A Note from Editor S. Chris Broslavick

There are photos in an album; our pictures tell a story. In this issue of Dominican Roots we share our sisters’ experiences with our sponsored ministries (Siena Retreat Center, Senior Companion Program, Bethany, Eco-Justice Center and HOPES). Perhaps you’ll find someone you know and an interesting remembrance.

The Sponsorship Office launched the first edition of Dominican Roots in the summer of 2013. The purpose of this publication is to share news and information about our sponsored ministries with our sisters’ families and friends. Currently we have over 700 persons on our mailing list. And, all issues are available on our website, www.racinedominicans.org; go to the Sponsored Ministries tab (scroll down, look right).

Periodically, we evaluate the interest of our readers and the appeal of our material. Your experience of this publication would be invaluable in determining its future. Please, send a note to Sponsorship Office, 5635 Erie Street, Racine, WI 53402 or an e-mail to sponsorship@racinedominicans.org telling us what you find interesting, helpful/not helpful, educational, etc. about Dominican Roots. Thank you!

Meet our Executive Committee

The Executive Committee is made up of Racine Dominican elected leaders S. Maryann McMahon, S. Kathy Slesar and S. Lisa Kane. Together they hold an important role in the governance of our ministries, focusing very specifically on mission fidelity, finance and director appointments.

Policy-making and general oversight of each ministry are the responsibility of the Boards of Directors.

All of our founded ministries, called sponsored ministries, are incorporated 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations that serve the needs of Racine and beyond.
In 2013, a large group gathered in our former retreat center to prayerfully be grateful for all that we experienced in the 46 years that countless people came to be spiritually nourished and blessed. The building was soon to be deconstructed as the new retreat center was nearing completion. As we were emotionally letting go of this space that many called their “second home,” and bringing closure, Claire Anderson, Executive Director, invited us to stand. With raised hands, we sent all the energy from all those years of life and love to the new space. Siena Retreat Center continues to thrive and is celebrating its 55th anniversary.

For many years I have had the privilege of offering individual or group retreats at Siena Retreat Center using the Art of Basketry, sharing prayer, reflection and spiritual direction, while creating beautiful baskets.

In the words of one participant: “That time of prayer, spirituality, conversation and quiet brought a richness to my life that I had been missing. The weaving of the baskets, over and under, side by side, then coming together at the twist, all the while moving forward and staked with God helped me to look deeper into relationships, change, what has been and what could be.”

Stroking her beautiful face, a petite Cambodian candidate for religious life approached the Siena Retreat Center reception desk, pointed to the window of gently falling snow and said, “Hurt!” I smiled and gestured, “No.”

That evening the retreat directors invited the pre-novitiate attendees outside to experience a Racine lake-effect winter storm. Early the next morning, the young woman, smiling, was back at the desk, pointed to the door and exited the building. She created a snow angel, then sat quietly on the nearby bench as if in wonder at the silent whiteness surrounding her. Another victory for God’s graciousness!
The elderly population of Racine was rapidly growing. Many seniors were living alone, isolated. Connecting with family and friends, going out and about, interacting with others were no longer feasible. That is, in part, why the Senior Companion Program (SCP) was created in 1978. The SCP was a simple, friendly service where volunteers went out to visit with the elderly. As time went on, additional office personnel, grant writing, safety protocols, including background checks of all volunteers, became necessary. Nevertheless, over four decades of companionship continue to be offered.

S. Joyce Ballweg

As a director on the Senior Companion Program Board, I have found our ZOOM meetings during the COVID pandemic challenging; I much prefer to see people—in person! Also, volunteers who companion elderly persons have been unable to visit in person. Phone calls, letters, ZOOM and window visits have been their means of staying in touch. I have long been with the elderly. There is something special about them. I guess it’s where they have been and what they share; I get more from them than I can give them. Seniors who are alone are longing for friendship. You do not have to do anything for them, just listen and talk.

S. Carol Runde

Over eight years I visited three seniors who were homebound. For five of those years I have companioned a neighboring woman afflicted with MS and in need of total care. Aside from her caregivers, seemingly I have been her only visitor. Our visits stopped during COVID. To keep in touch I regularly write to her. It is a stroke of luck that we share the same birthday. Hopefully, we will celebrate our sixth time together this year.

S. Rose Marie Anthony

As a volunteer in the Senior Companion Program I have learned that seniors are well seasoned pray-ers. I would gather with women and men in their assisted living homes around a table where we shared the Word/Communion prayer so dear to them as members of faith communities. We made a “joyful noise to God” that echoed our heart’s longing for peace and unity among all people in our world. The intensity of their prayer was seen in their smiling, content faces and their abundant expressions of gratitude. As I left I heard, “Thank you! Thank you for coming!” For now we continue through keeping each other in our daily prayer and phone conversation.

