

## **A Catholic Activist Faces “The Treatment”**

By: John Krumm - The New Hampshire Challenge

She not only held her faith, she actively grew it and let it define her path to the end.

What was most important to young Janet Mary Oleksik, and the young woman who became Janet Mary Krumm was her intense Catholicism and her drive to serve others. Early in life, Janet thought she would become a Franciscan Sister of Saint Joseph, an order dedicated to hospital service and education centralized in Hamburg, New York. She went through four years of preparatory training and was just about to enter the order.

Then, upon her final consult with a counselor, Janet had doubts if the order of Sisters would provide her the freedom she felt she would need to accomplish the call to serve others she so passionately felt. At the time, the order was somewhat inflexible, and a lack of flexibility never did fly well with Janet. So, she decided to take some time, and see a bit of the world. This led to a college degree in French from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) and her initial employment in human services in the Baltimore area.

And that led (luckily) to her meeting me, her future husband who was in human services in the Baltimore area also.

However, with marriage, and our joining the Air Force, no matter where life took Janet, that intense passion to serve others never left her. She actively cultivated the purity of the catholic influence this passion brought to her service. She would study advanced theology for instance, when we were stationed in Grand Forks, North Dakota. She would travel twenty five miles to Crookston, Minnesota to a Benedictine abbey of nuns for these lessons, sometimes braving intense winter storms and temperatures thirty and forty below zero. She later embraced the order of monks I was considering joining before meeting her, the Society of Mary, “The Marianists.” In Marianist devotion and the orders’ view of lay equality and through an intense retreat at Cape May Point, N.J., with them she found the firm footing for her Catholic activism to flourish.

And then, in Grand Forks, North Dakota our son Joseph was born with Down syndrome. Janet’s drive took over, tasking me to call the fifty states if necessary, to see where Joseph would have the best chance to be included and treated as normally as possible. That led, to a call from an armed and ready ICBM missile silo in North Dakota, to the office of Donald Shumway, who would later become the Commissioner of Health and Human Services in NH. Talking to Shumway twelve years before that time, it was clear to me that we should try to be assigned in New Hampshire, at (then) Pease Air Force Base because of the vision he had. It took Shumway

and me about 15 years to remember that call, and to recall that it was actually us on each end of that line in 1985.

Another favorite saying of Janet's .... "God draws straight, with crooked lines."

I always said if one wanted to know and understand Janet Krumm, they first had to realize she was an activist Catholic. Once you realized that, the rest of her actions, her service, her drive for independence, and where she chose to fight were somewhat predictable. And, she held that urge to serve, and her activist Catholicism to the end.

In New Hampshire Janet pieced together a good program of support for Joseph, but was concerned that it took her ability to research, and all her academic skills to do so. Janet worried about families who did not have those skills, and their children with disabilities. She told me one night about an idea she had. Janet told me her solution would be to start a newspaper to keep these families informed about what is going on in the state, that they might rally around such a publication and improve their lot.

Being the supportive husband I was at the time, I told her I did not think it was possible. I advised her that the state was too "tight." Janet took my dim view of her idea as a challenge. She wrote proposals, and won a few with the Marianists to outfit her with the latest computer support money could buy in 1987, and *The New Hampshire Challenge* was born out of the old "Special Families United" organization.

Janet beamed broadly with pride, as her first edition went out to about 250 families which was the SFU mailing list at the time. Today, *The Challenge* goes out to 10,000.

One of our favorite Catholic authors was the famous monk, Thomas Merton. Little known are a group of tape recordings Merton made for novices at his abbey in Kentucky. The tapes were about formation in the monastic life. The title of these tapes is misleading, because they are actually about a guide to the internal spiritual life. And that was Janet's real journey, an intense and deeply internal spiritual life which had as its by-product, an incredible service to New Hampshire.

In one of these tapes, Merton outlined what he called "The Treatment."

The famous monk contended that when an axe flew back into the face of a monk and killed him instantly, the monk was indeed blessed. Car accidents and lightning strikes were to be equally desired, as they were quick and did not demand much from those taken from this earthly existence directly to the presence of God.

“The Treatment” however, often showed clearly what some incredible people were made of. “The Treatment” tore away all facade, all cover. Merton contended that “The Treatment” started when old monks received word they had little time left. These monks often were told that their death was near but there was still some time to be had. The monks often struggled as long as possible to stay within the monastic community which was their home, but eventually most had to be separated into the monastic infirmary as sickness progressed.

There, in the infirmary they often realized they would never again be fully integrated into the life they had chosen... but they had to accept where God had placed them with grace.

And that was the challenge of “The Treatment.” When our friend death comes to us, as he announces his final decision that there is no going back, it is put up or shut up time for the Christian.

