



St. Benedict Academy
Alumnae Association
Newsletter
Summer 2023

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

A Story Waiting to Be Told

Jenny Bokoch Gillett, SBA descendant, daughter of Janet Nicolía Bokoch '72, wants to tell the story of the sisters who built SBA and the young women who studied there. She has already conducted more than 30 alumnae interviews and has others scheduled. She will also interview sisters, oblates, and others who will round out an oral history of the Benedictines and SBA.

Pulling exclusively from the interviews, Jenny will write and direct a public theater presentation of the Oral History of St. Benedict Academy and the Benedictine Sisters of Erie. The presentation will take place in the summer of 2024 at a venue yet to be determined. The presentation will also be presented online. The many interviews Jenny is conducting will become part of an Erie Benedictine and SBA Oral History Archive.

Jenny is a storyteller, educator, and theater maker in Brooklyn, New York. She spent time in Erie growing up and travels back regularly to visit family. "Over the years, I heard many wonderful stories of how my mom's years at SBA influenced her entire life for the better, and I am so proud to be connected to the community as an SBA descendant," Jenny said. Jenny's mother died in 2022. Her aunt, Maryann Nicolía Kuta '67, died earlier this year.

The connecting thread in this 150-year multi-generational story is women's empowerment reflected in the lives of thousands of women who shaped their worlds for good. It begins with the foundation of the Erie Benedictine community in 1856, winds through 120 years of SBA graduates, and continues to the present day, through the SBA Alumnae Association, the Benedictine community, and those whose paths have intersected with any of these women.

"They [the sisters] taught that you stand up for what you believe in, and that's really carried through my whole adult life," said Judith Lorei '78 in her interview with Jenny. What Sister Angela Ann Zukowski '63, remembers is, "Don't be afraid to take a risk... Sit in the front row of your life, not in the backseat. When you make a mistake simply say, 'Oh how fascinating,' and get on with it."

Sister Linda Romey and Michelle Basista, CFRE, in the Benedictine Sisters' Communications and Development Office are coordinating the effort with Jenny.

St. Benedict Academy a legacy of women's empowerment

The Benedictine sisters who established, staffed, and guided St. Benedict Academy for 120 years not only built a solid educational program. They also designed for connection. This empowered the women who studied there through bonds of friendship, mutual accountability, and genuine love for others.

SBA formed strong and confident young women who went on to have great influence in the families they raised and the places they worked and volunteered. They continued to share this legacy with daughters and granddaughters, with colleagues, friends, and neighbors long after graduation. This is why, so many years later, the Benedictine tradition, the root of the SBA legacy, continues to shape lives. We tell those stories here.



Sister Linda Romey, Michelle Basista, CFRE, and Jenny Gillett

If you are an SBA Alum and would like to request an interview with Jenny, please email her: jennybgillett@gmail.com.

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

sbaalum@eriebenedictines.org

SBA Profiles: Living the Legacy

Helen Schneider, '55

“Graduation from St. Benedict Academy in 1955 was the beginning of my lifelong connection and association with the Benedictine Sisters,” said Helen Schneider (née Zmijewski). Helen volunteers at Benedictine ministries and is regularly seen at the monastery, at community events, at fundraisers, and at SBA Alumnae Association events.

She has passed her Benedictine spirit on to her son Michael, a faithful supporter of the Neighborhood Art House, and two of her grandchildren, Jamie, who currently teaches at the Art House, and Aaron, who volunteered at St. Benedict Education Center with the former refugee resettlement program. Helen was instrumental in making these connections for her grandchildren.

How did four years at SBA shape young women so profoundly that they unreservedly pass their experience on to others, especially children and grandchildren? What was the rare alchemy that transformed a quality educational institution into an experience of personal value, friendship, and loyalty that would last for decades?

Certainly the formula included an attentive, caring connection that built strong relationships both between sisters and students and between the students themselves. “Sister Mary Grace Hanes was my business teacher in the mid '50s,” Helen said. “She had just taken her final vows and communicated so easily with us. She attended many of our class reunions and continued to teach us prayer and friendship. I would have daily interactions with her and other sisters, which deepened my faith. I continue to see Sister Mary Grace when I’m at the monastery for liturgy, she remembers me and several classmates after all these years. So special. So SBA.” (Sister Mary Grace celebrated 75 years of religious life in 2022.)

Likewise, Helen’s SBA-forged friendships continue to this day. The Benedictine emphasis on community as well as the many different organizations, clubs, sports, and arts activities fostered relationship building. The activities allowed those from different parts of the city and varied economic backgrounds to come to know each other and create friendships that would last for decades.

