The Graber parents—Katherine, known as "Kate," and Walter, called "Walt"—in the early 1920s, shortly after they moved to upstate New York with their first five children. Active in the church, they emphasized to their children the riches that mattered—faith and family.

and cried and cried. And my mother said, 'Now listen, Agnes will not stop loving you and if you care so much, you sit down and write her a little note.'"

Young Kay started writing to Sister Mercedes (as she learned to call Agnes) and looking forward to monthly "visiting reunions. (This was an era **DONATE** when sisters couldn't leave the convent to visit their families.) Eventually, the girl traveled alone to visit Sister Mercedes—trips that could involve several hours on multiple buses.



Agnes and Kay on Agnes's entrance day into the Sisters of Mercy on September 8, 1944.

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Agnes (center) became Sister Mercedes on a spring day in 1945 when she was received into the novitiate. She wore a wedding dress, which was a custom at the time of many Sisters of Mercy and other religious orders. With her are her siblings Sisters Anita and Mary Ann.

When Kay was a high school junior, Sister Mercedes became a teacher at her school. But Kay avoided her big sister—and Sister Mercedes' Latin classes—much to her sister's dismay. "I was at that teenage stage where I didn't want people to know that I was connected to the nuns," says Sister Kay, laughing. "But nothing made her prouder than when I got the award for excellence in Latin when I graduated."

Adds Sister Kay softly, "I could do no wrong in her eyes. It was wonderful to have her as my personal coach and cheerleader."

Called to be a Sister of Mercy?

Although Kay had enjoyed visiting her Sister of Mercy siblings as a girl—and exploring their beautiful, sometimes mysterious convents—religious life was the farthest thing from her mind. Her plan: become a nurse, get married and have a lot of kids. But a nun at her high school and then one at her nursing school told her that she might have a calling to religious life.

Kay tried to brush off these suggestions, telling the nuns that she was someone “who likes to have a good time.” They assured her, however, that happy women make the best nuns. So even though she’d had two marriage proposals and planned to spend a post-nursing school year in California, she entered the Sisters of Mercy.



Sister Kay as a new nurse in 1957.

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Sister Kay on her entrance day into the Sisters of Mercy on September 8, 1957.

“I saw how happy my sisters were,” she says. And she was moved by the Sisters

of Mercy who ran St. Peter’s Hospital in Albany. “The values they promoted, the compassion and care for others, were contagious. They captivated my heart.”

Her mother and sibling Sisters of Mercy were “absolutely thrilled” with her decision. But her father initially resisted. “He felt that he had already given three daughters to the church and he didn’t want his youngest child leaving him,” recalls Sister Kay. But he

soon came around.

Although her siblings Sisters Anita, Mary Ann and Mercedes were educators, Sister Kay embraced her nursing ministry. Like Catherine McAuley, founder of the Sisters of Mercy, Sister Kay found herself serving people of all backgrounds, and connecting those with resources with those in need. “In health care, I have always had and sought opportunities to work with the poor,” says Sister Kay.

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The Graber Sisters of Mercy on the day that Sister Kay was received as a novice on April 19, 1958. (From left) Sisters Anita, Mary Ann, Mercedes and Kay.

During a 56-year career at St. Peter's Hospital, where she served in such diverse roles as director of nursing, chief operating officer and major gifts officer, Sister Kay had a special bond with the hospital's nursing assistants and service workers. She developed training and educational programs that ensured an upward career path for these employees. She also ensured that compassionate care and services were available to all, in keeping with the Mercy mission. In 2017 the hospital renamed its Wall of Nursing Excellence as the Sister Katherine Graber, RSM, Wall of Distinction, and in 2018 the St. Peter's Hospital Foundation gave Sister Kay the Catherine McAuley Award, which is bestowed annually on individuals and organizations that have had a profound impact on the hospital's mission.

Religious life: A 'mystery and a gift'

Sister Kay was once visiting with two nephews, when one of them brought up her vocation.

"He said to me, 'Aunt Kay, you are so with it and so much fun. How did you ever get in the convent?' And I said to him, 'The way I look at it is that life and a vocation are a mystery and a gift. How do you explain a gift or a mystery? Religious life has been for me a tremendous gift and a tremendous opportunity.'"



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Sister Kay with her nephew Bill Houlihan on Easter in 1961.

As the matriarch of 41 “amazing” nieces and nephews, 65 grand-nieces and -nephews, and a dozen great-grands, Sister Kay emphasizes the values that led three of her sisters and herself into the Sisters of Mercy—service to others, faith in God—but does so with her characteristic light touch.

To young women considering religious life today, Sister Kay says: “If you want a life that is absolutely rich with opportunity to be of service and to make a difference in the lives of others and the community, you may want to become a Sister of Mercy. If you’re adventuresome, if you’re generous-spirited, if you care about others, your opportunities as a sister are unlimited, as is the joy and fulfillment that you will find. You can truly make an impact on our world. And it’s fun!”

Her sibling-Sisters of Mercy—Sisters Anita, Mary Ann and Mercedes—would surely agree.

