God says, “Behold, I do a new thing.”

The new thing that God seeks often occurs in times of disruption, when the familiar world has collapsed and the future is in doubt, when days grow shorter, and we wonder if darkness will swallow the light. The new thing that is being born in our lives emerges out of the hidden womb and the dark soil.

God’s new thing is the vision of “something more,” a hovering possibility that challenges the world as it is. It is the moral arc toward which history bends, filling us with a divine restlessness with the way things are that inspires the quest for what may be if the world embraces God’s vision of Shalom.

— Bruce G. Epperly from The Work of Christmas: The Twelve Days of Christmas with Howard Thurman
Electing a Benedictine prioress is a serious, prayerful, and sometimes lengthy undertaking.

The process that culminated on July 12 in the election of Sister Stephanie Schmidt as the 22nd prioress of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie began 18 months earlier with the launch of a self-study. Dubbed “Engage for the Future,” the self-study focused on the community’s living of the monastic life and the role of the monastery in the larger Erie community and beyond.

The study’s final report, which included specific direction statements to focus community life over the next five years, served as a guide for election discernment.

Sister Michaela Hedican, OSB, of St. Benedict Monastery, St. Joseph, MN, and Sister Lynn McKenzie, OSB, president of the Federation of St. Scholastica, traveled to Erie to facilitate and witness the election—knowing the risks of traveling during a pandemic and aware that they would be quarantining after returning home. The Benedictine Sisters of Erie belong to the Federation of St. Scholastica and, as its president, Sister Lynn served as the canonical (legal) representative who validated the election and its outcome.

After roll call, followed by balloting, Sister Lynn asked Sister Stephanie if she was willing to accept the outcome. “I am humbled and honored to be called forth to be your prioress in this service of love,” Sister Stephanie told the sisters in response. “I count on your prayers as we journey together.”
Sister Anne Wambach, completing her second term as prioress, led the Rite of Installation of Sister Stephanie Schmidt as Prioress on August 15. Sisters gathered in chapel for the ritual, a simple call and response, in which Sister Anne asked Sister Stephanie, “This community has called you to be prioress, a visible sign of Christ’s presence in our midst. Do you accept this ministry of leadership among us?” Stephanie responded, “With the grace of God and the support of my sisters, I do accept.”

After a second call and response between Sister Stephanie and the sisters where each offered support to the other, Sister Stephanie called the new monastic council forward. She and the community commissioned Sisters Patricia Hause, Christine Kosin, Ann Muczynski, Diane Rabe, and Linda Romey as councilors. Diane will also serve as subprioress.

Although pandemic restrictions prohibited the large number of guests who would normally have been present, some of Sister Stephanie’s family did travel from Philadelphia to celebrate with her. And, in COVID-19 style, oblates and friends organized a 25-car drive-by greeting at the monastery on the evening of the installation.

“We were so happy to greet Sister Stephanie,” said co-organizer Oblate Breanna Mekuly. “I almost cried when I saw everyone—friends, oblates, and sisters. It meant so much just to be together again even if it was only in our cars.”

To learn more about Sister Stephanie and to listen to the reflections she gave after her installation, visit eriebenedictines.org/story/sister-stephanie-schmidt-new-prioress

One of Sister Stephanie’s two brothers, her sister and two sisters-in-law travelled from Philadelphia to celebrate with her: Nancy and Karl Schmidt, Stephanie, her sister Maureen Schmidt and sister-in-law Rosanne Schmidt. Because of the pandemic, no other guests were present.


Sister Stephanie and the sisters greet oblates and friends in a drive-by celebration.
What was your conversation with God when you realized that you would be the next prioress of the Benedictine Sisters? I was shocked, overwhelmed, thought there must have been a mistake. My question to God was, “Why?” When I got over my shock, I had to listen. And I heard, “be not afraid, I am with you.” And, “my grace is sufficient for you, my power works best in your weakness.” I clung to those scriptures for a while then I remembered something else that God has frequently reminded me, “freely you have received, so freely give.”

The Rule of Benedict says that the prioress holds the place of Christ in the monastery. What do you think most prepared you for this role? Since I can remember, I have had a deep sense of being loved by God. Faithfulness to prayer over the years has affirmed that deep love. But, practically speaking, the past 10 years that I worked in monastic formation ministry were a preparation because I was daily in touch with the wisdom of Benedict as I helped our new members learn to love and live the Rule. Also, in that ministry, I had to constantly examine my own life, always being sure to practice what I preached.

What do you feel is your greatest responsibility as prioress? First, to learn to know and love each individual sister because I think it’s in loving the other that we call forth the best in each other. The responsibility of being a leader means making decisions, even when they might not be popular. That involves taking risks, knowing that we’re going to try some new things, we’re going to make mistakes, but that’s ok—we’re not called to be perfect, we’re called to grow.

Your greatest challenge? There is so much to learn! The greatest challenge is to see each person every day with fresh eyes, to break free of past judgments or stereotypes and truly see anew.

My heart has to keep expanding.
Do you see enough flexibility in the Rule of Benedict for something new here, for some different ways of living monastic life in addition to our vowed life? You know my slogan: “With God, all things are possible.” So I don’t want to rule out anything. I’m not a visionary but I am open to suggestions and to questions. The spirit is always calling us to something new and we have to see how we can continue to welcome seekers and how we can allow more mutuality to happen. Younger generations have something to teach us just as we have wisdom to share with them. If we can continue to be faithful to love and embrace it in all its forms, people will be attracted to this life, and we’ll find creative ways to embody that love in a communal atmosphere.

I think Benedict was a very wise man, a psychologist at heart. When I taught the Rule to the novices I was always amazed at his practical wisdom. He says that this is just a little rule for beginners. His theme is the middle way, moderation, let’s work it out, let’s find balance. He’s always open, for example, to seeking counsel from community and he says to make sure you have the youngest available because they often have new ideas. He also says even the visiting monastics, the guests, might have something to teach us, so that spirit of openness to learning is important.

We have 275 oblates who follow the Rule of Benedict with us. Do you see possibilities for new or different ways of integrating with oblates who are seeking more spiritual depth, seeking community in this world with its many challenges to community, to human well-being, to growth? Well, I have just finished reading through their oblate commitment papers. [See page 10] I am amazed at the variety of ways our oblates live the gospel and our corporate commitment “to be a healing presence and prophetic witness for peace and justice by actively addressing the climate crisis and the rights of women and children.” They volunteer, on top of regular jobs, in prison ministry and with their local faith communities. They fight racism, work on climate change, and with local “get out the vote” efforts. They pray the divine office morning and evening with us. Their energy and intensity is inspiring to me. How we integrate with them is something we will be exploring now that we have an oblate as co-director with a sister for the first time. I think that will bring a whole new viewpoint.

