News



Clida Ellison "was an absolute pillar of the church," says a former pastor of Gesu Catholic Church in northwest Detroit. (Patricia Harrington)



by Patricia Montemurri

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Editor's note: *On Holy Thursday, Pope Francis prayed for the dead as well as for the priests, doctors and nurses who he said represented the "saints next door" during the coronavirus pandemic. Over the next months, National Catholic Reporter and Global Sisters Report will be bringing the stories of Catholics in this crisis: those who have died, but also those whose service brings hope. To submit names of people for consideration for this series, please send a note to saintsnextdoor@ncronline.org.*



To Gesu Catholic Church in northwest Detroit, lector Clida Ellison brought a voice that was gentle yet commanding in its rendition of the Word. Away from the altar, she brought new people to the faith through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, while sprinkling in tales about her Creole upbringing in Louisiana and raising five sons.

"She was an absolute pillar of the church," said Jesuit Fr. Robert Scullin, Gesu's pastor from 2009 through 2017.

Clida also served Gesu as a eucharistic minister, as a youth group co-founder and an all-around example of fortitude. When her physician husband suffered a debilitating stroke in 1995, she returned to school at age 57 to become a social worker, counseling troubled youth into last year.

When she died of complications of COVID-19 March 26 at age 82 in Detroit, the pandemic prevented a Catholic funeral at the church she served so well.

"Nana was so beloved. She could have easily packed Gesu Church under normal circumstances," wrote her grandson, Jeremiah Bey Ellison, a Minneapolis city council member, in an April 15 New York Times opinion piece about the coronavirus' crushing toll on African Americans in major U.S. cities.

In Michigan, while blacks make up about 14% of the state's population, they have accounted for nearly 40% of coronavirus deaths through mid-April.

"Leaving Detroit, I thought about the disproportionate number of black folks dying from the coronavirus because they had asthma, diabetes or hypertension. ... Because they couldn't afford to visit a doctor or because they couldn't afford to miss work. Because their blood pressure was perpetually too high from a lifetime of being stressed out by all of the above," wrote Jeremiah Bey Ellison, after attending a small service for Clida at a Detroit funeral home. "I thought about how predictable this all was. How preventable."

Another of Clida's sons, Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison, described her in a tweet as an "unbelievably cool mom."

"She's just one of those people who held the sky up and you never thought you'd be without and suddenly here we are," Keith Ellison said in an April 15 St. Paul Pioneer Press article.

He also retweeted a photo of Clida in Washington, D.C., when Pope Francis visited in September 2015. Keith, who had converted to the Islamic faith, was in 2006 the first Muslim elected to Congress, where he served for 12 years.

Clida was hospitalized in early February for colon surgery. Her husband, Leonard Sr., coincidentally was hospitalized at the same time. They arranged to share a room, and Clida still responded to her husband's calls for help and need, even as nurses told her to leave his care to them.

She was recuperating at her Detroit home on March 21, when a neighbor who was also her doctor visited and sent her to the hospital. She had an infection and pneumonia. On March 26, she died at 9:03 a.m. The family learned she also had tested positive for the coronavirus.

As Clida Cora Martínez, she grew up in Natchitoches, Louisiana, of Creole heritage. Her parents stressed education and her father faced challenges registering African Americans to vote. She attended the historic Holy Rosary Institute boarding school for African American girls in Lafayette, Louisiana, and was taught by Sisters of the Holy Family.

She graduated from Xavier University in New Orleans in 1959 with a degree in medical technology. She married a University of Michigan medical student, Dr. Leonard Ellison Sr., and moved north, where she raised her family and managed her husband's psychiatry practice. Among her sons, one became a doctor and four earned law degrees.

"My mom discovered her faith and then rediscovered her faith at Gesu," said the Rev. Brian Ellison, a lawyer and pastor of Detroit's Church of the New Covenant. He accompanied his mom on pilgrimages to the Vatican, to Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, and to Catholic pilgrimage sites in Medjugorje, Bosnia, and in Prague.

"Gesu embraced her as well. It was a mutual admiration society," he said. "She went to church at least twice a week for decades. She was devout, no question, and knew her stuff."

How did she handle it when he joined the Baptist faith and brother Keith became a Muslim? "She said, 'My kids are evolving spiritually and politically, and how can I walk with them on this evolution,' '' recounted Brian Ellison.

It was during a program to improve relationships between white and black parishioners at Gesu in the early 1980s that Clida stepped up as a parish leader, he said.

Jesuit Fr. Gary Wright was posted at Gesu, operated by the Jesuits since its founding in 1922, when Clida participated in the program "Christ Renews His Parish" in the 1980s.

Participants went on retreats to explore their roles in the church and spiritual relationships. Those first participants, such as Clida, then became the instructors in retreats for others.

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"They all had parts to play. It was transformative because it was something Catholics had never done — a way to own their faith and what God had meant in their life,' said Wright. "It was like, 'OK, you're on,' and you have to pass it on to the next person. It laid the foundation of how she evolved in the parish, passing the faith on to newcomers in RCIA."

She never let family challenges — such as her husband's stroke — sour her or deter her. Her work also was challenging — 20 years of counseling in the juvenile division of Michigan's Third Circuit Court.

"She just rose to it, and that speaks to a very deep trust that I serve what God has put in my place to deal with," said Wright. "The parish wouldn't be what it is if she hadn't contributed what she did."

Another parish buddy was the music director, Carl Clendenning.

"You could count on her to tell you the truth. If you didn't want to know the truth, don't ask," said Clendenning. "If she didn't like a song or a style of music that I offered, she had no problem telling me." She preferred her music lively, and especially gospel.

And as a eucharistic minister, said Clendenning, "she would always look you in the eye when she presented the host or the cup — and smile."

She could bring humor to almost any situation, and you were fortunate to join her for a meal. She shared her cooking chops with a national cable cooking channel. She appeared on a 2014 segment of the Cooking Channel's "My Grandma's Ravioli," hosted by Mo Rocca. Clida talked about her Southern Creole upbringing, whipped up "Clida's Creole crab stuffing" for the cameras and shared her recipes for "Clida Ellison's Natchitoches meat pies" and her Louisiana gumbo with andouille, chicken, crab and oysters.

"The greatest thing about Clida, with all that she went through, was I never once heard her complain and say she was tired," said Gesu's current pastor, Jesuit Fr. Phillip Cooke. "Hope was embedded in her."

Cooke, drawing on his Jesuit training, recalls an image of St. Ignatius Loyola, in which the order's founder is pictured leaning into the wind.

"That's Clida Ellison, leaning into the wind," said Cooke. "You never heard her complain. She just wanted to serve."

Clida is survived by her husband and her five sons, Leonard, Brian, Keith, Anthony and Eric, and their spouses, 17 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. Memorial donations can be made to the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers, which supports research into treatment programs for adolescent offenders.

[Patricia Montemurri is a retired Detroit Free Press journalist. In 2017, she authored *Detroit Gesu Catholic Church and School*, which chronicles the legacy of the historic parish and is available at bit.ly/GesuBook.]

This story appears in the **Saints Next Door** feature series. View the full series.