Enjoy some additional Graber family photos, courtesy of Sister Kay Graber.

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Kay, age 1.5 years, with her mother, Kate. "I've always said I had the influence of two great Catherines in my life," says Sister Kay. "My mother's principles were closely aligned with those of Catherine McAuley," founder of the Sisters of Mercy.

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Mr. and Mrs. Graber on a summer's day in the mid-1940s. "Dad was always a shirt and tie man," notes Sister Kay.

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Sister Kay on a "Visiting Sunday" in 1960. At the time sisters received monthly visits from their families at the convent.

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Sister Kay with some of her grand-nieces and -nephews at her 55th birthday party in 1991. To her right is her sister Marge, who was grandmother to some of the children.



Sister Kay with her niece Kathy and infant John at John's christening in 1992. Sister Kay is John's godmother.

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Sisters Mercedes and Kay at a family wedding in 1996. The two remained close until Sister Mercedes' death in 1997, and Sister Kay says she "felt privileged" to help care for her beloved sister during the last two years of Sister Mercedes' life.

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Sister Kay as a [60th anniversary Jubilarian in 2017](#). Two sayings of Catherine McAuley have been her mantras: "In the care of the sick, great tenderness above all things" and "Be cheerful, animating all around you."

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Sister Kay at a St. Peter's Hospital celebration in her honor in 2017. The hospital renamed its Wall of Nursing Excellence the Sister Katherine Graber, RSM, Wall of Distinction. (Photo via: St. Peter's Hospital Foundation)



Sister Kay received the Catherine McAuley Award from St. Peter's Hospital Foundation on June 5, 2018, from Thomas Tyrrell, Foundation chair, for furthering the hospital's Mercy mission. (Photo via: Joe Putrock/Special to the Times Union)

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Posted on April 10, 2019 at 11:13 am

Mary Costello RSM

What a great story and legacy. Kay is everything and much more that was written. I think she was one of the finest of our community leadership. I always loved her humor and especially her decadent deserts. Thanks for all the Grabers especially Kay.

Posted on April 10, 2019 at 12:11 pm

Sister Betty Burke

Very nice story Kay! Thanks for sharing!

Posted on April 10, 2019 at 12:36 pm

Kathleen Economides

Goodness. I remember her from the late 50s and early 60s. What a great story. And to think – one of 15 children.

Posted on April 10, 2019 at 5:36 pm

Jane Francisco

I loved reading this. God bless this wonderful family. Generous parents giving so much to the Lord in all of their vocations.

Posted on April 10, 2019 at 7:24 pm

Kevin Graber

Great job Aunt Kay!

Posted on April 10, 2019 at 8:34 pm

Mary Anne Basile

Kay, what a great story. Thanks for sharing.

Posted on April 10, 2019 at 9:17 pm

DONATE **Erner**

What a wonderful article Sr. Kay! It was such a pleasure working with you at St. Peter's. I have always cherished the times we talked, sharing experiences of coming from our mutually large families and having siblings in religious life.

I wish you well and Godspeed ❤️🙏

Posted on April 10, 2019 at 11:59 pm

Ann Elizabeth Compton

Having been a student at three schools staffed by the Sisters of Mercy, and later as a staffer at two hospitals they administered, I have to say the joy and dedication of the Sisters Graber remain a hallmark of the order's total ministry.

I pray more young women listen to their call to service in this very loud world. There is a unique freedom in being among those who fill the needs of communities in this way.

Blessings to all our good Sisters.

Posted on April 11, 2019 at 1:35 am

Marilyn Graf

What a wonderful story, Kate! I was admiring you on many levels as I read and realized later that we were close in age. When I got to the end of the story, I realized I'd met you at some of our CHE meetings, one of which was at St. Peters!

Thank you for sharing your family and the highlights of your vocation as a Sister of Mercy ... beautiful!!!

Posted on April 11, 2019 at 1:37 am

Marilyn Graf, RSM

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Posted on April 11, 2019 at 7:20 am

DONATE Saetta

Sister Kay, Your story and your zest for life are exactly what young people need to hear. Our Mercy way of life is truly filled with so many opportunities to serve those in need, and when lived well, is contagious!

Many thanks for sharing your story and for your life of self giving service.

Posted on April 11, 2019 at 9:32 am

Claudia Ward, RSM

Beautiful and inspiring 'herstory' – family legacy! God has truly touched you all in a very special way!!! Thanks so much for responding to God's invitation and for sharing your family's faith-filled journey and vocation with us all. Mercy – we all are truly Blessed!!! Blessings ...

Posted on April 11, 2019 at 11:14 am

Ellen Vopicka Mercy Associate

Thank you so much for sharing this wonderful story! Connections in Mercy truly are a magnificent mystery that is very fulfilling.

Posted on April 11, 2019 at 1:40 pm

Aggie Partington

So proud of you, Aunt Kay! We always knew that you were the cool nun, but we didn't know exactly how cool until reading this fantastic story. Love you bunches. 🥰

Posted on April 11, 2019 at 3:09 pm

Sister Pat

Think of you often in connection with St Peters and even more impressed with your lovely story. What a faith filled home you were raised in. Thank you for sharing.

