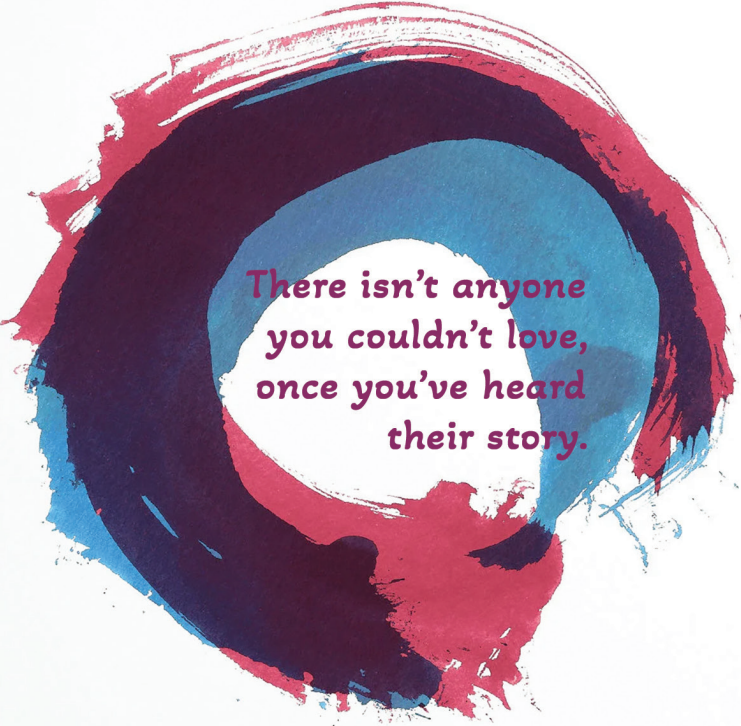




The Companion

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**There isn't anyone
you couldn't love,
once you've heard
their story.**

Mary Lou Kownacki, OSB

From Sister Val ...

Dear Friends,

Sometimes it seems like everywhere I go, there are loud, urgent messages blaring at me. I'm sure you feel this way too: the news, the ads, family members, other drivers on the road, coworkers and friends, all of them present me with question after question, crisis upon crisis that I'm sure I don't fully understand. Then I'm not sure what I should think or do to help.

When I first came to Emmaus Ministries, I often felt very much the same way. The soup kitchen, especially, could be overwhelming; always full of people who were struggling hard to get through another day in their complicated, challenging lives. Tempers sometimes flared; voices were sometimes raised; people sometimes sat completely slumped over, exhausted or tearful, and I wouldn't know what to say.

But without fail, I would look across that crowded room and spot Sister Mary Miller, then the Director of Emmaus, sitting across from a guest. Her chin resting on her clasped hands, elbows on the table, leaning in to make sure she caught every word, she would be listening intently to this person's story. Not trying to problem-solve, not trying to find blame, just listening. With total focus. Her ability to listen was unmatched, and I learned from her that the most important thing we have to offer is not our money, not our food, but our time and attention. She taught me and



Sister Valerie Luckey (left), Director of Emmaus, with founding mother of Emmaus Soup Kitchen, Sister Mary Lou Kownacki in 2021

countless volunteers and staff to sit down, be quiet, and really listen to the guests.

Our founding mother, Sister Mary Lou Kownacki, wrote, "There isn't anyone you couldn't love, once you've heard their story." Emmaus is a place where people whose stories are rarely heard are listened to and loved, a place where the pure compassion that comes from understanding can replace assumptions and judgements.

In this issue of *The Companion*, we invite you to pull up a seat at the Emmaus tables, and to listen, as the Rule of Benedict encourages, with "the ear of your heart," to the stories that our community members have to share. Let these stories lead you to greater love at a time when love is what the world most needs.

In peace,

Sister Val

Listening with Love

There isn't anyone you couldn't love, once you've heard their story.

KEVIN STEVENSON, Blue Coats Member

by Liz Allen, Staff Writer

For Kevin Stevenson, hope and faith go hand in hand. Kevin is a founding member of the Blue Coats, a group that works to counter gun violence and keep young people safe in Erie schools and on the street.

A Blue Coat is also present at Emmaus Soup Kitchen each night, greeting guests, helping them to find seating and reassuring every visitor that Emmaus is a safe place to eat, to shelter from the elements and, if they like, to mingle and converse.

Brother Kevin is one of two Blue Coats currently assigned to Emmaus.

Almost 19 years ago, Kevin and his best friend, Daryl Craig, the founder of the Blue Coats and known as Brother D, were at Abundant Life Ministries at East 8th and Parade Streets when they heard that an 18-year-old had been killed on Wallace Street.

The two men quickly enlisted friends to begin a peace movement that became the Blue Coats.

The need to act fast when danger loomed was familiar to Kevin; he had a swift response after hitting rock bottom in Pittsburgh. "It was 7:15 a.m. on May 15, 2006. I had a full crack pipe in one hand and a fifth of vodka in the other," he said. He prayed to God to save him from himself.

