

(Transcript of) Eulogy for Mary Sellers (1935-2023), a Macmillan nurse.

Delivered at the Requiem Mass by Andrew Sellers, Mary's son.

Welcome. Well, it is certainly fitting that Mary Sellers has her memorial service here in St Georges Catholic Church, for the Sellers family have had a long and illustrious 'career' with this Church. Mum's parents were married here in 1934, our sister was married here, there've been baptisms and christenings galore, and my brother and I spent countless hours as small boys dressed in cassocks, on our knees in front of this very altar. Even this lectern was a sort of gift from the Sellers family. For those of you that don't know the story, the previous lectern was, I think, constructed out of planks of wood and a flattened cardboard box, and it was a source of great embarrassment for Father Burke. But then, (this was in the late 70s), Father Burke found out that a Church was to be deconsecrated in Leeds, and this marvellous golden lectern was going to be up for grabs, and he asked my Dad for help. My father, Peter Sellers, a teacher at St George's best described as being a man greatly feared and grudgingly respected, said that he would "see what he could do". Legend has it that he grabbed a couple of the most ferocious & unruly St Georges schoolboys and off they went down the A64 in the old Bedford Van. Whatever arguments the good citizens of Leeds provided as to why this lectern should stay within the city of Leeds, they were met with a much more convincing counterargument of extreme violence, and the lectern was loaded into the Bedford, driven triumphantly back down the A64, and it has stood here ever since. And it is a testament to my father, that even though he's been dead for more than 40 years, not a single person from Leeds has ever dared to ask for it back. So yes, it is fitting Mums memorial should be in this Church, in the greatest city in England, where Mum was born, and where she lived all her life. A happy childhood in Langholme Drive, a place she seemed to recall mostly by the smells of the air - the smell of coal fires and of the sugar beet factory, and of the sweet peas tied up against the garden shed. As a child, Mum joined the Guides, and got all the way to the highest 'rank' in that organisation, that of "Queens Guide", an achievement of which she was very proud. And it was also an achievement which she was effortlessly able to shoehorn into any conversation, apparently at random. But Mum was also a child who was born during the time when she remembered huddling in the Andersen shelter, when the German bombers came.

And then, a career in nursing, where she started lifelong friendships with Eileen (Grey) & Patricia (Holder), and a career dedicated to helping others, a career of selfless dedication to the welfare of her fellow men and women.

And then, one Friday evening, she took a circuitous way back from the restrooms in the Assembly Rooms, so she would deliberately walk past my Dad and deliberately catch his eye, which she of course did.

And then marriage, and a teacher and a nurse buying a brand new three-bedroom house for 2,350 pounds, & filling it with happy children.

And then back to work, first as a district nurse, and then on to her last job, which is the one upon which we must dwell...

Because it is impossible to talk about Mumsy without referencing the work she did as a Macmillan nurse. For those of you who don't know what Macmillan nurses do, they look after patients who are going to die of cancer – and that's all they do. She was one of the first. What type of person would decide just to care for patients who were inevitably going to die? Only a person with enormous reserves of moral and spiritual courage. But Mum told me once that she suddenly realised with stunning brutality that she had gone from being a nurse where she would be able to help people to get better, to heal, to being in a job where every patient, every single patient she tended to would, inevitably, die.

When we are babies, crawling around on the floor, we quickly learn that if we reach out our hands, we will be lifted up into the arms of our parents. Later on, we reach out to embrace our friends, and then even later we reach out our hands to those we wish to marry, those we wish to spend our lives with. We spend our entire lives reaching out our hands to those we love and care for. But sometimes, in pain and suffering, we are obliged to reach out our hands to strangers. Sometimes, in the fear and suffering of terminal cancer, we are obliged to reach out our hands to Macmillan nurses. And those nurses, like Mum, are there to lead those patients through the valley of the shadow of death, to guide the way with light, to help banish the fears back into the darkness, to say that "all will be well". But when that patient died, Mum's work was not done, because there would be another cancer patient there, reaching out their hands to her, and she would have to start that long journey all over again. We haven't been able to find out how many cancer patients Mum tended for during

