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Family finds strength in song and prayer

A Milwaukee paper tells the story of a remarkable family going to the October 6 canonization of Josemaría Escrivá, the founder of Opus Dei.

09/26/2002

New Berlin, Wisconsin - One by one, they walked through the door and up the steps to the kitchen. Another day of school was done. One by one, each

planted a kiss on Maria Dillett's cheek.

"Hi, Mommy." Kiss. "Hi, Momma." Kiss.

The youngest six of the Dilletts' nine children - Roseanne, 13; Rebecca, 11; Anita, 10; Sarah, 8; Edward, 7; and Myra, 6 - all students in New Berlin schools, joined their older sisters - Angela, 17; Julie, 15; and Katy, 14 - who had arrived at their New Berlin home earlier from Catholic Memorial High School.

Their mother gave a kiss in turn and accepted each quick-but-warm hug.

Dad - Patrick Dillett - wasn't forgotten in the parade of kids' kisses, either.

All went about their business. The oldest off to a baby-sitting job. The middle ones stirring the stew, setting the table. The little ones retreating to play in the family room, where they

stacked sofa cushions until they had built their own airplane.

But first, each politely shook this columnist's hand, smiled a genuinely cheerful smile and answered questions if they could about their lives before and after their family's misfortune.

Misfortune - and miracle, Patrick Dillett said.

"Lots of people commented that we were not going to make it," he said. "I really do believe that it's part of God's plan, that we were made tighter as a family."

Six years ago, then Journal Sentinel columnist Bill Janz first wrote about the Dilletts' nightmare. After delivering Myra, her ninth child, Maria experienced complications and severe bleeding. Her heart stopped, she fell into a coma and she was left with an injured brain.

"I remember that day," Julie said, snuggling close to Mommy on the kitchen stool next to her, gently rubbing her hand.

"Perfectly," Angela added. "All I wanted to do was hold my little sister. I was scared."

But she was the oldest, then 11, and had to act much older. When she alone was permitted to visit her mother in the hospital early on, her father said that if Angela told her mother she loved her, maybe her mother would say it back - by blinking her eyes.

Her mother blinked, and father and daughter cried in joy.

Music for mother

As the days and weeks went on, the other children played their violins and sang songs for their mother and the hospital staff. After a month in

intensive care and five months in the hospital, Maria came home.

Help came from all quarters - extended family, church, friends, the community. Patrick quit his job as an excavator to tend to his wife and family full time, though both volunteer and hired helpers still assist him.

The children learned a new routine and accepted the added responsibility. Each child knows who does what and when. They get up, get each other up, get cleaned and dressed, prepare and eat breakfast, pack lunches, get off on the school buses. They know how to get right at after-school and weekend chores, yet still work in the soccer matches, school football games, play rehearsals. They know, too, when to shower their mother with love and affection.

"I think that's helped her most - that she has all that around her," Patrick said, nodding toward the cluster of children.

That, and their dedication to prayer, both Maria and Patrick said. They attend Mass daily and follow Opus Dei, a secular organization dedicated to helping individuals find holiness in ordinary life and everyday duties.

Maria said she prayed - the entire family prays - to Opus Dei founder Father Josemaria Escriva, and "he helped me to get better." Escriva died in 1975, and, when he is canonized a saint next month in Rome, the entire Dillett family will be there to celebrate and sing together.

"Some people say we're nuts," Patrick said, with a smile and a shrug. "But I knew Maria would really like to go."

Today, Maria continues to make "slow, steady progress," Patrick said.

Once a champion badminton player in her native Mexico, Maria has lost much of her coordination and most of her speaking ability. She was able to tell me, though, that she understands everything and - when I asked - showed me she could speak in sentences.

"Hi," she said. Her daughters laughed at the brevity of her choice.

Changed lives

She can walk with someone beside her for balance, which is remarkable given that she was close to wheelchair confinement, Patrick said. He sought instruction in a special therapy program called "patterning" - best known for use in children and based on the concept that you can retrain the brain. The Dillett family and volunteers spend three hours a day, five days a week taking Maria through the patterns of crawling and walking.

"Hard but good for me," Maria said.

Despite what Maria has lost physically, her humor is intact. Before, she often conspired with the children to play tricks on their father, and "she still likes to pull your leg," Angela said.

The older girls said they miss many things about their mother - her cooking, her bright, colorful dresses, her easygoing nature when it came to discipline, her mother-daughter talks. Yet, they still have her.

"We're lucky because she didn't die," Katy said.

Meanwhile, they have grown closer to their father, who more often than not was at work before.

"Now he'll just want to randomly talk to us - talks just to see how we're doing and how things are going," Angela said.

It may have been the children's music that helped to lift Maria Dillett out of her coma. Today, the music still lifts spirits.

The Dillett family has become a familiar sight at southeastern Wisconsin church festivals, schools, senior citizen homes, fund-raisers and community events. Several times a month they play their violins, sing, dance and perform a skit. Maria Dillett cannot sing, but she is always there beside them on stage, in her usual seat on a chair, keeping a beat in her own quiet way.

Patrick Dillett usually decides which songs they play, but the older girls - Angela and Julie - were quick to name their favorite.

"We Are Family."

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song-and-prayer/](https://opusdei.org/en-au/article/family-finds-strength-in-song-and-prayer/) (04/05/2026)