Throughout history monasteries have had local influence as centers of intellectual progress and spiritual inspiration, in addition to being safe havens for pilgrims, and agricultural and cultural centers that anchored the Middle Ages. What do you see as the role of a monastery today? What is our place in Erie, given the great issues of our day—climate crisis, racism, immigration, women's issues, poverty? Simply to live the gospel, be faithful to Jesus’ principles of dignity and equality for all. It involves putting ourselves out in public spaces and teaching the importance of the common good—which I think we’ve lost sight of in our American culture. The pandemic has underlined the interconnectedness of all creation and the reality of our global village. We have to come to grips with the fact that we are all one.

As a monastery we are still called to be a center of culture, of beauty, art, and music, all of which can be found here at the monastery and in our ministries. If you go to our Emmaus Soup Kitchen, there are fresh flowers on the table. If you go to the Inner-city Neighborhood Art House, economically deprived children are learning how to dance, sing, and create beautiful art.

We still have to encourage learning, to be a place where new ideas can be discussed. Our Enrichment Series, which invites people to come to the monastery and hear speakers address relevant topics, is very valuable in that monastics will always be life-long learners. Education and study are part of the monastic vocation.

We are a center of spirituality. People are searching for meaning in their lives, and we have a responsibility to share ways of encouraging this
connection with the Divine beyond our traditional prayer. We do that well, inviting people to share liturgy with us, but I think we need to continue to be a place where seekers can find a home and ways to express their seeking.

We try to be a place of welcome; hospitality is a hallmark of Benedictinism. Many of our guests say, “I feel so welcome here.” We have to continue being inclusive, not becoming so centered on one position that we can’t entertain or welcome people of a different persuasion to come and join us in dialogue.

And probably something that’s very important is that a monastery will always be a witness to stability in this time when people are so mobile and have no home base, no roots, and don’t really feel like they belong anywhere. Our rootedness in Erie, our commitment to this group of people, to the land, to the neighborhoods, to peace and justice right where we are, that’s stability. People know we are always going to be here, our tradition and our history proves that. That’s a valuable gift in an age of insecurity and instability.

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For nearly 10 years, we've had a virtual monastery, Monasteries of the Heart, that is a 21st century spiritual and learning center for more than 22,000 members around the world. What are your thoughts on virtual community—especially after we have been forced into much more virtual life by the pandemic?

Well, it's no secret that I'm not very tech savvy. I much prefer the face-to-face human encounter. That being said, I do rejoice in the fact that some of our sisters had the vision and the willingness years ago to create this virtual community, Monasteries of the Heart. I think it fills the need of many people, and it is a response to a real thirst for spirituality. It will keep growing, I'm sure.

In his book, Keeping Faith: A Skeptic’s Journey Among Christian and Buddhist Monks, Fenton Johnson writes, “The monk is a philosopher, a seeker of wisdom, who is taking Jesus as his or her role model… The monastery is thus the remnant…of a community of people committed to the search for wisdom. Perhaps that...is its defining characteristic and the key to both its importance and its persistence across diverse and often hostile times and cultures.”

Would you agree with Johnson's assessment of the purpose of a monastery? How do you see the Benedictine Sisters of Erie searching for wisdom today and what does that look like in practical terms?

What is wisdom? That’s the first question. Wisdom is the search for happiness, the philosophers said. The search for meaning, the search for truth. A quote from T.S. Eliot that is one of my favorites is, “We had the experience but we missed the meaning.” And I think that is an illness of our time. We in America have become such an action-oriented culture, “I am what I do,” and we go through experience after experience not taking the time to process. In a monastery silence, prayer, and solitude feed taking the time to search for wisdom, for meaning, to make sense of what this is all about. Silence is a rare commodity in the world today. The monastic rhythm promotes the search for wisdom as we stop throughout the day to center ourselves, to pray, to remember what it’s all about, to make meaning through our reflection experiences. That is an essential element of a wise life.

As Benedictines, we continue the search for wisdom in our openness to others, in conversatio, the notion that every day I’m open to change, I’m not the same as yesterday. Stability roots us in truth and in God. There is wisdom in obedience, that deep listening to the needs of the world around me, to what I hear when I listen with the ear of my heart, when I listen with compassion to what is being called forth. I think those vows, and the commitment oblates make to these values, lead us in our search for wisdom.

One of the biggest dangers today is complacency. If we sit back and think we have all the answers, that would be deadly. We can’t give in to the sin of complacency. We need to be in touch with real people, with real problems beyond our community. My heart has to keep expanding, as Benedict would say. My heart has to become wide enough to take in the needs and the suffering of all those who have no one to speak for them, who have no advocate. If we keep listening deeply and responding in love, that’s where the passion will come to live the gospel day by day.
Two women enter Benedictine novitiate

Sisters Jacqueline Sanchez Small and Colleen Leathley are continuing their monastic journey with a canonical novitiate year. Sister Ann Muczynski, Director of Monastic Formation, will be their novice director. After the Rite of Entrance into the Novitiate on October 17, Ann reflected, “It is a privilege to walk with these women on their journey. It also comes with tremendous responsibility.”

Sister Ann gave each of the new sisters the Rule of Benedict, a key text for their study during this year of intense reflection, study, prayer, and community living.

“I give thanks for this graced and sacred year to deepen my relationship with God, this community, and myself as I discern my vocational calling,” Sister Colleen said before adding with a smile in her Australian accent, “Bring it on, I say!” A native of New Zealand, Sister Colleen is a psychologist and academic who came to Erie to spend a year in the Benedicta Riepp Monastic Experience program. She returned to Australia until she couldn’t ignore the pull of the monastic community and returned to explore a monastic vocation.

“I’m looking forward to this year to practice the monastic way of life more fully. I’m excited to continue learning and growing with this community,” said Sister Jacqueline, who spent the summer of 2015 as the Joan Chittister Intern working with Benetvision and Monasteries of the Heart. She left Erie to complete her degrees in divinity and social work, becoming an oblate in 2015. She returned to Erie and rejoined the staff where she interned before entering the community in 2019. Sister Jacqueline is originally from New Jersey.

Listen carefully, my child, to my instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart.

—Rule of Benedict, 6th century

Vocation Team ready to listen

Living into one’s vocation is not an easy task. Careers may change throughout one’s life but seeking one’s vocation is a journey into the heart. Which is why a vocation can be challenging to discern. As an intergenerational vocation team, Sisters Elizabeth Oettel, Mary Ellen Plumb, and Valerie Luckey bring varied life experiences, perspectives, and gifts to their ministry of journeying with women discerning a call to Benedictine monastic life.

“I am a seeker at heart, and I have a deep appreciation for the monastic way of life,” said Sister Mary Ellen, a baby boomer. “I owe much of my self-discovery to those who walked my vocation path with me as I discovered, and then integrated, the call to seek God with this community, inspired by their example and wisdom, their patience and love;”

A vocation discernment process is not to be rushed. “Walking with another who is seeking her true vocation means being open and listening, accompanying and supporting her, regardless of the outcome of her discernment or the time it takes,” said Sister Elizabeth, a member of the silent generation. “It is a privilege to walk with someone during this time of vocation discernment, to journey with her as she sorts out her vocation.”

