



Where Hope Is

Stories of Benedictine Influence

*An original interview-based theater production
by playwright Jenn Bokoch Gillett*

June 30, 2024

H. O. Hirt Auditorium, Blasco Memorial Library

*Produced by the Benedictine Sisters of Erie
Erie, Pennsylvania*



June 30, 2024

Dear Friends,

Where Hope Is: Stories of Benedictine Influence is a new interview-based theater production by playwright Jenn Bokoch Gillett. The play reflects a snapshot-in-time—1960s to the 1980s—of the influence of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie. Jenn created it from a dozen conversations selected from more than 60 interviews she conducted with Saint Benedict Academy (SBA) alumnae, Benedictine sisters, and a handful of others whose lives were shaped and are still being shaped by the sisters.

The story is one of spirituality, community, and steadfastness in facing questions of meaning, faith, and gospel accountability that challenged thinking and instilled young women with a sense of their own worth and power. It’s a story of prophetic voices and passionate commitment to those denied a place at any table. It’s a women’s story of ongoing potential for new generations seeking connection and meaning today.

The stories that the actors will tell on stage will be combined with short, projected, video clips of actual interviews in the creative telling of this women’s story.

Jenn is a documentary theater-maker residing in New York. Her mother and her aunt were SBA graduates, and she grew up hearing intriguing stories about their high school years—which is the connection, the motivation, and the inspiration that drew her to create this new work. Director Ashley Renee Thaxton-Stevenson and five actors have accompanied Jenn from New York to present *Where Hope Is*.

While only a limited number of voices can be realistically shared in a time-bound presentation, an interview archive will be available online at eriebenedictines.org.



Linda Romey, OSB
Coordinator of Communications and Development
Benedictine Sisters of Erie

Where Hope Is:

Stories of Benedictine Influence

Created by Jenn Bokoch Gillett

Directed by Ashley Thaxton-Stevenson

Performed by

Taylor Beckman

Qianna Brooks

Jenn Bokoch Gillett

Lucy Medeiros

Katy Shafer

Amanda Vincenti



We remember two alumnae who passed from this life to the next between the time Jenn interviewed them and this performance. Ann’s voice will be heard on stage tonight. We cherish their memory and we give thanks for their time with us.

Grace Piorkowski Earl, Class of 1959

Ann Michalski, Class of 1981

Production Team:

Stage Manager: Rachel Ahrens

Projection Design: Ashley Thaxton-Stevenson

Video Editing: John Conant

Line Producer: Michelle Scully

Fundraising: Michelle Basista, CFRE

Project Coordinator: Linda Romey, OSB

Executive Producer:

Benedictine Sisters of Erie

Sister Stephanie Schmidt, OSB, Prioress

6101 East Lake Road, Erie, PA, 16511

eriebenedictines.org

Music: *Te Deum Chants of Praise*, hymns and canticles by Mary David Callahan, OSB. Sung by the Benedictine Sisters of Erie.

Special Thanks:

- Sarah Misch, Lydia Funke, Julia Garcia-Combs, and Averil Carr
- Theresa Zoky, OSB, Archivist, Benedictine Sisters of Erie
- SBA Alumnae Association Board of Directors, co-chairs Darlene Harkness Kerstetter, '82, and Valerie Joint Purzycki, '88, and the 1,850 members of the SBA Alumnae Association

Where Hope Is was developed with support from:

Verbatim Performance Lab, NYU

BAX/Brooklyn Arts Exchange Parent Artist Space Grant

Subcircle Residency, Biddeford, Maine

Koch Foundation, Gainesville, Florida

An anonymous Foundation

Artist's Note

Thank you everyone for attending this performance. It has been a work in progress for more than two years, and bringing it to fruition with this reading is a huge source of joy.

I have spent a lot of time thinking about what to put in this playwright's note. Some of what I want to share is practical information. To clarify, I call myself the playwright because I created this piece, but none of these words are my own. Everything you will hear is taken verbatim from interviews with the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, Saint Benedict Academy alumnae, and others who volunteer, pray, and work within the Benedictine circle. It has been a huge privilege to be on the receiving end of these stories. If you contributed an interview to this project, even if your words do not appear verbatim in the script, know that you were a massive part of its development. Learning about everyone's experience with the Benedictine community taught me so much, and painted a picture of the past, and also illuminated what the future may hold.