Janet Mary (Oleksik) Krumm, in spite of hundreds of temptations, some outside resistance to her decision to fight cancer with all her might, a few personal betrayals and in spite of hard odds, “Put up”. She was told initially she had only six to eight weeks to live in 2005; her reply was quick and decisive – “if that is so, I’ll deal with it but I have work to do.” She took her fighting spirit and faced down cancer’s repeated attacks. She initially recovered, and for awhile there was no sign at all that the disease remained within her.

And she took the precious time, and continued in her service to the people of New Hampshire with disabilities. She may have wondered now and then what other course her life may have taken, but the old saying is true, “you will find your treasure where you put yourself.”

And Janet put herself with her family, and with her newspaper which she founded for the benefit of the people of New Hampshire who had disabilities. Her dreams about the future were to write even more, for the benefit of people with disabilities.

Janet also “put up”; in the grace and positive attitude she consistently shown to those in the medical community she came into contact with. As the years went on and as many of the initially skeptical doctors scratched their heads in disbelief in how well she was doing, all was handled with style and grace that only Janet Mary (Oleksik) Krumm had. She was a cheerleader to new cancer patients she would meet at the Seacoast Cancer Center. More than one of these patients was blessed by God to have Janet next to them on their first chemo treatment. She made these appointments about others, not about her.

Janet would tell them there was nothing to fear, she would encourage them to give themselves over to the medicine and fight the thief with all they had. Every time I saw this happen, she gave great strength and comfort to those she would advise through not only words, but by her

actions taking in the chemo next to them for them to see. And, I would recognize her call to service given new form on another level.

Because of the way Janet's cancer originated, she never had a chance to discover it before it had spread throughout her body. She took all the precautions; she had all the tests throughout her life. However, cancer hit her like a lightning bolt. And, in time, it did come back. Even then, Janet remained positive and pushed it back again, and again. Her vision at that point was to "manage" the cancer, and to live to the fullest.

And she did. She took trips, put out her beloved newspaper, made arrangements for her family and lived life to its fullest. But the thief and the coward known as cancer came back one final time.

At first we both thought we would give it a "chemo blast" and drive it back, but it had done its job and closed a vital organ. When our best supporter, our oncologist Dr. Barbara Shea informed us there was nothing left to do, we both knew we would return and Janet would go to her next life from the comfort and the security of her own home which she loved.

And this is where "The Treatment" came upon Janet in earnest.

Faith – by its very nature - always has a portion reserved for doubt. I do not know exactly where, but one of the Apostles said something like... "Lord, I believe. Help me in my unbelief." And the doubts came upon her as they do to all of us. However, the more she was tested the more she measured up and held onto her convictions, her faith and continued to grow in her Catholicism by reading on her last bed. As the final days came upon Janet, she was in and out of conscious thought. It was clear to us, her family who surrounded her that she was talking to people on both sides of what we call "life." She would smile, gesture, and wake up to describe old friends who had went on years ago, but were now present to her and offering encouragement. She knew she was not alone here, as her family was around her, and she grew to know she would not be alone on the other side also as these friends and angels made they known.

Yet, in the end, her last earthly thoughts were of her son Joseph and his future in NH. She told me it was OK to consider going back to Pennsylvania, but to remember our children were now part of the state they have come to know as their own. She advised me on the future of *The Challenge* as she knew I was considering being an active part of it. She prophesized immediate 'challenges' *The Challenge* would face with her death, and how to handle them in order to keep it strong and independent, rather than to be "tamed." She could not hide it from me that she wanted me to carry on her work, and to keep *The Challenge* exactly that – A Challenge -- as I have decided to do.

She was right about all of this, 100%.

Finally, our daughter Mary observed that “Mom won’t die” while our son Joe was present. Mary felt certain, that Janet needed to feel free to give up her spirit to God without Joe seeing her last moments. Janet always felt Joe had difficulty with the concept of death, and, Mary was right.

We arranged for Joe and Mary to go out for the evening. It was to be a great night at the local pubs, as the Celtics were in Game Six on the way to the NBA championship. As the night wore on, it was clear to me that Janet’s Championship time was also here. We both said all the Catholic prayers we had grown up with, and nothing more was to be done. Janet had been roundly blessed by the priests and staff of Saint Mary’s in Dover, and now was ready and willing to enter new life.

At midnight, the Celtics had won. I leaned over to her, and whispered that there was no better time, her team had won and Mary and Joe were out of the home. It was just us now, and she should feel free to go home. I told her that her father and grandmother, and my own mom and dad were waiting for her.

And, in peace, holding my hand she gave her incredible spirit back to God at 12:10 a.m. on the 18<sup>th</sup> of June.

Janet had passed “The Treatment.”