Because the Benedictine Sisters settled on Erie’s east side, they built SBA to educate the girls of the working-class

—continued on page 27



Jamie Keim takes a break with her grandmother Helen while planting trees at Glinodo Center.

Mary-Alice Ozechoski, '81

If you want proof that following your heart rather than bowing to reason will lead you to the life you’re meant to live, Mary-Alice Ozechoski is it.

The life her parents would have shaped for her wasn’t the one she was destined to live. She found her own way to becoming an independent, empowered woman when she was drawn to St. Ben’s like a magnet to its opposite pole.

“I chose St. Ben’s much to the chagrin of my parents. In 8th grade, I don’t think it was on a conscious level,” Mary-Alice recalls. “I remember my entrance interview with Sister Christine Vladimiroff and being affected by how she comported herself. Then I had teachers who were walking examples of things I had never seen in my life. Sister Peggy Pilewski was teaching English, but also had this passion for photography. Sister Pat Lupo was teaching science, but we all knew she was working on environmental issues.” Before women were told, “you can be anything you



Mary-Alice Ozechoski is the Senior Vice President for Enrollment Management at Alvernia University in Reading, PA. She holds a bachelor’s degree in communications and a master’s in counseling and student personnel services.

want to be,” Mary-Alice absorbed that message at SBA. “I got that from the sisters. You can be a phenomenal English teacher, but you can ALSO be an artist.”

As St. Ben’s became a home for Mary-Alice, it planted in her the idea of “home” as an inner space of acceptance and tolerance—more than a physical location—in such a way that she has been “home” all her life in one way or another because of that high school experience. As an adult, a career woman, married to a woman, she is still “at home.”

“I grew up on Erie’s west side and took public transportation to St. Ben’s my first year—it was an hour and 15 minutes on the bus each way,” Mary-Alice said. But time and distance didn’t matter because St. Ben’s was where she found friendship, deep conversation, and challenge. “I knew I wasn’t going to have a traditional life, but I didn’t know what that meant back then. I always thought I would get married and have a family, but I knew it wouldn’t be the life of my parents.”

The term “spirituality” wasn’t common parlance when Mary-Alice was at St. Ben’s in the

late 1970s. But the experience of spirituality, specifically the Benedictine monastic spirituality of the sisters, filtered into daily school life. “Sister Rosanne Loneck was teaching contemplation,” Mary-Alice remembers. “I would spend my lunch hour with Mrs. Lucille Powers and Sister Rosanne in the home economics department where they both taught. It was a quiet space, and they would have thoughtful conversations that grew out of a very deep level of friendship. It was something I had not experienced before.”

Another new awareness for Mary-Alice was the call to respond to injustice in Church and society. “The movement against nuclear arms was not being discussed in my home even as we advocated for change as students,” Mary-Alice said. After she began attending Sunday liturgy at the monastery, Mary-Alice noted the difference between those liturgies and her home parish: “Women weren’t reading at Mass in my parish, it was all men.” As co-editor of the 1981 Scholastic yearbook, Mary-Alice and her collaborators used the gender-neutral “freshpersons” rather than “freshmen.” She wrote then, as a high school senior, “The roles of women in our society are in transition. It is up to us as young women to decide where those changes will take us...”

St. Ben’s students, along with the sisters, actively engaged with expanding awareness of what it meant to be a human community on a living planet rather than digging their heels into what was passing away. “There were two gay men who had adopted children and they came to Mass on Sunday at the monastery,” said Mary-Alice. Volunteering at the Benedictine Sisters’ Emmaus Soup Kitchen



Mary-Alice and campers at Glinodo in 1999.

helped her begin to recognize the systems that keep people poor.

In her 30 plus years in higher education, Mary-Alice’s SBA and Benedictine experience have consistently guided her life and work choices. Seeing an increase in lower income and Latinx students at Alvernia University where she is Vice President for Enrollment Management, she made it a policy that all open houses and presentations be in English and in Spanish. “We also now work on emergency aid because we want a one-stop shop to service our students. It shouldn’t matter if you move into the dorm with your stuff in a U-Haul or show up with a garbage bag full of clothes and a duffel bag, you won’t be marginalized and you’ll have access to the things you need,” she said. “That’s what I’m focused on now, that’s my work today.”

“Alvernia’s values are aligned with hospitality, humility, collegiality, contemplation—the Benedictine values I learned at SBA. And that has felt very congruent to me, as when I tell new students that this is going to be their home for four years and we’re going to care about them and we’re going to love them, it feels right.”

As she moves towards retirement, Mary-Alice realizes that many of the sisters who started her on her way at SBA are now in their 80s. “It’s hard for me to think they won’t always be there. I wish the distance (between Chester Springs where she resides and Erie) wasn’t so great,” she reflects.