There were so many big picture takeaways for me—perhaps the biggest one was that it is possible to remain an individual within a group. It is possible to support a unified vision while still being given the freedom to grow and make choices of one's own. To me, this spoke of a community that has a comfort and strength that seems ideal, but also is extremely rare.

I would also like to share a personal take away. Much of my family is from Erie, Pennsylvania, and many of them are with us today. I am honored to share the work with all of you, and especially with my family. My mother, Janet Elaine Nicolia Bokoch, '72, and my aunt, Maryann Nicolia Kuta, '67, attended Saint Benedict Academy. I heard stories about the sisters and their work within and without the school over the years. Mom and Aunt Maryann also spoke of a place with a unified vision, but that allowed them to make their own choices. I believe this set a foundation for much of my mother's life, and that knowledge was a gift she and my father passed on to me.

I am sad to say that my mother and my aunt have both recently passed on. However, I found joy discovering that they live on in the hearts and minds of many people. In several interviews, people kindly said to me that they remember the Nicolia sisters. And I always felt a glow. This reminded me again of the great power of storytelling. I would like to thank all our participants again, for sharing that power with me. And thank you all for being here today, so we can share that together. I am honored and humbled to be the channel for these memories.



Janet Nicolia Bokoch, SBA Girl,
Class of 1972



Acting Ensemble

Sister Annette, OSB – Read by Taylor Beckman

Ann – Read by Katy Shafer

Donna – Read by Amanda Vincenti

Judith – Read by Lucy Medeiros

Leah – Read by Jenn Bokoch Gillett

Virginia – Read by Qianna Brooks

Sister Angela Ann, MSHS – Read by all



Thank you to the acting ensemble who generously offered an acting workshop to children at the Benedictine Sisters' Inner-City Neighborhood Art House while they were in Erie.

Meet the Cast and Crew

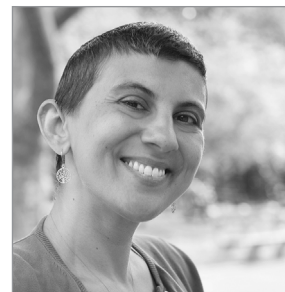
Taylor Beckman (Sister Annette), (she/her), is thrilled to be a part of *Where Hope Is* and to be working with this incredible



bunch of individuals. Select productions: *Into the Woods* (Little Red/The Heights Players), *An Empowered Woman* (Jan/Gallery Players), and multiple productions with Pickles Theatre Company, a Theatre in Education touring troupe in Belgium/France. To pay the rent, Taylor is a Drama Therapist specializing in eating disorder recovery. She earned her Bachelor's in Theatre and Psychology at Muhlenberg College and her Master's in Drama

Therapy from New York University. Taylor lives in Brooklyn, New York, where she can be seen riding her bike, baking delicious treats, or reading 19th century Brit Lit.

Jenn Bokoch Gillett (Playwright; Leah), (she/her), is a playwright,



performer, educator, and storyteller. She has devoted her career to creating interview-based theater featuring underrepresented voices, and utilizing various mediums such as puppetry, audio recordings, movement, and music. Her goal is to place real words, experiences, and stories onstage, both so that audiences can reflect upon them, and so that real people can see and hear themselves in a script. Jenn's plays have been performed in New York and Los Angeles, with the support of

organizations such as Dixon Place, The Center at West Park, Brooklyn Arts Exchange, and The Omega Women's Leadership Center. In addition to playwriting, she currently works as the Arts Partnership Manager at Marquis Studios in Brooklyn. Her greatest ongoing gig is that of being a Mom to her son Lawrence Matteo, age five. Jenn is proud to hold an M.A. in Educational Theatre from NYU, and draws from this experience to elevate voices from the community in her theater praxis. Jenn created *Where Hope Is* for many people, but especially for her Mom, Janet, and her Aunt Maryann. More at jennygillett.com.

