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St. Benedict Academy  
Alumnae Association  
Newsletter  
Winter 2022

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*"We'll always come to thee again, when alma mater calls."*

Have an address change? Story to share? Idea to highlight your class in the newsletter? Email:

[sbaalum@eriebenedictines.org](mailto:sbaalum@eriebenedictines.org)

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

Geraldine L Meahl Baron '43  
Pauline L Siegel Chimenti '47  
Kathryn Ann Kelley Majersky '47  
Jean Marie Conti Stevenson '48  
Joan Tomczak Oldenski '49  
Cecilia A Czulewicz Rutkowski '51  
Veronica Kabasinski Kulesza '52  
Rita Hodubski Kowalik '52  
Nancy Jakubowski Kala '53  
Suzanne Lorei Kania '55  
Ann Marie Malinowski Walters '56  
Patricia M Carroll Scarpino '59  
Sylvia A Brzozowski Schmitt '59  
Shirley A Strohmeyer Buzanowski '63  
Marie Meyer Dallas '65  
Janice A Malinowski Farrell '65  
Patricia Bailey Whitehill '65  
Nancy Lundstrom Barton '68  
Janet Nicolia Bokoch '72  
Debra Ann Chimenti Sciamanda '74

# St. Benedict Academy a legacy of women's empowerment

*St. Benedict Academy, the first school for girls in Erie, educated young women for 120 years until shifting demographics and economic challenges forced the sisters to close the school in 1988. Now, more than 30 years later, the SBA legacy lives on in the 2,666 members of the SBA Alumnae Association and, as you will read in the stories that follow, in individual women whose lives have embodied the legacy of leadership the SBA faculty and staff strove to grow in them, filling their hearts "with higher power and opportunity...."*

## Rene Filipowski, CIH, '77: A leader in global safety

Rene Filipowski wanted to experience life beyond Erie after she graduated from SBA in 1977 and blindly selected (by randomly dropping her finger on a map) Washington, DC, as her destination. She chose The Catholic University of America and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in general biology followed by a Master of Science in cellular biology. Through subsequent chance meetings, encouragements, and promotions Rene eventually became manager of the Designated Agency Safety and Health Official (DASHO) Support Group at Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) headquarters in Washington. After a distinguished career spanning more than 30 years, including 20 years as a Federal employee at the FAA and 10 years as an FAA contractor, Rene retired earlier this year.

"Early on in graduate school, I found that I was gifted at growing cell cultures in vitro, it was second nature to me," she said. That's how she began her career as a director of laboratory operations for a small biomedical company in cell biology. She went from there to a career in industrial hygiene, working with asbestos removal in the late 1980s. Eventually she became one of only about 10,000 board certified industrial

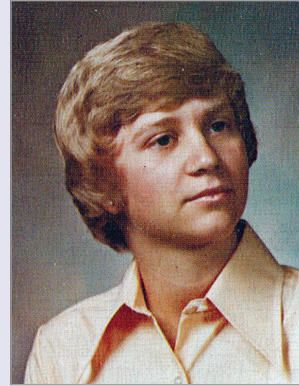


hygienists (CIHs) in the world. In 1991 she began contract work for the FAA.

Her occupational safety and health work put her in places as diverse as coastal areas hit by hurricanes and the Pentagon after 9/11. “Protecting workers on the job was almost a calling for me. I had witnessed a carnival ride worker have a fatal accident and I became determined not to ever have that happen or experience that again. In my career protecting the 45,000 employees who make sure people and goods travel on the safest airspace system in the world, no day was the same and it was NEVER boring. There were many days my SBA principles were practiced—mostly, to LISTEN proved critical.” Rene said.

Now that she has retired, Rene’s leadership skills will more fully benefit the nonprofit Washington Women Outdoors. Rene is the long-serving president of the organization that provides opportunities for women to develop skills and participate in various outdoor activities. “I would like to use my time to develop a leadership program for this group in addition to enjoying and participating in its activities,” she said. One of the activities she particularly enjoys is cycling. “Even if I am doing the same bike route, it’s always different with different people, different weather, so I can always enjoy the moment.”

Sister Mary Grace Hanes, who was the SBA guidance counselor who held the map when Rene dropped her finger in the spot that set the course of her life, wasn’t the only SBA influence that shaped her. “My years at SBA are among my fondest. The friends that I made are still those I keep in touch with today. We had an amazingly talented class. We just celebrated our 45th reunion and the energy felt like we were back in the halls of SBA. The biology training from Mrs. Moczulski and classes in history and global religion have been a big part of my understanding of the world. I have used my French that I studied under Mrs. Antalek and Sister Phyllis Schleicher. Sister Rosanne Loneck gave me an appreciation for different cuisines, which I am grateful for every day. The opportunity to be in a leadership role in student government and Model UN provided a great foundation for applying myself in other leadership positions throughout my life. Mostly, I have the



Rene in a Cote de Rhône (France) vineyard on a recent cycling trip, and her 1977 Scholastic yearbook senior picture.

