In 2010, Sister Stephanie wrote, “Each of us is a story! We were created by God as a story waiting to be told.”

Sister’s story began when her parents, Louis Mueller and Eugenia Schlegel, who were German, were born in Alsace, Lorraine. As a young boy of 9 or 10, Louis was sent away from home by his father to become an apprentice to a butcher – a decision that, providentially, gave him a trade by which he provided for his future family. However, this experience of sudden separation from his family, as Stephanie recognized later, left him with “characteristics we all knew so well – silence about his own problems locked in his heart and a courage and determination to succeed.”

Louis Mueller was conscripted into the German Army for a short time prior to World War I. In 1911 he married Eugenia Schlegel, also from Alsace, Lorraine. Realizing that European nations were preparing for war, Louis decided to take his young wife to the United States. They settled in Akron, Ohio, which had a large community of Alsatians.

Sister Stephanie, their first child, was born on Sept. 1, 1914, and named Louise Joan. The happiness of Louis and Eugenia Mueller was short-lived. For, when little Louise was only 21 months old, her mother died. “With no relatives to call on for help, Dad, in his predicament, placed me in the hands of willing friends, neighbors, and finally for awhile in a Cleveland orphanage,” she explained.

Within two years, Louis Mueller married another Alsatian woman, Mary Strebler, who had recently arrived in Akron. Mary had left behind a 2-year-old son whom, her parents agreed to raise, knowing that Mary would send for him as soon as circumstances permitted.

“Mary was a wonderful mother,” Stephanie wrote, “and a very busy one.” She and Louis Mueller had five children: Joseph, George, Agnes, Leo and Albert. In addition to caring for this large family, Mary helped her husband in his butcher store, which was adjacent to their home.

At home, the family spoke German, heard some French at times and also a bit of English. The Mueller children learned English when they attended St. Bernard School, staffed by the Akron Dominican Sisters.

Around 1925, when Stephanie was in the fifth grade, her parents decided to send for Mary’s son who was raised by Mary’s parents. Ollie, the 15-year-old boy who arrived dressed in knickers and a beret, spoke German, but no English. He had no trouble communicating with Stephanie’s parents. But, even though the children of the family spoke German, it was not as easy to communicate with his new sisters and brothers. That year, she recalled, was one of “sparks,
tempers, growth, exasperation and the courage of my Dad, who truly tried to be a father to him.” Ollie’s surname was officially changed to Mueller.

When Stephanie finished the eighth grade, her father insisted that she go to high school, even though she thought she ought to go to work to help support the family. It was at St. Mary High School where, as she noted later, “I met the IHM’s along with many Irish and a very conservative pastor, who never let us forget his kindness in opening the education doors to us Germans.”

Stephanie’s freshman year began with great expectations, meeting new friends, teachers and new possibilities. At the same time, she continued to help in caring for her brothers and sister. But, in December, Mary, the only mother she ever knew, became ill with double pneumonia. Stephanie described what happened on Christmas day. “Early Christmas morning, all of us had breakfast, but were very subdued. Dad came to the kitchen shortly after eight o’clock, took us all into his arms, and cried: ‘Why, my God?’ Amid sobs and tears, he said ‘our Mom just died.’

“All at once for me, I became the mother of a family, with all of its responsibilities as well as student life as a freshman,” she recalled. For the next two years, Stephanie took over as the mother of the family because the women whom Mr. Mueller hired to help with the family “just didn’t fit.” It was better, as Stephanie said, “to go it alone.”

In 1931, when Stephanie was a high school junior, her father married Barbara Frantzen, a widow from Budapest who had no children. Stephanie described her as “a queen of a woman” who created a real home for the family, showering love on all, especially on little Albert, the youngest child. Barbara died in 1944, after 13 years of being a loving wife and mother. “My family idolized her and still holds her memory in awe.”

It was Barbara’s presence that made it possible for Stephanie to enjoy the rest of her high school years, both her studies and the fun she had with both girls and boys. It was also Barbara’s presence and care of the family that made it possible for Stephanie to consider an invitation to become an IHM Sister.