Qianna Brooks (Virginia), (she/her), is a multi-hyphenate: actor, life coach, social entrepreneur and travel enthusiast. She is over the moon to be part of the production of *Where Hope Is*. Her credits include *The Funeral* at Chain Theatre, *The Golden Cockerel* with American Ballet Theatre and *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike* and the premiere of Doug Devita's *Nell Dash*, both at The Heights Players. "Ubuntu – I am a person through other people. My humanity is tied to yours." —Zulu Proverb



Lucy Medeiros (Judith), (she/her), is thrilled to be a part of *Where Hope Is*. She has both a bachelor's and a master's degree in Educational Theatre from NYU, and is particularly passionate about new works and Theater for Young Adults. In addition to her work as a performer, Lucy has worked in a variety of summer camp and educational settings helping to empower youth through storytelling. She is currently the Drama Subject Expert Teacher at BASIS Independent Manhattan's Upper School. When not teaching or performing, Lucy can be found crocheting, reading, and spending time with her wonderful friends and family.



Katy Shafer (Ann), (she/her), is so excited to be in the production of *Where Hope Is*! She is a NYC-based actor whose past credits include: *Alt-Hamlet* (Charlotte), *Julius Caesar* (Classical Studio), *Romeo and Juliet* (NSB), and *Haunted* (Summerstock Austin). She is a graduate of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts where she studied musical theatre and Shakespeare. When she is not performing, she is tutoring high school students in math and prepping for a half marathon in August. Thank you to her friends and family for all the constant support and love. @katyshafer



Ashley Thaxton-Stevenson (Director), (she/her), is a theatre maker and educator, raised in the foothills of Southern California, with British, Black, and Korean ancestors. She specializes in new play development, theater for young audiences, and contemporary applications of Shakespeare. As an educator, Ashley supports youth, emerging artists, and arts organizations to deepen. Ashley is a member of the Verbatim Performance Lab's Core Acting Ensemble, an Ensemble Member with Spellbound Theater, and is on the faculty of BAX/ Brooklyn Arts Exchange, Fiasco Theater, and NYU's Program in Educational Theatre. She holds a BA from NYU's Gallatin School of Individualized Study and an MFA in Acting from Brooklyn College. When she's not making theatre, she is reading novels, building spreadsheets, and having disco dance parties with her toddler and spouse. Learn more: art-s.co.



Amanda Vincenti's (Donna), (she/her), passion (among lesser passions including tea, horses, and sushi) is discovering how theatre can put good into the world. That pursuit currently means examining the art from multiple perspectives, including performance (favorite roles include Sally Bowles, *Cabaret*; Elmire, *Tartuffe*; Emilie, *The Moors*; Gwendolen, *The Importance of Being Earnest*) as well as writing, research, education, and more. Trained in Educational Theatre, Amanda is especially interested in making theatre universally accessible and unpacking the impact of a non-male gaze (work that includes teaching voice lessons, writing and developing new plays, and daydreaming about starting a theatre company with a distinct community-engaged mission). More at www.amandavincenti.com.



Rachel Ahrens (Stage Manager), (she/her), is a college junior studying Fashion Merchandising and Creative Writing. While she participated in ten productions throughout her time in high school, this is her first time behind the scenes. She is excited to be returning to theater as a college student, and is honored to be a part of such a unique production. During the summer she can be found going to the beach, reading outside, or writing for her internship.





**A Prayer for Those Who
Dwell in a Monastery of the Heart**
by Joan Chittister, OSB



“Enable us to grow in the Benedictine spirit
in ways that make us
compassionate co-creators of a world in process,
creative keepers of the human community,
loving listeners to the heartbeat of the world,
caring siblings to its wounded
and bringers of peace to a world in distress.”

**Join our online monastery
and global community
to deepen your spiritual life.**



Joan Chittister

The Monastic Way
A FREE monthly publication

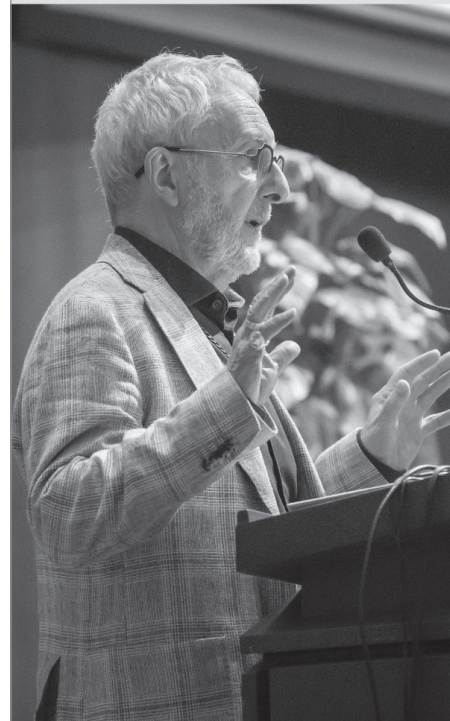
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The Diocese of Erie is grateful to the **Benedictine Sisters of Erie** for their deep commitment to the people of our region. The impact of your faith, hard work, generosity and vision reverberates through our community.