Christian-ingrained aspiration to ‘do the right thing’ and live in a way that helps make the world a better place,” Rene said. She will continue to be a living example of the legacy of empowering women shaped by their years at St. Benedict Academy.

## Linda Laird Staszewski, '68

### Empowering women through women’s stories

Linda Laird Staszewski '68 is the curator of *20 Lives Ignited: How 20 Women Over 60 are Creating Success on Their Own Terms*. It occurred to her that women her age, over 60 (she is 71), have a lot of wisdom to share. She prayed for guidance and felt God telling her, “Why not YOU?” when she began thinking that someone should compile some of this wisdom. So, she set out to collect amazing stories about even more amazing women and their path toward success.

According to Linda, “Our mission is to inspire girls and women, especially women over 60, as it is never too late and you are never too old to become who you want  
—continued on next page

Left to right, Erie Benedictine Sister Pat Lupo, '61; book curator/author/aging advocate Linda Laird Staszewski, '68; publisher @ Cori Wamsley (Aurora Corialis Publishing, Pittsburgh, PA); and publicist @Kelli Komondor, at the launch of *20 Lives Ignited*. A large crowd gathered at the Erie Art Museum for the event which featured video testimonials from each of the contributors as well as music, food, and drink.

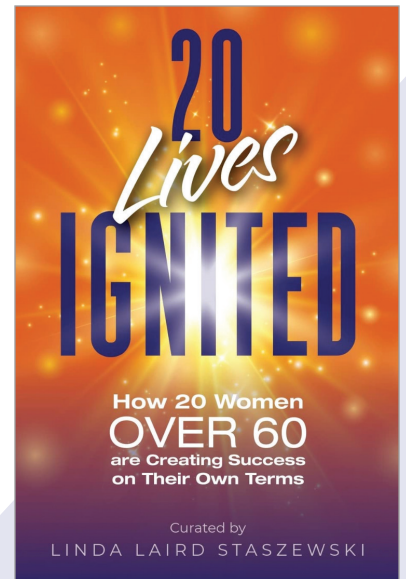


to be. At our age, we have wisdom and experience from decades of living, learning and loving. I mentor others to live their best lives, all glory to God!"

"My years at SBA started me on a path to personal growth, developing skills, and my God-given talents," Linda said. "It was there that I first realized how integral women leaders are to the community and to the world. I was particularly inspired by watching women leaders, including the amazing nuns and teachers, as they brought new approaches to leadership, including empathy, collaboration, and team building. This was evidenced by so many of the nuns and teachers at SBA. One example is Sister Joan Chittister, who is such a strong advocate of justice, peace and equality."

The stories in *20 Lives Ignited* showcase wisdom, insight, and love that are applicable to a woman at any age and stage of life. These 20 women have overcome obstacles in spite of the odds against them and are courageously sharing their stories, setting the world on fire.

The **Class of 1968** will celebrate their 55th reunion June 24, 2023. Please update your contact information: leave a message at 814-452-0020, or email [strongamazingwomen@gmail.com](mailto:strongamazingwomen@gmail.com) or Facebook messenger Linda Laird Staszewski and/or Carol Helminski. This is essential for you to receive reunion information with postal costs rising!



## La hospitalidad benedictina: Benedictine hospitality

Who knew that a phone call in the summer of 1975 would start a cross-cultural relationship that would span decades?

Saint Benedict wrote that monasteries (and by extension schools run by monasteries) are never without guests.

It makes perfect sense, then, that Sister Christine Vladimiroff, who was principal at St. Benedict Academy in the 1970s, would welcome exchange student "guests" to SBA. "Sister Christine called my mother in the summer of 1975 and asked if we'd like to host an exchange student from Mexico," said Kim (Rinke) Sullivan, '76. "Of course, my dad thought a single student would be lonely, so he suggested to Sister Christine that she invite two girls as exchange students, and we'd host them both. Pilar and Eva came that August and that was the beginning of our fabulous connection with our adopted family from Mexico."

For the 1978-79 school year, Ana Elena Santos Lara came to live with Sue and Tom Rinke and their family and attended SBA with Kim's sister, Halle. Fast forward more than 40 years. "Being an exchange student and living with the Rinke family are two of the best things that have happened to me," said Ana Elena on a recent visit to Erie. "We have had a very close relationship, more than friendship, that has meant a lot to me and my family. They are my American family. Years after me, my daughter Ana lived with Kim and her family!" Ana has visited Erie 20 times in the last 44 years. "Who knew that in high school a bond would be made for a lifetime!" said Kim.

Sister Christine lived with the Lara Ramos family in Saltillo, Mexico, for summers and one full year while she earned her doctorate at the Universidad Internacional in Mexico City. "My grandparents, Binda and Atanasio, used to say she was their American daughter," said Ana Elena. Sister Christine died in 2014.