Posted on April 11, 2019 at 4:55 pm

Mary Murphy

Great story! So happy you all “kicked the habit”! Hope to see you soon!

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Posted on April 11, 2019 at 5:27 pm

Barbara Rooney Kleschnitzki

It is so interesting that just now, on April 11th, I decided to google you Sister Katherine!! So many years ago I enjoyed so much working when you were the Director of Nursing. We were such a lucky bunch—your Head Nurses!! It was unheard of in those days to be directed to schedule a day for professional development, but you knew that caring for your nurses contributed to quality care!! We were so blessed to have you always on our side. Remember when you instituted the unit dose system of drug delivery abolishing the archaic system despite all the opposition? That is just a little item among many that you did, but it had a huge impact on patient safety and nurses’ peace of mind. Hugs to you from afar!!! Thanks Sister Kay.

Posted on April 11, 2019 at 7:07 pm

Shirley Poll

Beautiful story. I had two sister who were Sisters of Mercy. They were twins.

Posted on April 11, 2019 at 7:24 pm

Tina Mawson

I loved reading your story Sister Kay!!! I truly miss seeing you around SPH. You are and always be a fantastic leader and special person! Thank you for all that you have done!

Posted on April 12, 2019 at 12:39 pm

[Kathleen Fitzgerald McCabe](#)

Sister Kay is a woman to truly admire. She is gifted in many areas, and has been a role model, not only in her leadership abilities, but in her unique ability to connect with so many who were

(are) part of the St. Peter's family. Not only did she sincerely care for patients and families, but consistently took a genuine interest in the needs and concerns of so many staff, no matter what their status or title.

Posted on April 12, 2019 at 3:35 pm

Debbie Jones

I loved this story Sister Kay. Don't know if you know this, but when I started my nursing career **DONATE** worked on 6 McCauley. I remember being afraid of you (can you imagine?) I remember Joan laughing saying you should not be afraid of her. She's a marshmallow. I never forgot that. Loved hearing about your journey. God bless and it was an honor to work with you and the Sisters of Mercy ❤️❤️

Posted on April 13, 2019 at 8:12 am

Ellen Boyle RSM

Kay it is an honor to know you, a great Mercy, a terrific nurse but most of all a valiant , loving , compassionate human being. My sincere gratitude for your generous gifts to all.

Posted on April 14, 2019 at 11:32 am

[Lynn Horn](#)

I have many wonderful memories of Sister Kay at St. Peter's when employed in ICU & NICU. I always felt she was responsible for the family-friendly work atmosphere/environment at St Peter's when I worked there in the late '70s through the early '90s. As nurses, we had a great work ethic and made sure the patients were our priority as our role model (Sister Kay) taught us. It was an honor to emulate her. She always has taken the time to say hello when I have run into her...and she never forgets a name!

Well deserved accolades for Sister Kay.

Posted on April 17, 2019 at 1:47 am

Jerry & Mary Graber

Aunt Kay, yours is such a terrific story. We are all so very proud of you! The pictures are wonderful. All our love, Jerry, Mary, and your California family.

Posted on April 17, 2019 at 10:09 pm

Mary Treventi

Aunt Kay,

A wonderful story of the family. We love you and are so proud of your accomplishments.

Such great pictures!

Love, Mary and Charlie

DONATE | *April 18, 2019 at 9:09 am*

Dale Jarvis

What an inspiration you are, and the parents who raised four women to be Women of Mercy. How much you all have given to God's people.

Posted on April 22, 2019 at 10:41 am

Mary Hartnett

Thanks Kay for such a great story of love and inspiration. You are a gift to so many – family, friends, the people you serve so generously, the church, and our community.

Posted on August 10, 2019 at 7:54 pm

Sean Roche

Sister Kay is a great lady and has been a leader at St Peter's Hospital and the Albany community. What a great story about her and her sisters! Thanks for sharing.

Posted on August 25, 2019 at 6:52 pm

[Phyllis Maunz](#)

I love the postulant picture of Sept 8, 1957...I have one just like it taken on the very same date of the very same year

Posted on August 27, 2019 at 9:35 pm

Larretta

Thank you for sharing your story; beautiful and inspiring. I wanted to read more. God's blessings!

Posted on September 29, 2019 at 9:25 pm

Kevin Bur

Sister Kay,

As one of eleven children of wonderful parents such as yours, I was very interested in reading the story of you and your family.

You are a definite inspiration!

DONATE Mom and Dad loved Venerable Sister Catherine McAuley. She is my Great Aunt x4!
May God Bless you Sister Kay! 🙏🏻✝️

Posted on January 9, 2020 at 10:13 am

Amy

I would very much like to see the history of my Dad's family and the three Mercy sisters in a documentary like this. What an awesome legacy that could be shared in our future to our family.

Posted on January 10, 2020 at 4:33 pm

Maryann Burgoyne

Kay.....what a wonderful life and story of you and your siblings.....especially those in Mercy. Peace and blessings to you in this New Year....from one Mercy nurse to another !!

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