Congratulations
on the premier of *Where Hope Is: Stories of Benedictine Influence!*



DIOCESE of ERIE
Sharing the Catholic faith in northwest Pennsylvania



From Debra Anderson Spears Class of 1974
In memory of my friend Susan Ayers Kedzior, 1974.
We had great times!



Edna Haller Lynch '28
SBA—a great experience!
Judy Lynch Allison '61



Kathleen Anysz from the SBA Class of 1969
The 1969 SBA Class celebrates the Benedictine spirit and
our 55th Year Class Reunion



Cathe Piorkowski Hedderick - 1976

Grace Piorkowski Earl - 1959

Forever Cherished, Forever Missed



I remember the day I received my St. Ben's uniform. I put it on, went outside and danced in the front yard. I was so pleased! I wore it proudly for the next four years. Last October I attended my 50th reunion. Seeing familiar faces, recognizing voices, singing our alma mater — lasting memories forever — treasures. Thank You, SBA.
Diane Becker Borenstein, '73



Saint Benedict Academy alumnae, Benedictine sisters, and others who were interviewed by Jenn for this project are listed here in alphabetical order by first name. Those marked with an * represent interviews included in the performance.

Alumnae

*Sister Angela Ann Zukowski, MSHS, D.Min, Class of 1963
*Ann Michalski, Class of 1981 (deceased)
Beth Dzuricky, Class of 1978
Betsy (Elisabeth Ann) Roebach Monsalve, RN, MS, Class of 1966
Beverly Smith-Slowski, Class of 1956
Carole Schleicher Plummer, Class of 1980
Claire Lukawski Felong, Class of 1970
*Donna Sowieralski Heaps, Class of 1973
Elissa "Lissa" Scalise Powell, Certified Genealogist, Class of 1973
Grace Piorkowski Earl, Class of 1959 (deceased)
Jane Pearson Connolly, Class of 1969
Jane Posway Miller, Class of 1973
Janet Wojtalik, Class of 1971
Janice White Waldemarson, Class of 1967
Jeanette Schultz Lewis, Class of 1973
*Judith (Judy) Lorei, Class of 1978
Judy Lynch Allison, Class of 1961
Karen Norton Groucutt, Class of 1972
Karen Villa Schweinfurth, Realtor, Class of 1967
Kathleen A. Kutz, Class of 1965
Kathleen Belczyk Burik, Class of 1977
Kimberly Rinke Sullivan, Class of 1976
*Leah (Cecilia) Popp, Class of 1963
Lisa Manendo, Class of 1974
Marilyn Bowers, Class of 1965
Marilyn McEnery, Class of 1966
Mary Beth Pilewski Paul, Class of 1972

Mary Hoffman, Class of 1970
Mary Dreisbach Olowin, Class of 1966
Marybeth Whitby Veshecco, Class of 1973
Maureen Moore Dodd, RN, BSN, MS, JD, Class of 1966
Renee A. Theobald Kloecker, Class of 1956
Rita Bartnik Maimbourg, Class of 1974
Rosemary Marz Niebauer, Class of 1972
Sharon Fay, Class of 1984
Shelia Warner, Class of 1973
Sue (Marcella) Andrews Zill, Class of 1965
Sue Skrypczak Chase, Class of 1982
Dr. Veronica Vitelli Martin, DNP, RN, CRRN, NE-BC, Class of 1966
*Virginia (Ginny) Glenn Flowers, Class of 1966

Sisters, including sister alumnae, and others

Anne McCarthy, OSB
*Annette Marshall, OSB, Class of 1961
*Barbara Roseborogh, Oblate
*Carolyn Gorny-Kopkowski, OSB, Class of 1958
Joan Chittister, OSB, Class of 1954
*Katie Gordon, Pax Priory Community
Margaret Ann Pilewski, OSB, Class of 1965
*Mary Ellen Plumb, OSB, Class of 1971
*Pat Lupo, OSB, Class of 1961
Patricia McGreevy, OSB
*Stephanie Schmidt, OSB
*Valerie Luckey, OSB
Theresa Zoky, OSB
Rep. Bob Merski
Mayor Joseph Schember



With Gratitude from the SBA Class of 1967



With gratitude for all the Erie Benedictines do for our Erie community. — Mary Hembrow Snyder



Lisa Manendo, Class of 1974.
Thank you SBA for wonderful memories.