"Benedict's wisdom in encouraging his followers to welcome guests and strangers was certainly taken to heart by the Rinke family and others who hosted and became friends with our exchange students," said Sister Phyllis Schleicher, who taught French and was chair of the Language Department at SBA in the mid-70s. "It's when we get to know the other, the person from another culture, or faith, or economic background that we begin to realize that the differences are far outweighed by our shared humanity. How clearly the long relationship of the Rinkes with their Mexican "daughters" and their families give testimony to this. We need Benedict's wisdom, and the example of the Rinkes, more than ever in our world today where it seems that fear is too often stronger than welcome."

After graduation, Kim became a nurse and worked 18 years at Hamot Hospital followed by 21 years as a school nurse, retiring at the



Halle Rinke VanDamia '79, Ana Elena Santos '79, and Kim Rinke Sullivan '76 during Ana Elena's visit in fall 2022.



Christine Vladimiroff, OSB  
Scholastic Yearbook  
1979

end of 2021. She married her childhood sweetheart, Brian, 39 years ago and they have two grown children, Katie and Taylor. Kim's friendship with several of the girls from her SBA years continues—as the school song says, “friends we never will forget.” Ana is among those Kim counts as a sister as well as friend.

Ana Elena returned to Mexico after her year in Erie and became an English teacher, already teaching while going to college. She studied Human Resources Administration and earned a master's degree in Education. Her career in education included

teaching, English department coordinator, high school vice principal, and academic quality vice principal at a university in Saltillo. She recently retired. Ana Elena married Elías in 1985 and they have three children, Ana, Melisa and Elías.

Although St. Benedict Academy closed in 1988, the SBA Alumnae Association remains strong. Email [sbaalum@eriebenedictines.org](mailto:sbaalum@eriebenedictines.org) to be put on the mailing list to receive information about reunions and special events.

## Class of '67 Reunion



The Class of '67 recently celebrated their 55-year reunion at their annual picnic. We spent hours having fun, playing games, winning baskets, enjoying good food, reminiscing, and catching up with “friends we never can forget.” We shared life stories and struggles, and gave thanks for the many prayers that helped get us through them. Brenda Swartz Pasko said, “One of the best memories to all of us was the sister's bread on Thursday. The sharing of bread is truly what it is all about, even when it never made it home. The sharing of life's struggles was inspiring. We know we are never alone because God is with us and because of our SBA bond, we are all together in prayer for each other.” Next year's picnic will be held on Wednesday, August 9.

## 2022 Scholarship Winners

*The SBA Alumnae Association is pleased to announce that 25 scholarships of \$250 each were awarded to relatives of alumnae who will be attending Catholic grade or high schools for the 2022-23 school year. Funding comes from monies raised at the annual Christmas Party and the Cash Bingos.*

Matthew Bond, Cathedral Prep, grandson of **Patricia Devine '65**; Mila Bender, St Jude School, great niece of **Lisa Kelleher '82**; Jenna Rose Meyer, Mercyhurst Prep, granddaughter of **Nancy Veshecco '66**; Hannah Steppic, Cathedral Prep, daughter of **Adrienne Steppic '84**; Nicholas Wasielewski, North Catholic High School, grandson of **Susan Wasielewski '58**; Teddy, Penny, Maggie Groucutt, Immaculate Conception Academy, grandchildren of **Mary Rita Groucutt '72**; Dylan Lubowicki, St Jude School, grandson of **Kathleen Weed '75**; Juliet Dombrowski, Our Lady of Victory Catholic High School, granddaughter of **Karen Krahe '66**; Madison McElhaney, Cathedral Prep, niece of **Mary Drabino '74**; Dane Stemmler, Blessed Francis Seelos Academy, grandson of **Catherine Stemmler '64**; Morgan Sigler, Mercyhurst Prep, granddaughter of **Eleanor Sigler '61**; Noah, Casey Wagner, Cathedral Prep, St James School, grandsons of **Nancy Ruffa '73**; Carolyn McGraw, St Joseph School, great niece of **Lucrecia Rogers '63**; Charles Campbell, St Luke School, nephew of **Kathleen Burik '77**; Henry Tellers, St Matthew Catholic School, great nephew of **Christine Visosky '59**; Josephine Kuzma, Mercyhurst Prep, cousin of **Maureen Hubert '73**; Natalie Ann Weigold, Our Lady of Peace School, granddaughter of **Michele Pellegrino '81**; Dylan Danch, Cathedral Prep, grandson of **Kathy Danch '73**; Morgan Gladitz, Cathedral Prep, granddaughter of **Linda Gladitz '66**; Krista Denslinger, Mother of Sorrows, granddaughter of **Kathleen Denslinger '69**; Sadie Elizabeth Messer, Mercyhurst Prep, granddaughter of **Barbara Berdis '61**; Andrew Barczynski, Incarnate Word Academy, grandson of **Jeannette Barczynski '65**; Grace Murphy, St Luke School, great niece of **Angela Orlando '76**; Emilee Kimmy, Mercyhurst Prep, daughter of **Christine Kimmy '87**; Livi Freiwald, Oakland Catholic High School, granddaughter of **Judy Freiwald '64**