



Mary Ellen Kenny "Sister Bernie"

December 8, 1938 - December 7, 2024

Sister Bernadette (Bernie) Kenny

December 8, 1938 – December 7, 2024

Sister Bernie was born in Boston, MA and baptized Mary Ellen. Her early schooling was in Somerville MA, coincidentally where MMM came to live later. After leaving school she worked as a dental assistant for a short period before joining MMM in Winchester MA.

After her initial religious formation period, she went to Ireland to study Nursing. When she graduated, she won the top grade in the whole of Ireland! But she did not stay in Ireland long. Once her training as a nurse and midwife were completed, she travelled to Tanzania. Her first mission was in Dareda Hospital. After a short break to upgrade her nursing to degree level in Boston, she was then assigned to Ethiopia. There she worked in Gambo.

By 1977, Sr. Bernie was back in the USA. After helping in Vocation Promotion work for a year, she found her life's work when she moved to Appalachia and Virginia in 1978.

MMM came to the Appalachian Mountains at the request of the Richmond Catholic Diocese. Sister Bernie started the program when she began dispensing health care and a kind touch out of her Volkswagen Beetle. In 1980, the Health Wagon was founded by Sr. Bernie Kenny. St. Mary's Hospital, Norton, VA provided a valuable partnership and sponsored the program for over twenty-five years. In 1983, Sr. Bernie upgraded her skills at the Medical College of Virginia becoming a registered Family Nurse Practitioner.

Although Sr. Bernie turned over the leadership of the Health Wagon in December 2005 her heart and her life remained firmly embedded in Appalachia until she died.

Sister Bernie also initiated the invitation to the Remote Area Medical project (RAM) coming to the region, an annual three-day open air medical clinic drawing people from the surrounding counties. Sister Bernie continued to use her knowledge of the area, her friendships, and her skills as nurse-practitioner and massage therapist to open up spaces for healing to take place among the Appalachian people. Sister Bernie said, "It's not about pills. In most health care the emotional part is ignored. Health care is social; it's a way of identifying what's inside a person."

Sr. Bernie also co-authored a book, *Better for Being with You*, with Tauna Gulley, a nursing instructor for the University of Virginia in Wise VA, that explores the concept of care and caring among residents in central Appalachia.

In early December, Sr. Bernie became seriously ill and was moved to Pikeville, KY for medical care. She died there peacefully on December 7th, just hours before her 86th birthday. She is predeceased by her parents and siblings, Tom, Bill and Ann. She is survived by her sister, Ellen Mahairas.

A viewing will be held at Mullin's Funeral Home Chapel, Clintwood, VA on Wednesday December 11, 2024 from 3 pm to 6 pm. Her Funeral Mass will be celebrated at St. Joseph's Church, Clintwood, VA on Thursday December 12 at 11:00 am with Father Thomas Kenny S.J followed by a reception at the Clintwood Community Center. There will be a further celebration of her life in Somerville MA later with burial in Holy Cross Cemetery, Malden, MA. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to the Medical Missionaries of Mary, 179 Highland Ave, Somerville, MA 02143 <https://mmmworldwide.org/donate/> or The Sister Bernie Kenny Scholarship UVA-Wise Foundation, 1 College Avenue, Wise, VA 24293 www.giving.virginia.edu/wise.

Cemetery Details

Holy Cross Cemetery

Malden, MA

Previous Events

Viewing

DEC 11. 3:00 PM (ET)

Mullins Funeral Home Chapel
210 Main Street
CLINTWOOD, VA 24228

Funeral Mass

DEC 12. 11:00 AM (ET)

ST. Joseph's Catholic Church
Clintwood, VA 24228

Tribute Wall



“ Mullins Funeral Home and Crematory created a Tribute Video in memory of Mary Ellen Kenny "Sister Bernie"



Mullins Funeral Home and Crematory - December 11, 2024 at 01:50 AM

RM

“ Roma Mullins lit a candle in memory of Mary Ellen Kenny "Sister Bernie"



Roma Mullins - December 13, 2024 at 10:28 AM



“ Sister Bernie was an amazing lady with such love for everyone. She will be missed by all who have had the pleasure of meeting and knowing her.