Benedict wrote his Rule in the 6th century. This guide for “living ordinary life extraordinarily well” has guided Benedictines ever since. The three sisters who came to Erie in 1856 could not have imagined the generations of young women—right down to Mary-Alice—whom they would empower at SBA. Now, in the 21st century, we are telling the story of women who continue to empower women—and men—to live their lives with the same passion for goodness and justice as Benedict. And that is reason to give “A cheer for dear St. Benedict’s...”



Anne Mazza and Mary-Alice prepare a special part of the Thanksgiving para-liturgical service. (From the 1980 Scholastican.)

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

- Julianna M Custer Cicero '49
- Mary Ann Allgeier Biebel '49
- Joan Behrendt Peters '51
- Patricia Krasinski Bruschi '52
- Ruth M Neeve Earll '53
- Esther Szczypinski Cross '54
- Mary Louise Mizikowski Maracci '57
- Caroline Kujawinski Wolff '58
- Mary Lou Kownacki, OSB '59
- Sylvia A Brzozowski Schmitt '59
- Elaine Markiewicz Tomczak '60
- Marlene A “Jackie” Mikrut Ennis '60
- Carol Ann Wisinski Slupski '60
- Margaret M Schnelzer Shaner '63
- Janice Sokol Kosin '67
- Maryann Nicolina Kuta '67

—continued from page 25

population in their neighborhood which meant that many of their students, like Helen, assumed they would get a good clerical job and/or marry after graduation. It was an inner-city school that planted the seed for the rest of the students' lives.

"There were a lot of groups—not cliques exclusive groups, but groups of friends who seemed to fit together," Helen explained. "There were eight of us in my group of friends. Our backgrounds didn't matter. Some were class officers or took advanced academic classes as college prep where we east siders took the commercial classes because we knew that we'd graduate and get a job and start working." Although death has taken five of Helen's group, she and two others remain in touch. The loyalty that began with the experience of Benedictine hospitality and community in the 1950s never left them. "It was where I belonged. We never missed a class reunion," Helen said. She and classmate Dee Jankowski Madura are planning their 68th reunion—an intimate luncheon with surviving members of the Class of 1955.

Helen's was the last class to graduate from the SBA building on East 9th Street (currently St. Benedict Child Development Center). The new St. Benedict Academy on East 10th Street opened in September 1955 with 459 students representing 19 parishes.

While Helen's parents were not formally educated themselves, they provided Catholic education for Helen and her two brothers



Evelyn Zmijewski, Helen Zmijewski, and Barbara Zattosky at the SBA front entrance on East 9th Street in 1955.

and sister, but Helen knew she would not go to college after graduation. "I worked for D. Schlosser Lumber Company, and later I worked at General Electric in the drafting department," Helen said. "And then I wanted to do more with my life."

Eventually, after she was married and had children, Helen earned advanced degrees, a bachelor's degree from Villa Maria College and a master's in education from Gannon University. She taught more than 20 years at Erie Day School, and she volunteered at the Neighborhood Art House for almost 25 years.

During her maturing years there came a point when Helen realized she was tired of being known by her husband's name with "Mrs." attached. "I wanted to be Helen," she says. "I wanted to be my own person. I loved being who I was, but I didn't

want to be known by my husband's identity. I wanted to have my own identity."

In 2008 Helen deepened her commitment to the Benedictine tradition when she became a Benedictine oblate promising to live Benedictine spirituality and values in her own life.

Health concerns have slowed Helen recently, but her commitments remain strong even if scaled back. "The doctor suggested I'm too busy for my age," she said. "But I'm still curious and fit enough to continue my life's journey."

Class of '68 – 55th Reunion

LOCATION CHANGE for Friday, June 23, 6 - 9 p.m.

Big Bar, 14 East 10th Street, Erie. The Breeze Band will play, food available, casual dress. On-street parking or use parking ramp across the street.

Saturday night, June 24, 6 - 9 p.m., buffet at The Colony on West 8th St. in the Colony Plaza. Four entree choices, \$35.

Please RSVP to Linda Laird Staszewski for one or for both events by June 9: 814-452-0020, or strongamazingwomen@gmail.com PLEASE SHARE this information with any of our classmates with whom you are in contact. THANK YOU!

SAVE THE DATE

SBA Annual Christmas Party Luncheon

Sunday, November 26, 2023

11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Ambassador Banquet &

Conference Center

7794 Peach Street, Erie

SBA CASH BINGOS 2023

July 16 || September 17 || November 12

Doors open at noon || Polish Falcons Club, 431 E 3rd St, Erie