Vocation team members Sisters Elizabeth Oettel, Valerie Luckey and Mary Ellen Plumb.

As Sister Val, a millennial, explains, “Working as a team to support seekers who are considering a Benedictine vocation is important because Benedict is clear that wisdom rises out of the communal voice. Benedict calls the individual to listen to others in all parts of life. To be a team in vocation ministry means that our work will benefit from multiple wisdoms coming together.”

You can read more on our website at ereibenedictines.org/become-benedictine.

Listen carefully, my child, to my instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart.

—Rule of Benedict, 6th century

Email vocations@mtstbenedict.org

Background image: Benedict on the ladder of humility, Rule of Benedict Chapter 7. The 15-foot bronze sculpture by artist Greg Mueller is on the campus of the University of Mary, Bismarck, ND.
Is there anything that the 1,500-year-old Rule of Benedict has to say about dismantling oppressive systems like racism and sexism? I believe the answer is yes, when we understand the context.

Benedict lived in the chaotic, collapsing Roman Empire, a stratified, hierarchical society of privilege and domination, with land-owning men at the top, and servants, women, children, and property at the bottom. The male head-of-house enjoyed rights of citizenship and influence, and was the only voice and authority on all matters regarding his land and property.

In the midst of this society, Benedict organized a monastic community based on relationships of equality and love, where citizens and servants lived together. To avoid replicating society’s oppressive structures inside the monastery, Benedict needed a system that would break down oppressive patterns.

The structure he created is an anti-oppressive system of rank based solely on the date and time of entrance into the monastery, not on wealth or prior status or position. An illiterate peasant who entered one day was recognized as senior to a wealthy official who arrived the following day. This ranking is not a new hierarchy of domination. There are no perks or privileges accorded to one’s rank, except if there aren’t enough chairs. In that case, the junior monk (one who came to the monastery more recently) gives the chair to the senior who has been there longer. Rank is also used in determining order, for example, when monastics line up in procession they go in rank by date of entrance.

Need, not rank, is the basis for the distribution of goods. The best food in the monastery goes to the sick who are weak.

Rank does not determine positions or assignments. Those are based on an individual’s gifts and on the guidance of the spirit.

Love is the one thing that flows down through Benedict’s rank. He says that as we progress on the monastic path, we are to increase in love, which means seniors who have been in the monastery longer are expected to love more. The seniors are to love their juniors and the juniors are to respect their seniors.

What can this teach us today in a society rooted in white supremacist and patriarchal worldviews and structures? Our whiteness grants us privilege in access to education, employment, healthcare, and safety of mind and body. White privilege is subtle and deep. In today’s grossly unequal society, Benedict’s teaching calls those of us who benefit from these unjust systems and standards to actively work to change them.

As white women, we know this experience of injustice from a different perspective, as women in a male-dominated world. Women know what it is to experience oppression, to be overlooked, invisible, silenced, paid less, victimized, and abused. Women of color face the greatest amount of discrimination and oppression, while men, particularly white men, sit atop social stratification. We can use what power and voice we have to advocate against systems of injustice, while following the lead of movements of people of color trying to create a more equitable world.

What can we learn from Benedict’s anti-domination structure to help us in this struggle? We can apply his lessons to the structures and systems of our lives, our communities and our society. When we are at table, especially decision-making tables, ask, “Who is missing?” And, “How do we include them? What needs to change to ensure that those affected by decisions participate in making them? What policies are widening the growing racial wealth and income gap, and what changes are needed to narrow that gap? What structures would promote racial and gender diversity in applicant pools for employment?”

Benedict’s teaching compels us to participate in creating and supporting social structures and policies that institute relationships based in equality, respect, and love.

Graphics courtesy of Advancing Equity and Inclusion: A guide for municipalities
City for All Women Initiative (CAWI), Ottawa, Canada
Benedictines for Peace
40th anniversary

As part of the Benedictine Sesquimillennium celebrating 1,500 years of Benedictine life (480-1980), the Federation of St. Scholastica, of which the Erie Benedictines are members, encouraged sisters to participate in a weeklong witness for peace at the Pentagon in the summer of 1980. Forty-eight sisters from around the country answered the call. Following that demonstration, at a national meeting held in Erie over the Thanksgiving holiday, Benedictines for Peace (BFP) was formed.

“The motto of all Benedictine communities is a simple but profound one—PAX,” wrote Sister Mary Lou Kownacki, BFP organizing team member and first national coordinator. “Peace is the sign of the monastic community. It is our responsibility not only to be people of peace, but also to work for peace in the society around us.” Forty years later, the work continues. “It’s hard to comprehend what a radical initiative BFP was in 1980. Today, the collaboration of sisters, oblates, and friends continues the work, increasingly in collaboration with diverse networks and partners in the movements for justice and peace,” said current local BFP coordinator, Sister Anne McCarthy.
For the first time an oblate and a sister will co-direct oblate program

The Benedictine Sisters of Erie have named Oblate Joanne Cahill as the first oblate co-director of the 275 oblates of the community. Joanne, of State College, PA, will be co-director with Sister Dianne Sabol, oblate director since 2015. “For over 40 years I have witnessed how the Oblate Way of Life has evolved in this community and that we stand on the shoulders of sisters and oblates who have gone before us. I look forward to shaping the next chapter of this journey with Joanne,” said Sister Dianne.

“I applaud the community’s decision to move towards team leadership. Sisters and oblates bring unique perspectives to our Benedictine commitment and I am grateful that future planning will reflect both,” said Joanne, who has been an oblate since 2003. “I hope that sisters and oblates will continue to seek and find new ways to learn from one another as, together, we strive to ensure the time-tested values of the Rule are alive and well in our world today.”

Oblates are women and men who make a formal commitment to Benedictine spirituality and values as lived by the particular community where they make their oblation. Visit eriebenedictines.org/oblates

Read more about Joanne at eriebenedictines.org/node/34496

Requiescant in Pace

Ron Wasielewski
Erie, PA
Died September 22, 2020

Mary Beth (Betty) Kennedy
Erie, PA
Died January 25, 2020

Rev. Kenneth Laber
Salinas, CA
Died January 17, 2020

Carl Puleo
Hamden, CT
Died December 29, 2019

New oblates welcomed at virtual Oblate Commitment Ceremony

The 2020 annual Oblate Commitment Ceremony took place around the world via Zoom on Saturday, October 24. More than 100 oblates participated, including six initiates and five new oblates.