S. Karen Vollmer
Domestic violence is a hidden invasion of human dignity and disrespectful of an adult or child. That is why I carry in my heart dear memories of a joyous fundraising event, “A Heart of the Family,” which featured the art of the children of Bethany residents. It was a joyous occasion where children enjoyed games and face-painting while their artistic expressions were displayed in a silent auction. The children enjoyed moments of innocence, free from past trauma. As bidders vied for the art pieces, children saw the value of their creations and felt a renewed self-worth. Mothers and friends also glowed with pride.

S. Carmen Agbuis

Bethany has been a gift for many women and children. I recall a very difficult part of one woman’s life. A court order allowed her children’s father to visit them. Her son, just five years old, did not want to see his dad. To avoid this encounter he went into the parking lot and hid under a car. Painful and dangerous, to say the least; he did not see his dad that day. That young child was able to testify in court in support of his mother’s decision to leave their dad. Bethany, for this child and his family, was truly a saving time and place.

S. Evelyn Lins

What does it take to build pathways to a new life? Bethany Apartments knows how and offers the opportunity for a new life to all the women and children residing there. I have observed that the “village” of board directors, the executive director and staff, and residents together have the tenacity, strength and faith to overcome significant obstacles to new life. Everyone motivates, holds one other accountable and works together for and with the residents as they learn how to budget, to drive, to study, to share dreams and to bring those dreams to reality. Bethany is so much more than housing; it is a pathway to new life!

S. Kathy Slesar
In the fall 2008, shortly after the lease was signed for the original HOPES Center location on 6th and 7th Streets, Sisters, Associates, volunteers, and friends of the new ministry came together to bless the new ministry. At this point the structure was an empty shell. Over the next several weeks an army of volunteers would join together to clean, paint, furnish and define the structures that became the Cup of Hope, Just Trade, and the HOPES Center Counseling program. All those efforts, concrete efforts, were underpinned by the voices of prayer, song, and commitment that were expressed during that first blessing when the new expression of our mission, Committed to Truth, Compelled to Justice, came to life.

My days as executive director of the HOPES Center were never dull. My fondest memory is of a rather gruff and crusty young lady. She would come into the Cup of Hope coffee shop or the Just Trade store with the biggest chip on her shoulder and rarely a smile. After interacting with her on several different occasions, she began to open up and let her defenses down. Her heart was as soft as a cuddly bear. We got to know each other a bit and gradually could call each other by name and joke with one another. She was always honest and caring with me. When I see her on the streets yet today, my heart warms and I smile.

We had a frequent guest in our coffee shop whom our counseling staff wished to assess for his eligibility for housing services. He had been observed living in the streets. However, whenever approached, he would take his coffee and leave. One quiet day, Martice, the barista, initiated a conversation with the gentleman—and he did not leave! “I have some information that might help you,” Martice offered. “Will you come back to see me?” Martice was eventually able to coax the man into seeing a counselor; however, Martice was the counselor! He became viewed as a part of the treatment team. Though HOPES has undergone many changes, hospitality remains its hallmark.
In 2004, a dream came true when 17 acres on Michna Road were purchased by the Racine Dominican Sisters, thus birthing the Eco-Justice Center. It was an amazing experience to be part of the developing property expansions and enhancements, sitting at several meetings observing creative architectural minds at work. With great excitement plans evolved: first an extension on the farm house to include a geothermal heating and cooling system, then the useful Education Center, followed by positioning solar panels on the barn, constructing the hermitage, erecting the wind turbine tower, creating the labyrinth and tree house. A sincere Earth-friendly component was a given throughout all proposals and designs.

During 2005-06, I was the secretary of the committee for building the extension of the farm house. After two to three hour meetings, I would return home to Milwaukee to write the minutes and send them off to S. Janet Weyker, Executive Director. (I know she was pleased.)

We held 33 meetings! I enjoyed my work with the fine architect and our committee.

Shortly after the Racine Dominican Eco-Justice Center (EJC) started, someone gave me a lovely card with images of a bird, egg, buds, blossoms, acorn, chrysalis and the words “Expect Miracles.” I framed the card and had it on display in the Education Center for years. Indeed, miracles did seem to happen every time the Eco-Justice Center had a special need. Talented volunteers appeared, donations came for the hermitage, and grants were received to build the Education Center, wind turbine, tree house and more. Each spring brought the miracle of new life and new friends to the EJC. We have been blessed!

The field trip to the Eco-Justice Center offered a learning experience for my middle school students to enjoy the “farm,” as the sisters and volunteer guides introduced us to the alpacas, the goats, the gardens, the bees, the honey house and the barn with its solar energy panels. A little more taxing was pulling the weeds which were sprouting around the garden. Racine is so fortunate to be offered this environmental education experience at the Eco-Justice Center. During my 10 years as secretary of the Eco-Justice Center Board of Directors, I worked with so many wonderful persons also dedicated to the care of the earth.
“...to sustain the fundamental right of every person to pursue the fullness of life and to share in the common good.”

- Article 8 (partial), Constitution of the Sisters of St. Dominic of St. Catherine of Siena

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