During high school she realized that she wanted, more than anything else, to be a teacher. She decided to become an IHM. Later, she noted, “We were in the throes of a severe depression, and for a first-generation American, the teaching community seemed to be the vehicle to realize my vocation.”

Even though she wondered how she would live without swimming and movies, she entered the IHM congregation on July 2, 1932. With great tears, she and Sister Agnes Kidder rode the bus from Akron with the IHM Sisters who taught at St. Mary. The Sisters were excited because they were going to the new Motherhouse. Since there were 32 in the reception class who entered that year, they all made a promise to be faithful to their religious profession or tell all the others in the class why they wanted to leave. All 32 remained faithful to their religious vocation until death took one. Six months later, Louise Mueller became a novice, receiving the name Sister Stephanie.

In September 1933, while still a novice, she was assigned to teach fifth grade at St. Mary Academy. For the next 20 years, she taught the upper-elementary grades, fifth through eighth.
With a bachelor’s degree from Marygrove College and a master’s from the University of Detroit, she taught high school students for 32 years. Those years included being principal one year at St. Cecilia School in Detroit, and three years at St. Thomas, Ann Arbor. After 52 years of teaching elementary school and high school history and being department chair in various schools in Monroe, Detroit, Illinois and Ohio, she said: “Teaching was always a joy, and often a challenge. It was the fulfillment of my dream – to reach out and sharpen the wits of youngsters who often dared you to take them to a new horizon.”

Sister was also privileged to spend some time chaperoning girls traveling to Europe and was able to visit relatives in Alsace, Lorraine. After retiring from teaching, Sister spent two years tutoring unwed mothers in a teenage pregnancy center, visiting patients at a large nursing home and also ran for election and was voted into the Democratic Central Committee. Sister Stephanie’s last years of service included pastoral ministry at her home parish, St. Bernard’s, Akron, secretary for the IHM Southeast Province and receptionist at St. Mary Center, Monroe.

After retiring to the Motherhouse in 2002, Sister Stephanie continued to serve, taking charge of the Gift Shop for several years, visiting sisters who were sick and quietly doing many helpful things for others.

Sister Stephanie also took lots of time for prayer, something she longed to do after making a directed retreat in 1970 where she learned so much about Jesus in the Gospels. In 2009 she wrote: “Practically my entire morning is spent in prayer.” Her example of prayer, kindness to the sick, positive attitude and thoughtful service was an inspiration to all who lived with her in the Motherhouse.

On Sept. 1, 2014, Sister Stephanie’s 100th birthday, a surprise birthday celebration was held in the Motherhouse and attended by 47 nieces, nephews, grand-nieces and grand-nephews, etc., who came to celebrate with her and thank God for her long, inspirational life. The next day, Sept. 2, all the sisters joined with her to thank God at Mass.

Also in attendance at the Mass was Robert Clark, mayor of Monroe, who presented Sister Stephanie with a city-wide proclamation and put a city of Monroe pin on her sweater. Sister also received a letter of congratulations from the living U.S. Presidents. The great surprise, which overwhelmed her, was a papal blessing from Pope Francis and a dozen beautiful, pink roses. Sister’s response, which could be heard all the way to the back of the Chapel, was “WOW!”

Sister Stephanie was also featured in the Monroe paper on her 100th birthday. Sister’s advice is to “just hang in there, kid, to live a long, healthy life. Keep your mind and your heart open. Let the good in and let the bad things go by.”

Sister commented on her life in the community saying, “From the depths of my heart rises a constant song of praise for the Congregation because it has enfolded me with its love and enabled me to become a strong woman. I beg you to remember me in prayer and to continue in thanksgiving for the graces given me by the mercy of God in this wonderful Congregation.”
Now, I am sure that Sister Stephanie continues to say WOW! as she enjoys life everlasting with God and all her family. Thank you.

Written by Mary Jo Maher, IHM and Joan Monsour, IHM. Delivered by Joan Monsour, IHM, May 15, 2015