Lackovic Family Graduates
Judy and Linda, 1964
Mary and Susan, 1969
Thank you SBA!



A simple gratitude tribute for *A Little Rule for Beginners*.
It has deepened the heart connection among many.



SISTERS OF
ST. JOSEPH
OF NORTHWESTERN
PENNSYLVANIA

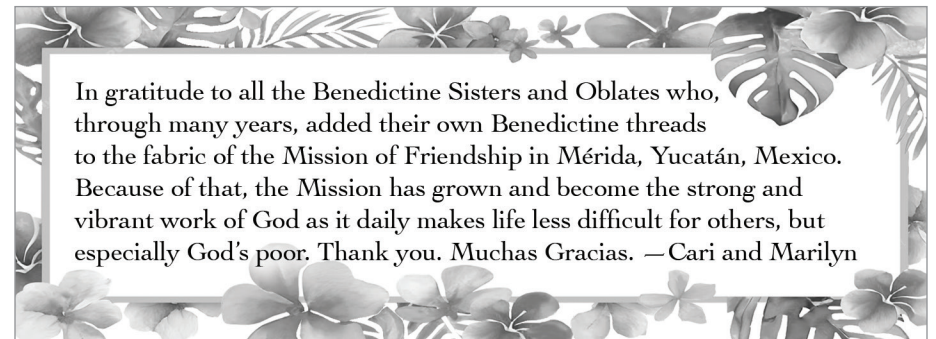


Gratitude for time spent with the Benedictine Sisters.
Barbara Roseborough, mom
Serena Roseborough Heberle
Class of '90, daughter
Paula Roseborough Medina
Class of '89, daughter



“A good teacher can inspire hope, ignite the imagination, and instill a love of learning.”

*With fond memories of SBA and their excellent faculty.
Pat Kowalski Colvin '71*



In gratitude to all the Benedictine Sisters and Oblates who, through many years, added their own Benedictine threads to the fabric of the Mission of Friendship in Mérida, Yucatán, Mexico. Because of that, the Mission has grown and become the strong and vibrant work of God as it daily makes life less difficult for others, but especially God's poor. Thank you. Muchas Gracias. — Cari and Marilyn

Who the Benedictine Sisters of Erie are.

Since 1856 the Benedictine Sisters of Erie have stood on the edge of tomorrow creating possibility in Erie. They are a monastic community of 68 women who follow the 1,500-year-old wisdom tradition known as *The Rule of Benedict*. As monastics, their main ministry is prayer and community; to this day the sisters and their guests gather three times a day in the monastery chapel at Mount Saint Benedict Monastery on East Lake Road for prayer. Their good work in the city of Erie and beyond has always been an outpouring of their prayer and life in community.

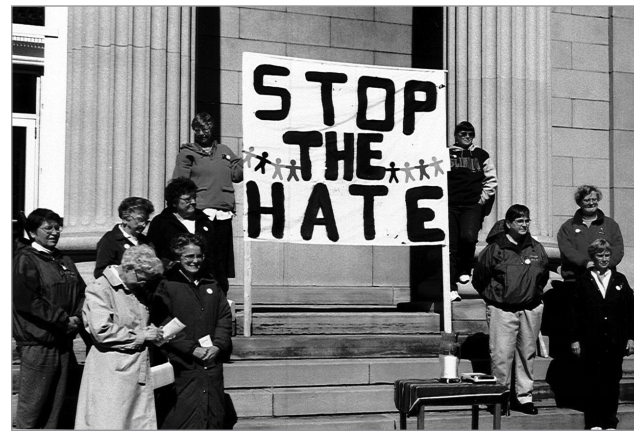
Their outreach, in addition to 120 years of educating young women at Saint Benedict Academy, included teaching throughout the Diocese of Erie until the 1980s. Beginning in the 1960s they began establishing more diverse ministries to serve other needs in the city. Their current good works include Emmaus Ministries, St. Benedict Child Development Center, St. Benedict Education Center, Benetwood Apartments, Inner-City Neighborhood Art House, Benetvision Publications, and Monasteries of the Heart. Benedictines for Peace and Care for the Earth are two additional works of the community. There are also sisters who work in other ministries besides those that are run by the community. What is essential is that in whatever ministry a sister is engaged, she lives out the Benedictine Sisters' 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."