Lana Stanley - December 11, 2024 at 09:53 PM

JJ

“ I meet Sister Bernie over 20 years at a RAM clinic and at every event since then she would walk up and say she was coming to get a hug with that HUGE smile on her face. She reminded me so much of my grandmother being so selfless and always putting others before herself. She truly was an angel among us. I cant imagine doing a clinic in that area without her being there in some capacity. Prayer for all of her friends and family!

Jennifer Jolliffe - December 11, 2024 at 09:36 PM

SM

“ 😭😭😭😭😭😭 *Bernie was Such a Precious Gift from God to Us. She lived on the hill right above my Mother. She Never Hesitated to come & help with Mom. Day or Night.. Bringing her Communion & Praying with her Every Sunday. She was the Speaker at Mom’s Funeral, as I wouldn’t have ask Anyone Else. There’s just not enough Words to try to explain All The Love She had for Everyone. She tried her best to medicate us & our Children when they were younger, because we had no money for Dr. trips. My Gracious, like I said I have So Many, but not nearly enough words to express Bernie’s Love, Caring & Dedication. May She Always be present in our Very Special Memories with her. 😭😭😭😭😭*



Susie Mullins - December 11, 2024 at 07:58 PM

SM

“ We’ve 😭😭😭😭 for days. For those that didn't know Miss Bernie Kenny personally, you don't know what an Exceptional Person you missed out on. Speaking for myself, There'll Never be another to take Miss Bernie's Place here on Earth. She's just that SPECIAL. She Always placed Everyone Else's Needs Above Her Own. Always Loving. Always on The Go Caring for Others &# 10 of The Town of Clinchco is suffering a great loss. Actually, I think The Town of Clinchco should Show Love for Bernie's Memory & have a Noticeable Sign Placed by The Highway at #10 Street with Miss Bernie's Name on it.



Susie Mullins - December 11, 2024 at 07:55 PM

PA

“ I met Sr. Bernie in the summer of 2015, when she invited me to RAM in Wise County. As she greeted me that first day, I knew I was in the presence of a very special lady! I returned to RAM for the next four years, until COVID arrived in 2020. I was unable to be in Virginia for the opening of the Sr. Bernie Kenny Clinic, but I visited in May of last year, and Sr. Bernie gave me a tour of the facility erected in her name. I was able to spend a couple of weeks with her in 2023, and the memories of the shared moments at her house will never leave me, especially now, as I fondly recall her amazing legacy. Over the years I met so many wonderful people in Clinchco and other neighboring towns, who knew Sr. Bernie firsthand, as she ministered to them in various forms of need, or extended simple friendship along the way. I remain in awe, as I think of how highly regarded she was among those who know her in Appalachia. They shared stories with me about their relationship with Sr. Bernie over the many years, and it blessed me abundantly to hear what they shared about their “Angel of the Mountains”. I felt so honored to know her, and reminded her again and again, when I could, that I was in the midst of an Appalachian rockstar! Truly that is how I felt each and every visit or phone call from Massachusetts. Sr. Bernie showered great love to everyone that she met or spoke with, uplifting those around her in a profound healing and compassionate way. My life has been greatly enhanced by knowing Sr. Bernie Kenny, and my heart is full of joy that now she rests eternally peaceful with our loving God. Thank you Sr, for all of who you were. You have left this world physically, but you remain in so very many hearts, forever! Godspeed.
Love, Pat Adam

Patricia Adam - December 11, 2024 at 06:12 PM

BC

“ Many fond memories exist working several RAM events with Sister Bernie and others. - Thomas V. Clark, Roanoke, VA

Brian Clark - December 11, 2024 at 04:24 PM

JS

“ Sister Bernie was amazing! I had the pleasure to work with her during several RAM-Healthwagon events, so positive and upbeat. Miss your charm Sister Bernie.