The ceremony followed a virtual oblate gathering. Members of the planning committee, Sister Dianne Sabol and Oblates Breanna Mekuly, Priscilla Richter, Mary Ann Matlock, and Becky Spudich, offered a reflection day titled, “Be Monastics Wherever We Are.” The day featured a message from Sister Stephanie Schmidt, prioress, and a video by Sister Joan Chittister on “The Heart of the Rule.” Breanna Mekuly and Monasteries of the Heart staff member Katie Gordon coordinated technology for the gathering and the ceremony, including producing videos of oblate commitments.

“Living in Missouri, it has been years since I have been able to be physically present at the monastery,” said Oblate Zeke Meyer. “Prior to the virtual event, I anticipated participating in a day to further my human and spiritual development. What I didn’t anticipate was the surge of emotion that I would feel. I literally had tears streaming down my face when I heard the bells call us to prayer. The miles between us melted away, I was indeed fully present. Thank you for the event and for stoking the fire within me! I am a better me for being a part of us. This will in turn bless the world and perhaps reflects a part of what we heard in our gathering, ‘Be a good Benedictine, the world needs you.’”

Making their oblate commitment for the first time were Christine Lutz, Greensboro, NC; Teri Bays, Sedona, AZ; Patrick Bradley, Lewiston, NY; Ann Vogan, Venus, PA; and Sarah Rieth, Buffalo, NY.

New initiates, who will spend the coming year studying, reflecting and discerning their call as oblates, are Cynthia Legin-Bucell and Michael Bucell, Edinboro, PA; Cherylnn Carter, Erie, PA; Claude Frankart, Mason, OH; Rob Giannamore, Albion, PA; Katie Holzheimer, University Heights, OH; and Rev. Dorothy Burton Pearman, Hamburg, NY.
The practices Benedict commends, which infuse all aspects of monastic life, are the practices Jesus commands. These are meant for all Christians and are described in the Rule’s fourth chapter. They begin with loving God, extend to loving neighbors as much as oneself, and encompass the Ten Commandments. Self-restraint—of physical appetites, personal ambition, emotional reactivity and speech—figures prominently among the good practices. Self-offering is vitally important and is expressed through serving the poor and showing compassion to suffering people. Truthfulness, with God, oneself, and others, including a wise and trustworthy spiritual confidant, is essential, as are humility and the pursuit of peace and reconciliation in relationships. Regular prayer, including the prayerful reading that is *lectio divina*, is the contemplative practice that gives rise to faithful action. All the Christian practices that Benedict commends amount to a pattern of faithful human response to the God of love. They comprise Benedictine spirituality, and they are meant to change the practitioner by the grace of God into a person whose life increasingly resembles Christ’s. When monastics make the vow of *conversatio morum*, in effect they promise to practice all of the above within the stable community of the monastery, “the workshop in which we are called to work along these lines” (RB 4).

To those of us who live outside that workshop, monastic life can look, if not easy, then far more orderly and well-proportioned than our improvisational, complex existences. Most of us lack a liturgy of hours and a leader who governs our daily behavior according to a community’s holy rule of life. We have liberties that sometimes allow us to feel lost and rudderless. We have responsibilities that can make us feel like abbots unprepared for the task. We obey no one and listen, or not, to whomever we choose. And some of us gravitate toward monasteries without ever meaning to become monks because we recognize in them a sanity and sanctity of daily life from which we need to borrow some practical wisdom. Perhaps the most valuable treasure to borrow from Benedict is the very concept of a rule of life. You don’t have to borrow all the content of Benedict’s Rule in order to emulate his act of establishing guidelines for faithful life with others. You can recognize, as Benedict did, that life without clear values and behavioral parameters will descend into chaos and cause harm. To say this more positively, you can acknowledge the need for a design or accept such a pattern...

Perhaps the most valuable treasure to borrow from Benedict is the very concept of a rule of life.

—Rachel Srubas

—from *Benedictine Promises for Everyday People* by Rachel M. Srubas, Oblate of the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, author and Presbyterian minister
love deeply. In Spanish, the word for the bow is _reverencia_. It describes so completely the inner posture I want to present before all of life, a deep reverence. As an oblate, I task myself to give outer testimony to that reverence.

—Theresa Cari Serafin, former co-coordinator of the Mission of Friendship, Mérida, México

In October 1975, I found myself on a 71-foot research vessel during what the ship’s captain later called the worst Gulf of Mexico storm he had ever witnessed. Our boat was tossed almost completely out of the sea by each passing mountain of water. And during those chaotic moments of mid-wave suspension, the suddenly airborne, spinning propellers were hopelessly inadequate to meet the task at hand. Like those propellers spinning uselessly out of the water, I have found Benedict’s little rule to be lacking when experienced outside a loving group of fellow pilgrims, isolated from community. Whatever form our monasteries take – be they virtual or isolated from community. Whatever form — Mark Gorman, Alexandria, VA

As I reflect on Benedictine values and practices, I see how my life has changed since becoming an oblate. Daily prayer and _lectio divina_ have become an integral and essential part of my life and rudder of my days. 

By setting my daily intention of serving God through serving others, it is a constant reminder that God has a hand in everything I do, if I will only listen and heed God’s voice. Sometimes that voice comes in a whisper and other times like a clap of thunder. Some days are easier to listen than others. I often struggle with the egotistical belief that I am in charge of my life. Surrendering can be so freeing and offer such comfort and peace. Trust God.

— Joan Martter, Erie, PA

The pull to isolate, to be emotionally reactive, to snap at others when they think or act differently than I do, becomes heightened in me during times of stress and crisis. I am reminded of my past hurts and perceived personal injustices. I am shamefully reminded of those injustices that I inflicted on others with or without intending to do so. The Rule of Benedict challenges me to develop self-restraint, particularly to address emotional reactivity. It is crucial for me, before I move my feet to the floor every morning, to pray _lectio divina_. In praying the psalms, reading the Rule reflections, and listening to the USCCB Daily Readings, I become grounded in the teaching of Christ to love God with my whole heart and whole soul, and to love my neighbor as myself. The Rule of Benedict encourages me to forgive myself when I fail and others when they do, too.

— Kathleen B. Pae, Erie, PA

Benedict’s rule on hospitality has been the cornerstone of my life as has my daily prayer ritual. Throughout our 55-year marriage, we have opened our home to family, friends, the homeless, and the lost…some have stayed months and others, years. While our commitment to hospitality has required us to stretch our hearts and grow in unexpected ways, we have received far more than we have given. I currently serve as the Director of Holy Ground PBC, which provides shelter and wrap-around services for homeless, single moms and their children. Serving as an “innkeeper” of God’s children has been challenging, especially now, requiring me, a take-charge and hands-on person, to let go and trust in the grace of God to keep our young families safe and financially stable. Daily I am reminded that God is the Great Provider!

— Phyllis Turner Jepson, West Palm Beach, FL

Collectively weaving both Franciscan inspiration to embrace a simple lifestyle (backpack, tent, sleeping bag, and my HydroFlask) and Benedictine teachings on behavioral integrity (“Your way of acting should be different from the world’s way,” Rule of Benedict Ch. 4), I traveled approximately 8,703 miles on Amtrak in this infamous year of the pandemic.