Visionary Benedictine leadership throughout the community's history shaped those who today shape tomorrow. In the 1950s, before Vatican II opened the door to the future, the Benedictine sisters were already on the threshold. They made conscious decisions to see the movement of the Spirit in the world, studying emerging thinkers, theologians, and liturgists, for example, to deepen their Benedictine commitment. They offered an academically rigorous education, including advanced science, to young women. They brought in prophets of the day such as Dorothy Day, pictured here in the Saint Benedict Academy foyer, to address and inspire sisters and students.

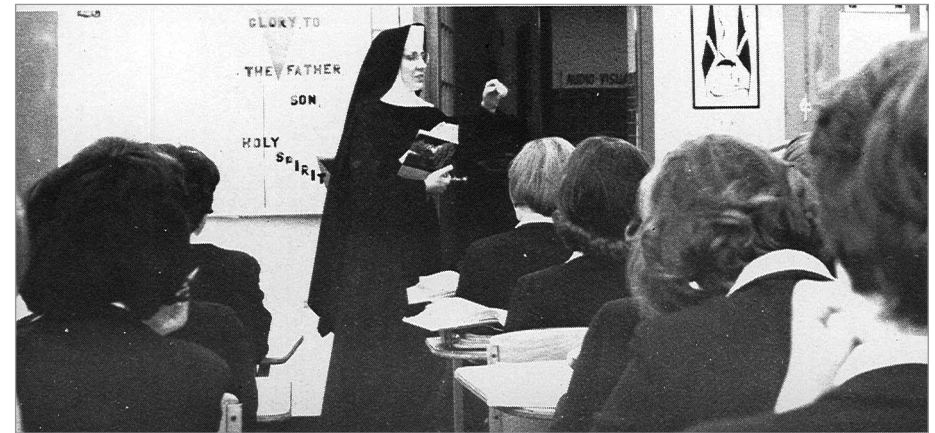
The 1960s-1980s, the decades recalled in *Where Hope Is*, reflect powerful, turbulent times in both church and state. These years played a significant role in shaping who the Benedictine Sisters are today as well as shaping the lives of the young women at SBA. Those years encompass the era of anti-war protests,

and social sin. The Benedictine Sisters were there with all those who were speaking up and speaking out, joining in prayer and working for the reign of God. Their story is one of spirituality, community, and steadfastness that has raised questions and empowered others. It's a story of prophetic voices, love for all God's creation, and passionate commitment to justice for those denied a place at the table. It's a women's story of ongoing potential for new generations seeking spirituality, connection, and meaning today.



boycotts in support of migrant farm workers, civil rights, and the women's movement. They saw the beginning of gender awareness, the dawning recognition of environmental destruction, and awareness of structural

and social sin. The Benedictine Sisters were there with all those who were speaking up and speaking out, joining in prayer and working for the reign of God. Their story is one of spirituality, community, and steadfastness that has raised questions and empowered others. It's a story of prophetic voices, love for all God's creation, and passionate commitment to justice for those denied a place at the table. It's a women's story of ongoing potential for new generations seeking spirituality, connection, and meaning today.



Why this collaboration on *Where Hope Is*.

Women's stories are largely missing from recorded history—it is only recently that women have become the authors of their own story and that efforts are being made to recover women's perspective on history, to tell the experience of women in women's voices. This project is one such effort to tell a story whose impact continues to reverberate in Erie and beyond.

The more than 60 recorded interviews that Jenn conducted for this project will contribute to a communal memoir of women's self-discovery and

empowerment in the form of an online archive. Through these interviews the project explores the Benedictine influence and impact in the city of Erie over generations.

The Saint Benedict

Academy story merits retelling as witness to the power of welcoming young women into the lived context of a strong women's community unafraid of facing and shaping the future. By 1988, after 120 years in operation, demographic shifts, the evolution of religious life, and increasing costs were factors that caused the sisters to close SBA. Shortly thereafter it became obvious that the community and commitment the sisters cultivated in their students wasn't building-bound and the SBA Alumnae Association came to life. Today, 35 years after the school closed, decades-long alumnae friendships continue. The Alumnae Association supports class reunions every year, plans events, offers scholarships for Catholic education, and organizes fundraisers that support Benedictine good works.