her work as a Macmillan nurse, but she was a Macmillan nurse for a long time... When people talk of courage or bravery, we think of soldiers storming machine gun emplacements, or firefighters running into burning buildings. But that's not courage compared to what Mum did, or what Macmillan nurses do. Where did this tiny bird of a woman find the inner reserves of strength, to do what she did, for so many years? A fearlessness, a practicality, a level of moral and spiritual courage that is difficult to believe, hard to comprehend....Where did this little slip of a woman develop the fortitude to be able to shoulder the moral decisions needed in helping a person to face their own death? She was an extraordinary woman...

But I have to make a little aside here, for there was one part of Mums work with the Macmillan foundation that was never fully recognised. She realised very early on [in the early 80s] that there was a part of the job which was simply intolerable, and that was that Macmillan nurses were expected to give their home telephone numbers out to patients. This was back in the days when one house had one telephone, it was screwed to the wall, you couldn't see who was calling, and you couldn't switch it off. So the awful outcome of this was that Macmillan nurses and their families might be expected to have to take phone calls from dying patients at all and any hours. I was still a teenager when Mum was working as Macmillan nurse and the phone rang often late in the evening, and so I was the one who sometimes picked it up, and some of those patients calling Mum - some of them, they were unhinged in their suffering. And I would quickly hand over the phone to Mum and go off into the next room. But because teenagers often listen in, I often listened in, and I would hear her talking to these poor patients, guiding the way with light, banishing the fears, reassuring them that "all will be well". I listened, and understood then, at an early age, that there was something truly remarkable about my Mother, something superhuman almost... But, phone calls in the evening, an impossible burden to be placed upon an already difficult job – but what could Mum do? Salvation arrived in the form of none other than Princess Diana. Mum met her at Garrowby Hall in [February] 1983, and Mum seized the opportunity. When Diana asked about her work, and its difficulties, Mum told me that she gave Diana a look which said "Yes, but you don't know the half of it". And Princess Diana picked up on this, because she sought Mum out later, and took her aside privately, and asked Mum what the problem was. And Mum told her how no nurses with young families could be expected

to be taking phone calls from dying patients in the middle of the night. And Princess Diana did her thing, and she told the boss of the Macmillan foundation precisely what she thought about the matter, and within days, a new rule was made, that Macmillan nurses should not have to give their phone numbers out to patients. And I remember all of this clearly, because a few days after Mum told me about this, the phone calls, they tailed away and then they stopped forever. And they must have tailed away and stopped forever for all the other Macmillan nurses across the land. So, that was always something in Mums life of which she was particularly proud, her interaction with Princess Diana, and having had a hand in making life that little bit easier for the Macmillan nurses that came after her....

But of course, in one of the cruellest of ironies, the last cancer patient she ever cared for was her own husband, and I witnessed that as well, how she faced that task with the same discipline and kind-heartedness as anything that had gone before. And her life was filled with other singular tragedies, she lost her daughter Margaret to multiple sclerosis less than ten years ago, our brother Bernard was killed in a tragic accident as a young boy, and her youngest son, Peter, died in infancy...Dad was taken from her before they could enjoy a long and happy retirement together... But through all of these singular tragedies, she retained an overwhelming joy of life, a love of all the good friendships she had made, and she was a person who enjoyed the respect of everyone who knew her.

She led a good life, and died in her own home, on her own terms; Death will have held no fear for a woman like Mum. She'd seen us all recently, and she was active and sprightly right up until the last. A cup of tea in the morning, and then her big, caring, generous heart just gave out...

Mary Sellers was the best of us, as courageous a person as one can find on this Earth, never hesitating to take the hands of those people who reached out to her. And where Mum has gone, Peter and her children will be there to greet her, and she'll be able to hold out *her* hands to *them*, and all will be well....