With hiking poles in hand, I departed Burlington, VT, in January, where I served elders as a compassionate caregiver….

I arrived in Bend, OR, with a hopeful heart to nurture family relationships and worked as a chef until being laid-off.

Next to Dulce, NM, for ministry at a school serving the Native American Jicarilla tribe. Then on to Donaldson, IN, to cultivate the organic earth. I was challenged to simply be grounded in grace.

Heading for Tampa, FL, I was feeling akin to a monastic nomad. My empathy for the poor was transformed into compassion with the poor as now I was homeless…but not hopeless, living in community with the homeless at Metropolitan Ministry.

My spiritual challenge is to genuinely internalize the adage of “walking a mile in their moccasins” as I am now one amongst them. I am beginning to understand the stability of Benedict’s enclosure as “home is truly where the heart is.”

— Jeannette DeCorpo, Tampa, FL
The world stands still, time halts, lockdowns commence. One would anticipate a perfect opportunity to discover ways to integrate practices of the Rule into a daily pattern and dwell in the monastic way of life. However, it is not to be. The politicizing of the coronavirus in the U.S., the killing of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor aiming the spotlight on police brutality and my white privilege, the surfacing of ideological divisions, the social unrest all highlight the dualisms confronted. Established/unsettled, structure/disruption – here the practice of responding to a call has deepened my awareness. I welcome the possibility of transformation, I’m excited at being unsettled, and I seek the challenge of disruption. The dualisms become dialectics and this inner dialogue has me clinging to my current practices of the Rule (prayer, reconciliation, pursuit of peace) to maintain some semblance of faithfulness.

— Carl Baniszewski, Worcester, MA

I find the Rule of Benedict provides a good guide for trying to live Jesus’ command to love God and neighbor. On my visits to the Mount I learned how to pray Liturgy of the Hours, which is the foundation of my prayer life. Each day begins by checking the news on the Erie Benedictine website. Next I turn to “pray with us” as well as remembering all those who have made prayer requests. Then I enter Monasteries of the Heart. It’s amazing how those of us who have been long-time members have never met and yet feel close to one another as we post responses on that site.

Reaching out to others helps to assuage my sense of isolation during this time of COVID-19: weekly zoom visits with our children, daily texts with my brothers, phone calls and emails with friends. Having meaningful work to do has made a huge difference to my life. It is all of these connections that help to sustain me these days.

—Toni Allen, Ellicott City, MD

What do you do on the FIRST day following a LAST day? Anchor each day, and your heart, in the Rule’s 4th chapter. Earlier this year I was laid off due to the growing global pandemic. I turned to my Benedictine values and I established a daily routine of exercise, prayer, and meditation before sunrise. I centered myself before facing the day’s troubling news. I listened more than before. I let go of my fear of sitting still. In Chapter 4, I read, “...you are not to act in anger or nurse a grudge….do not grumble or speak ill of others…. guard your lips from harmful speech....” I heard the echo of my Mom’s voice saying, “If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all.” These words have meant more to me this year, challenged by social, economic, and political chaos. This year “common wisdom” became uncommon. I thought I always lived by these values, but they were tested – this year.

The value of silence, listening, respect for others, committed daily routine, spiritual reading, and prayer have enabled me to be more helpful to others, be ready to respond when needed, as well as to remain healthy during the most challenging year of my life. The Rule came to life for me – this year.

—Rosemary Gantz, San Antonio, TX

It’s been difficult to find inspiration and direction from today’s broken world. The deadly virus that is sweeping across the globe shows no signs of slowing down. Climate change has led to devastating wildfires and damaging floods and storms. Racism and hatred are still prevalent in our country. All of this gives me a sense of despair, and sometimes a feeling of dread when I awaken to a new day. But I take solace from the words of Sister Mary Lou Kownacki, in her “Prayer for Monastic Life”: “O God, help us to become people of prayer and peace.”

Since becoming an oblate, prayer has become an integral part of my life. But never has it been more important than now, with lockdowns, social distancing, and a lack of human contact, even with our own family members and our Benedictine family.

As an oblate, I am also called to be a person of peace. And that doesn’t just mean personal peace in a frightening world. It means opening my eyes to the needs around me and having a heart of compassion for others.

—Paul David Groucutt, Erie, PA

The ground of my Benedictine being is the Liturgy of the Hours. It was the ordering of each monastic day by the psalms that attracted me to the Benedictine life some 50 years ago. The words of the psalms took root in me then and continue to provide an unending food source for my soul. I sometimes borrow the words of the psalms when I speak to my God and they are what keep my soul fertile to follow the Rule. The companion to the psalms is the profound bow which I love.
Carol Ann McLaughlin, OSB
Profession, August 15, 1960
Monastic Incorporation
March 20, 1976
Died June 4, 2020

At the time of her 50th Jubilee in 2007, Sister Carol Ann said that the most significant gift of community is “that we uphold each other in love and support as we continue our journey in seeking God.” A faithful seeker, first as a Sister of St. Joseph and then as a Benedictine, Sister Carol Ann upheld and inspired many along the course of her life’s journey. She served in education as a teacher and principal before entering the health care field and becoming a certified dialysis technician. Her most recent ministry was with Therapy Dogs United, volunteering with her dog Rusty, who preceded her in death, to bring love and support to others. She was a Bradford, PA, native.

Jerome Eustace, OSB
Perpetual Monastic Profession
August 20, 1948
Died June 27, 2020

As she was beginning her 90th year, Sister Jerome spoke of what monastic life meant to her: “Of course, there is nothing more important than our spiritual lives. Ora empowering labora—prayer empowering work. I have no intention of giving it up. I will continue to cherish our ora and do as much labora as my body permits as I march into the next decade of my life.” Five years later, as she was about to celebrate 75 years of monastic life, a fall while she was working in the kitchen (still doing her labora!) led to her untimely decline and death. A native of Oil City, PA, Sister Jerome was a teacher and principal for 35 years before entering the health care field, becoming a certified nurse aide.

Anne McGreevy, OSB
Perpetual Monastic Profession
August 12, 1953
Died June 13, 2020

“I think for Anne, her search for God within a monastic way of life was perhaps defined by her fidelity to communal prayer celebrated daily in the Liturgy of the Hours,” said Sister Patricia McGreevy, Sister Anne’s sister, also an Erie Benedictine. Sister Anne, who would have celebrated her 70th jubilee just weeks after her death, was an educator and principal extraordinaire. She devoted 58 years to education; 12 as a teacher, followed by 46 in school administration. Students, faculty and staff in the dioceses of Erie, Cleveland, OH, and Arlington, VA, credit her not only for a solid Catholic education, but also for strong and efficient leadership. When she retired from education in 2008, she returned to the monastery. She was a native of Oil City, PA.