Jack Speed - December 11, 2024 at 03:20 PM

TG

“ Sister Bernie you were the best. I owe you so much and can never thank you enough for all you have done for me in my life. You are truly an angel sent from God. I love you and will miss you dearly Love Terry Gulley

terry gulley - December 11, 2024 at 12:35 PM

TC

“ Our thoughts and prayers are with our Sister Parish, St Joseph Clintwood, and the many families and friends that Sr. Bernie has made in her life of service. May God Bless you all as she watches over you from heaven. St Joseph, Appleton, WI

Twining Committee - December 10, 2024 at 11:13 PM



“ 37 files added to the album LifeTributes



Mullins Funeral Home and Crematory - December 10, 2024 at 08:25 PM

CS

“ I did not know or ever meet Sister Bernie but I have heard of her and all the good she did and care she gave to those in need in SW Virginia. May she rest in peace in the arms of the Lord.

Cathy Stiltner - December 10, 2024 at 07:18 PM

DF

“ Donal Burke & Family purchased the Beautiful in Blue for the family of Mary Ellen Kenny "Sister Bernie".



Donal Burke & Family - December 10, 2024 at 03:50 PM

FF

“ Fanchette, Vincent and all in ATD Fourth purchased the Full Of Love Bouquet for the family of Mary Ellen Kenny "Sister Bernie".



Fanchette, Vincent and all in ATD Fourth - December 10, 2024 at 03:48 PM

FF

“ Fanchette, Vincent and all in ATD Fourth planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Mary Ellen Kenny "Sister Bernie".

Fanchette, Vincent and all in ATD Fourth - December 10, 2024 at 03:48 PM

JH

“ Jeff And Linda Heaberlin lit a candle in memory of Mary Ellen Kenny "Sister Bernie"



Jeff and Linda Heaberlin - December 10, 2024 at 01:32 AM

JH

A rose for a beautiful soul.

Jeff and Linda Heaberlin - December 10, 2024 at 01:33 AM

JM

“ Janice Martin lit a candle in memory of Mary Ellen Kenny "Sister Bernie"



Janice Martin - December 09, 2024 at 09:41 PM



“ Divine Peace Bouquet was purchased for the family of Mary Ellen Kenny "Sister Bernie".



December 09, 2024 at 09:15 PM



“ A [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) was planted in honor of Mary Ellen Kenny "Sister Bernie".

December 09, 2024 at 03:48 PM



“ *Serene Retreat was purchased for the family of Mary Ellen Kenny "Sister Bernie".*



December 09, 2024 at 03:48 PM

SF

“ *Shelia Booher & Family purchased the Full Of Love Bouquet for the family of Mary Ellen Kenny "Sister Bernie".*



Shelia Booher & Family - December 09, 2024 at 03:37 PM

TF

“ *The Mambro Family planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Mary Ellen Kenny "Sister Bernie".*

The Mambro Family - December 09, 2024 at 03:36 PM

TF

“ *The Mambro Family purchased the Peaceful White Lilies Basket for the family of Mary Ellen Kenny "Sister Bernie".*



The Mambro Family - December 09, 2024 at 03:36 PM

FF

“ *We are so grateful to have known Sister Bernie, as are all the members of ATD Fourth World who came to know her. We shared many years of friendship and collaboration and benefited immensely from her companionship through hard times and good days. Our condolences to the members of her family, the MMM sisters and all those who will miss her so much. We regret not to be able to join you all Thursday but are happy to have been able to see her last year. We are all better for having known her and will try to follow her example of love and care.*

Fanchette and Vincent Fanelli - December 09, 2024 at 03:02 PM

TF

“ The Goss Family planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Mary Ellen Kenny "Sister Bernie".

The Goss Family - December 09, 2024 at 02:47 PM

TF

“ The Goss Family purchased the Divine Peace Bouquet for the family of Mary Ellen Kenny "Sister Bernie".



The Goss Family - December 09, 2024 at 02:47 PM

JR

“ Jimmy, Rebecca (Jenkins) & Tyler Robinson lit a candle in memory of Mary Ellen Kenny "Sister Bernie"



Jimmy, Rebecca (Jenkins) & Tyler Robinson - December 09, 2024 at 02:05 PM