The sheer volume of 120 years of well-educated, conscientious, and

self-confident SBA graduates makes this women's story integral to Erie's history. Character-building was an inherent part of the SBA experience. So was the unqualified value of women, the importance of creating a strong community, and a commitment to



the greater good. SBA graduates, formed in these values, impacted the city's work force, classrooms and PTAs, parishes, organizations, and generations of families. Decades later, they continue to influence their world.

The Benedictine Sisters of Erie continue to find creative ways to invite people into life-changing, intergenerational relationships. In remembering the stories of how Benedictine women shaped the past and evolved into the present, the sisters can foster emerging efforts to shape character, build community, and support young persons, guiding them in the Benedictine wisdom tradition. The sisters continue to support people of all ages as they seek spirituality, community, and work for the common good today.



Benedictine Peacemakers (see next page) is a new lived experience set to launch this fall. It is geared toward young women between 22 and 30 years old to lead them through a process of self-discovery to self-gift, to a life of meaning and good work. This year-long cohort-based program is designed to form strong relationships and commitment to community, creating a network of alumnae capable of changing the world through living the Benedictine way in whatever vocation they choose, wherever they live. Other ways to connect



with Benedictine spirituality are the Benedicta Riepp Monastic Experience Program, Benedictine Oblates, and Monasteries of the Heart. Find information about these opportunities at eriebenedictines.org.





Benedictine Peacemakers

A Year-Long Monastic Immersion

June 2025- June 2026 • Erie, PA

“The commitment to be peace, to speak peace, to create peace wherever you go is the call of monastic peacemakers.”

-Joan Chittister, OSB // Benedictine Sisters of Erie

Since 1856 the Benedictine Sisters of Erie have been a life-changing presence in the Erie area. While the methods for offering Benedictine formation and spirituality have changed, the Benedictine wisdom tradition remains strong. This fall the community is launching a new way to share that tradition of developing whole and healthy relationships with self, others, and God in a year-long monastic immersion program for young women. **Read more at eriebenedictines.org/peacemakers.**

Benedicta Riepp Monastic Experience Program

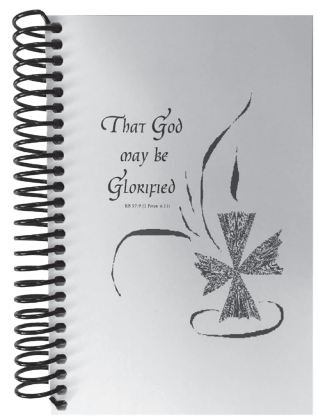
—for women of all ages seeking deeper meaning.



Throughout history travelers and pilgrims have travelled to monasteries to refresh and revitalize. Some stayed but most moved on, returning to lives “in the world,” renewed by Benedictine spirituality and charged with transforming their local communities, working to create a more just, equitable and sustainable world. No monastery is without guests and Mount Saint Benedict Monastery is no exception.

The Benedicta Riepp Monastic Experience Program is a formal way to experience living in a monastic community. It is for women of all ages desiring to deepen their spirituality and commitment to living the Gospel. Those in the program live at the monastery for six to twelve months and join the community for prayer, work, monastic formation, and other events.

Read more at eriebenedictines.org/seek-meaning.



**Join your voice with ours
in monastic prayer:
*That God May Be Glorified.***

Join in prayer with 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. Available through Benetvision, a ministry of the Benedictine Sisters: eriebenedictines.org/loh



St. Benedict's
St. Benedict's
we'll always
hail thy halls;
We'll always come
to thee again
when
Alma Mater calls...

St. Benedict Academy Alumnae Association

eriebenedictines.org/good-work/sba-alum

With gratitude for the Benedictine Sisters who for 120 years challenged thinking and instilled young women at SBA with a sense of their own worth and power.

With gratitude for the thousands of graduates who took their Benedictine formation into the families they began, into workplaces, parishes, schools, and everywhere they lived, worked, and volunteered. Their influence made a difference in the lives of all those around them, especially their families. Those whom they influenced in turn had an impact on others. To this day the Benedictine charism lives on.