Mary Daniel Meahl, OSB
Perpetual Monastic Profession
August 22, 1949
Died July 23, 2020

Although music and Sister Mary Daniel are all but synonymous, Sister Mary Daniel said that “being a Benedictine sister has always been my primary vocation.” During the more than 70 years that she fulfilled her vocation as a Benedictine, she also brought music into more lives than she could ever have imagined. Sister Mary Daniel was a gifted musician who played piano, organ, and harp. She taught music in schools and gave private lessons, led choirs, and served as community and parish liturgical musician. A native of Erie, Sister Mary Daniel was a 1945 graduate of St. Benedict Academy. Even in her final years, no longer able to play herself, she was grateful she could “still join my voice with my sisters in praise of God.”

We will celebrate the lives of our four sisters with family and friends when the monastery reopens. Obituaries and prayers are at eriebenedictines.org/obituary-sisters
I suppose if you asked people on the street, “What is Emmaus?” they would answer, “a place that feeds hungry people for free.” And they’d be right, to a point. But the COVID-19 pandemic gives me an insight into why that response is limited. To be sure, we’ve never missed a day during this pandemic of feeding those who come to the door of both the pantry and the soup kitchen. All through the lockdown Emmaus continues to receive generous donations and to welcome selfless volunteers. So what is lacking?

In a recent interview Pope Francis was asked what you should say to a beggar in the street. The Pope replied, “Hello. How are you?” And he noted that they’ll know you are sincere if, after asking the question, you take time to listen, really listen, to the answer.

That’s what the Emmaus family is not able to do during the pandemic. The Emmaus motto is “Bread for the body, care for the soul,” and during these quarantine months I feel we are only fulfilling half our mission. We may shout the question, “Hello. How are you?” to the guest who stands six feet away in the pantry or to the guest who reaches out for a packaged hot meal at the kitchen. But we are not able to get close enough to the other to listen for the reply, to sit down with them and talk, to give a comforting touch, to exchange a hug…to do all that you do when you talk to a friend. We miss being the family of Emmaus.

“Hello, how are you?” is as far as we can go during the pandemic. But the question is never enough. It’s the human exchange that comes after the question that determines the integrity of Emmaus. The question for Emmaus is always: In the breaking of the bread do we see each other as we truly are in the sight of God? And do we live out that beatific insight with kindness and largesse?

Emmaus Grove provided fertile ground for Sister Pat Lupo and her Neighborhood Art House students as they planted 25 saplings there last week. The tree-planting is part of the ReLeaf initiative of the Lake Erie Arboretum at Frontier Park (LEAF). Their goal is to plant 275,000 trees in Erie County, one for every person in the county.

“We’re using the Art House grounds as a nursery for the seedlings,” explained Sister Pat. “It’s a lesson for the students as they learn about varieties of trees—the project includes deciduous trees, conifers, and some fruit trees—as well as taking on the responsibility of caring for them until they are large enough to be moved to a permanent home.”

LEAF’s Executive Director, Vern Peterson, helped with the tree planting, as did Director of Programs, Rosa Fatica-Showers, who also volunteers at the soup kitchen. Jamie Keim, Director of Projects & Design for LEAF, was part of the team alongside Sister Pat and Master Gardener Mike Bailey, who co-coordinates the Emmaus Grove garden each season.

The team showed students how to dig a hole big enough for each sapling and tightly pack the soil, and how to wrap netting around the young branches to give them support throughout winter. The children then took over until all 25 trees were in the ground. With rainy weather, the initial watering took care of itself.

Rosa shared her experience noting, “One of the most important parts of ReLeaf is educating the community, especially young people, about the importance of trees. We feel so grateful to Sister Pat and her students, who were wonderful to work with and who took ownership of the planting. Each student was excited to have a tree of his or her own to name and care for. We look forward to working with the Art House on future tree plantings.”
Two of photographer Sister Lucia Surmik’s pieces, “In Harmony” and “Joyful Moment,” were accepted into the 2020 Independent Council on Aging Senior Art Show. “In Harmony” received an honorable mention. The show will be on display at the ICA’s Art of Aging Gallery inside Traditions Unlimited at 1608 West 8th Street in Erie until January 5. The piece Sister Lucia is displaying in this photo is “Realm of Beauty” and it is on display at the monastery.

At an October press conference, as Erie DAWN (Dwellings and Advocacy for Women in Need) celebrated its 25th anniversary, Executive Director Maureen Dunn recognized the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, the Sisters of Mercy, and the Sisters of Saint Joseph, the founding communities. Each community received a handcrafted mosaic that incorporates Erie DAWN’s rising sun logo.

Sister Katherine Horan is the new director of St. Benedict Child Development Center. She brings 30 years of teaching and administrative experience to the position. “I am honored to carry on our ministry at St. Benedict Center, and the vision that founder Sister Alice Schierberl and her successor, Sister Diane Rabe embraced,” said Sister Katherine. She succeeds Sister Diane Rabe who left the position after 29 years to become Subprioress of the Benedictine Sisters.

That in all things God may be glorified.

A grant from SOAR—Support Our Aging Religious—provided funds to make improvements in the kitchenette that serves the health care wing of the monastery. The counter and sink, dishwasher, and ice machine in the kitchenette were replaced, as well as the 15-year-old washer and dryer in laundry room. The improvements are especially important in this time of COVID-19 as they allow more efficient sanitizing in addition to being more energy-efficient and providing more up-to-date appliances for staff and sisters who work in the infirmary. “It’s so nice having ice that is made fast. I try and get in 10,000 steps a day which means I need to drink a lot of water—six big glasses a day,” said Sister Rita Zattosky. “It’s so convenient to come down the hall and get ice water!”
Saint Benedict Community Center (SBCC) celebrated the one-year anniversary of the Adapted Sports Program at the end of February 2020. Within a few weeks COVID-19 forced the Center to close. Sister Dianne Sabol, SBCC director, has stayed connected with participants during the pandemic through weekly zoom chats. “We eagerly look forward to when we can come together again for recreation at the gym,” she said.

Sister Carolyn Gorny-Kopkowski posted her 100th podcast on December 1. “Never did I imagine myself in the podcast ministry! Because of another sister’s urging I began and it’s become life-giving for me. I consider it an extension of my earlier retreat ministry.” Sister Carolyn began offering retreats based on the seasons and connected with creation spirituality over 30 years ago. Now she shares her experience and insights through her podcast series at eriebenedictines.org/podcast-creation-spirituality

Order from Benetvision store.benetvision.org/books.html

From the writings of Joan Chittister: On Women
This first collection of Joan Chittister’s writing on women includes more than 40 short excerpts and writings, including her essay, “Why I Stay” and the complete “Litany of Women for the Church.”

That God May Be Glorified
Join in the daily prayer of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie with this inclusive language psalter. The Liturgy of the Hours is in a five-week format, and includes psalms for morning and evening praise. All language, human and God, is inclusive.
We are grateful to the sponsors, golfers, and volunteers who participated in the 2nd Annual Benedictine Sisters of Erie Charity Fundraiser Golf Tournament on August 4. The 2020 tournament was held in honor of Sister Anne Wambach who completed 10 years as prioress.

Congratulations to the Winners:
First Place Women’s Team:
  5 Big Bees—Kathy Danch, Tina Delio, Sue Minarich, Irene Harrington
First Place Men’s Team:
  Bob Murray, Jim Murray, Pat Kloecker, Joe Kloecker, Sr.
First Place Mixed Team:
  Robin Scheppner, Rodney Chiarelli, David Bertges, Jim Engstrom
Second Place Women’s Team:
  Mary Hoffman, Mary Ann Hauser, Char Neizmik, Marlene Smith
Second Place Men’s Team:
  Marty Szabat, Tim Brugger, Pat Herr, Junius Johnson
Second Place Mixed Team:
  Rick Clayton, Sue Clayton, Leo Olszewski, Rachel Olszewski
Longest Drive Women: Sue Clayton
Longest Drive Men: Tim Brugger
Longest Putt Women: Mary Ann Hauser
Longest Putt Men: Jim Potter
Ring of Gold Winner #3: Richard Vicary
Ring of Gold Winner #5: Rodney Chiarelli
Ring of Gold Winner #11: Pat Kloecker
Ring of Gold Winner #18: Jim Murray
Skins Winner: 5 Big Bees—Kathy Danch, Tina Delio, Sue Minarich, Irene Harrington

We are grateful to our sponsors:
HONORARY CHAIRPERSONS ($10,000)
- PNC Bank
- Betsy and Bill Vorsheck

MONASTERY PARTNERS ($2,500)
- Windsor Beach Technologies Inc.
- Little Caesars / Lynn and Dale McBrier
- In honor of Sister Anne Wambach and the Benedictine Sisters—Msgr. Jim Sanner
- In honor of Sister Anne, the original “Philly Special”—Kathy and Jim Lynch
- Jack Bates Collision
- Vicary Insurance Agency / UPMC
- Frontier General Contracting, Inc.

MONASTERY FRIENDS ($1,000)
- Maloney, Reed, Scarpitti & Company, LLP
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- Velocity Network
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- Murray Insurance, LLC
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- In honor of Sister Anne Wambach
MONASTERY COMPANIONS ($500 & $200)
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- Martha Hilbert
+++ 
- Wilson and Doubet Family
- Ursuline Sisters of Cleveland in honor of Sister Anne Wambach
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- Doyle Kennedy in honor of Therese T. Walter
- Larese Floral Design
- Brugger Funeral Homes and Crematory
- 5 Big Bees
- Margaret Kloecker in memory of Sister Maureen Tobin
- TBaer Wealth Management
- Housing Authority of the City of Erie
- Steve and Kathy Danch
- Mayor Joe Schember in honor of his mother, Helen
- Marcia and Bob Allshouse
- Panache Salon and Spa
- Knights of St. George
- Allegheny Beverage Company
- Kathy and Dan Dahlkemper
- Neil and Marge Himber in honor of Sister Anne Wambach
- Signs Now

Donated Prizes and Other Gifts:

From golf season to Christmas season

Give the gift of love, be a part of the Benedictine Sisters’ Alternative Gift-Giving Program. An alternative gift to the Benedictine Sisters of Erie in honor, celebration, or in memory of a friend or loved one will help you to put more meaning into your gift giving.

Why an alternative gift?
- You don’t have to go to the store
- You can buy it online from the safety of your home
- It is a meaningful gift
- It impacts hundreds of people
- It is appreciated by both the donor and recipient
- It is easy
- It is one-size-fits-all
- It eliminates gift wrapping

We will send a card to the person, or family of the person, in whose name you give the gift. The card does not include the amount of your gift.

Save the Date
2021 Tournament
Monday, Aug. 16
Dear Friends,

“O come, O Bright and Morning Star, and bring us comfort from afar! Dispel the shadows of the night and turn our darkness into light.”

How many times do you think we have sung these words? Like me you’ve most probably been singing them for years but now, during the coronavirus pandemic, they have taken on a new and profound meaning. It’s like hearing the hauntingly beautiful melody and lyrics of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” for the first time. They are words of great comfort, telling us that out of the darkness of fear and isolation comes the hope and light of Christmas as we celebrate the coming of Jesus.

They remind me that my friends, this Benedictine community, of which I’m an oblate, and you, our supporters, keep me connected to the hope and the light within us all. You bring the light of Christmas to others, whether it’s a child learning a musical instrument, a volunteer collecting clothes and toys for needy children, someone learning how to write a résumé, or one of our elder sisters connecting with a pupil from long ago. It’s through these very ordinary lives and the actions of the people around me that the darkness is turned into light.

Won’t you please consider a financial gift to the Benedictine Sisters so that together we can bring light to the poor and marginalized? Every gift is important and every gift helps no matter how large or how small. We are all part of a common spirit that dreams of a human race where everyone has the right and opportunity to live the Christmas message of hope and peace, whether born in a manger or in a mansion.

Be a part of bringing this dream to life by adding the Benedictine Sisters to your Christmas list.

**Be a part of our Annual Giving Program** and commit to a yearly gift to support the mission and ministry of the sisters. This will enable the community to respond to unforeseen circumstances and provide help where it is needed most. This can be a one-time gift or you can choose to make a recurring gift throughout the year by joining our **Monthly Companions Program** which is an easy and convenient way to give because your gifts will be charged automatically to your credit or debit card each month. You can also arrange for your gift to be sent to us directly from your bank and cost-effective for both you, the donor, and for generosity. You don’t have to write a check and remember to charge your gift each month. It’s also we can count on.

You will truly be a part of our Christmas celebration. You don’t have to include a financial gift when you return the star, but if you can, we are grateful.

**To send your Christmas gift to the sisters**, use the remittance envelope in this magazine, or go to [eriebenedictines.org](http://eriebenedictines.org) and click **DONATE**.

Thank you for believing in the real spirit and miracle of Christmas,

*Jo Clarke, Oblate*

Director of Development Programs and Outreach
After 19 years of organizing, convening, writing, mailing, energizing, calling, and much more, Ann Comstock, ’64, St. Benedict Academy Alumnae Association Coordinator, is pulling back to allow the “younger girls who know all the new technology” to take the lead. SBA Alumnae Association board president Darlene Kerstetter, ’82, and board member Valerie Purzycki, ’88, will take the helm. “We’re grateful to Ann for her many years of service,” said Darlene, who has been on the board for 10 years. “And we’re looking forward to her continued support.” Ann will remain on the board and continue serving as treasurer.

Leadership change

Let us pray for our SBA alumnae who have passed into eternity—

Helen Heil Kiehlmeier ’46
Audrey Jersey Wilson ’49
Theresa Kuzma Taft ’52
Evelyn Marie Dobrzynski ’54
Dorothy Rose Rutkowski Dahl ’54
Mary Ann Rogers Hedderick ’55
Patricia J Krauchen Mezzacapo ’56
Mary Anne Kaczenski Kleiner ’56
Barbara Anne Becker ’60
Patricia Alice Cackowski Kirk ’61
Judith A Schaaf Bentley ’61
Ruth A Page ’62
Marilyn Wisinski Eckley ’64
Rosemary Benim Winschel ’66
Christine Wisniewski Rudolph ’67
Rosemary T Trott Allgeier

Class of ’76 teachers...

Sister Mary Lou Kownacki
“Here’s to standing up for the poor and powerless, Jane (Earll). And you have done that and more. As a strong woman leader with ideas, convictions, and principles you stood up and were counted. You made your voice heard and forged the way for other women to follow. You make the entire SBA family proud.”

Sister Mary Hoffman
“Yes, Mary Beth (Cermak), I remember you always chose the advanced math and science courses. Your attention to detail prepared you well for the outstanding profession you have now chosen. Congratulations.”

Sister Dorothy Stoner
“Darlene (Webb Feeney) has always had an earnest desire to make life better for others. Compassion, a sense of justice, faithfulness, integrity speak of who she is and what she has offered all of us. I’m proud of her!”

Sister Pat Lupo
“SBA was my first time teaching in an all-girls school and I loved it in the classroom and on the basketball floor. Seeing these young women mature over four years and become committed women in our community has been a great reward!”

Sister Rosanne Loneck
“It warms my heart and touches my soul when I hear about or meet an SBA alumna and learn where life has taken her. Raising and providing for a family is no easy task, and passing on skills, knowledge, and values learned at St. Benedict Academy anchors another generation.”

Sister Phyllis Schleicher
“Jane (Earll) was and continues to be a model SBA’er. She loved learning, always seeking to study more, even if it meant speaking in French!”

... and students remember
I have raised a pediatric RN, a mechanical engineer, an educator and an ICU mobility technician,” said Cindy Rettger, wife of 41 years, mom to four children and grandmother (or Busia, Polish for grandma) to five. “My proudest accomplishment is my family.”

For the past 35 years Cindy has made a career of making and decorating cakes, attributing this passion to Sister Rosanne Loneck, in an inter-term class. Her other enduring SBA influence was Mrs. Lucille Powers who instilled in her a love for sewing. “I have made several outfits for my family over the years.”

“Another thing for which I will be forever grateful to SBA is my circle of friends. I am still close to several of these dear people. In fact, a group of four of us have been going away for a “girls weekend” every summer for several years. We come together from three states, even during this year’s pandemic, as we decided to appreciate our own hometown,” said Cindy.

After a 25-year career as a teacher and high school basketball coach, Darlene Webb Feeney’s colleagues encouraged her to run for School Board Director for the School District of the City of Erie. She did and since December 2017 has served as a leader and representative of the community, and as an advocate for the students and the school district.

“I so admire our Benedictine sisters! They instilled in me a strong faith and a desire to advocate for social justice. I have maintained a close relationship with Sister Pat Lupo. Her work as an environmental leader inspired me to become a Master Gardener. Sister Dorothy Stoner has also been a great mentor and inspired me to use my voice to advocate for women and the poor and underserved,” said Darlene, who has a Master of Arts degree in Special Education.

Participating in Forensics (debate and extemporaneous speaking) and Student Government at SBA, developed skills Darlene utilizes often as a School Board director. Playing and coaching basketball taught her how to be a team player, another skill necessary when working on a board.

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“Although I never thought I would be in politics, my God saw something different for me,” said Susan Pacinelli DiVecchio. Susan was appointed City Treasurer by Erie City Council in 2005 and then ran for the position in 2006 and won. She won reelection every four years until she retired in January 2020.

“What I really liked about this job was helping people in any way I could, if they needed information about city services. Even while campaigning I found that people just want to be heard and tell you about themselves,” said Susan.

“SBA has always been a part of me. My teachers taught me things I remember to this day, including Mrs. Bedford’s needlepoint class. The girls from my class will always mean so much to me even though we do not see each other too often. They will always have a special place in my heart,” she reminisced.

Diane Adkins Tobin

Diane Adkins Tobin is happy to be a proud alum of SBA. She was elected associate judge for the Circuit Court for Harford County, MD, in November 2018, and three of her ’76 SBA classmates attended her investiture in January 2019.

“I always wanted to be an attorney because that is a good way to help people who are undergoing a crisis in their lives. After I began practicing law, I realized that I wanted to be a judge. I defeated three male candidates to win my seat, and am the first woman in the history of this county to defeat a sitting judge in an election,” she told us. Diane’s law degree is from American University in Washington, DC, and she spent her entire legal career in the courtroom. As a prosecutor, she specialized in prosecuting people who commit crimes against children and vulnerable adults.

“I credit the education I received at SBA for giving me the confidence to believe in myself and my abilities. This confidence carried me throughout my education and my legal career.”

Jane Earll

Jane Earll is an attorney and served four terms as a member of the Pennsylvania State Senate (1996-2012). “I fell into the political arena by an opportunity presenting itself….I was recruited to run for the State Senate, and ultimately decided that some of the same people were holding elective office in Erie County since I was a young girl. It was time for a change. New leaders needed to step forward to serve and I thought, ‘Well, why not me?!’”

“I participated in SBA Student Government and was class president. So in hindsight, that was the beginning of my political career, I guess!”

From St. Ben’s, Jane remembers in particular Sister Phyllis Schleicher, Mr. Paul Kovacs, and Sister Mary Lou Kownacki. “Sister Mary Lou had us make placards and form picket lines to support Cesar Chavez and the National Farm Workers. I didn’t appreciate it at the time, but I now believe that exercise instilled in me a belief that we all have a responsibility to do things outside of our own personal wants and desires. We need to be cognizant of the issues impacting a larger community,” she said.
Not a trace of the midnight snowfall when Old Monk pulls open her shutters. Today she hangs a new calendar in her cell and prepares a notebook for this year’s musings, yesterday’s insights already gathering dust on the bookshelf. Last night’s revelry awaits the street cleaner—broken bottles, fast food wrappings, empty plastic bags—a stray dog sniffs and moves on.

I wrote this one New Year’s Day as I was going through my ritual of preparing a new journal. I looked out the window and saw remnants of the midnight celebration. I put the past year’s journal on the bookshelf and saw lines of old journals filled with dust. It suddenly seemed so futile to try to capture the moment that passes, to try to collect memories on bookshelves. And yet, what else do we have that makes sense of our appearance here, now? French filmmaker Agnes Varda reminds us, “While I live, I remember.” Indeed.

—Mary Lou Kownacki, OSB from Old Monk, available as a Kindle ebook

Blessings for 2021