Fifteen minutes later, an Erie rehab facility called to say it had an opening. The next day, he was at the Erie City Mission for a nine-month program; he has been clean ever since.

"The hope was that I could be something other than what I was. I knew I had talents and aspirations," said Brother Kevin. Now 66, he thought at one time about becoming a firefighter. Maybe an oceanographer. He's a proud Blue Coat instead.

At Emmaus, he sometimes sees "a reflection of who I used to be. That allows me to stay humble," he shared. "I can speak a message of inspiration. All a person needs is a word – a word of encouragement."



Above: Brother Kevin offers his presence and his love at Emmaus Soup Kitchen.
Opposite: Sister Jacqueline works in the family room.

Listening with Love

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ROBIN, A Soup Kitchen Guest

by Jacqueline Sanchez-Small, OSB, Staff Writer

Robin's family looks like a Norman Rockwell painting: her three elementary-school-age kids in bright colors sit along one side of the dinner table, her doll-like toddler daughter at the head of the table in a high chair. All are joking with their mother and father, and sitting with their arms linked and leaning in on each other, waiting for their supper to come. They are regular guests in the family room at Emmaus Soup Kitchen, there almost every night.

"Honestly, my kids love coming here," Robin says. "Tonight, the baby's kind of sick so we were going to stay home and make due with toast, but even she said she wanted to come to Emmaus."

Robin understands: when she was growing up, she always wanted to come to Emmaus, too.

"I grew up in the foster care system," she explains. "I was in it until eventually I aged out at eighteen. And usually it didn't feel like the people who were taking care of me wanted me around. But I loved coming to the Kids Cafe in the afternoons. Sometimes I came even if I wasn't really hungry, because, you know, I got to eat lunch at school, and I was used to only eating one meal a day most of the time, so I wasn't necessarily going there just to eat again. But it was safe there. And I always felt really welcome. I guess I was going because I knew the people working there would pay attention to me."

Robin's kids revel in the attention that they get at Emmaus Soup Kitchen, too. They tell the volunteers all about their teachers, their friends, their homework assignments, and the games that they play with their brothers and sisters.

There's a key difference between their childhood and Robin's, though: they have their parents' full attention, too.

Robin and their dad started dating ten years ago, when they were 14 and 16, and had their first baby just two years later. At 24 and 26, their lives are far from easy and they struggle to make ends meet, but they still look very much in love, with each other and with their four children.

"Our family is complete now," Robin says. "Each one of them has a perfect personality that just fits with the others' and I love watching them become these cool little people. They're each so different but they're all really sweet."



Listening with Love

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AMANDA WINCIK, D.O.; Volunteer

by Liz Allen, Staff Writer

Once a month, with her warm smile and friendly face, Dr. Amanda Wincik, D.O., brings boxes of life savers to Emmaus Soup Kitchen.

But she isn't distributing candy or emergency flotation devices. Rather, she is offering, for free, packages of Narcan, to reverse opioid overdoses; test strips to check whether opioids have been laced with other dangerous substances, such as Xylazine, a drug used by veterinarians; and travel first aid kits, with containers to dispose of sharps (needles).

Two people have told her that having Narcan available saved their lives. But you needn't tally up successful interventions to know that Dr. Wincik, president of the Erie County Medical Society, tenders hope to Emmaus guests.

"What gives me hope are people and places like Emmaus," she said. "You find that in so many places if you look for it."

Working as a doctor and speaking with Emmaus guests, she meets people "where they are at," she explained. She doesn't ask questions. She doesn't judge. But she always reminds herself that people struggling with drugs don't fall into one demographic and they aren't defined by their addiction. "It's a disease and they are not their disease," she stressed.

She learned that approach growing up with her older sister, Sissy, who has Down syndrome.

Her sister is non-verbal but "she's not her diagnosis," Dr. Wincik said. "She's a whole person. She has likes and dislikes and sometimes those are written all over her face."

The Erie County Office of Drug and Alcohol Abuse provides the Narcan and the test strips and Dr. Wincik pays for the first aid kits out of pocket. She welcomes donations to help cover those costs.

"Emmaus is such a wonderful, welcoming place. It kind of puts your faith back in humanity. It sounds cheesy but it makes my heart feel fuller," Dr. Wincik said.



Above: Dr. Amanda Wincik volunteers at Emmaus once a month, handing out medical supplies and interacting with guests.

Opposite: Sister Mary Miller loved to interact with anyone who came to the soup kitchen.

Listening with Love

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A MOTHER & HER CHILDREN, Soup Kitchen Guests

by Jacqueline Sanchez-Small, OSB, Staff Writer

The two children seemed a little bit old to be pressed so close to their mother; both were middle school age, but they clutched her hands and stood right behind her as they entered the family room.

"Come on in, have a seat, make yourself at home," I said, but the family stood in the entryway, stiff and uncertain for a long moment. The mother said, "This is our first time here," and a few tears rose in her eyes.

They must have fallen on hard times, I thought: a car accident, a lost job, a rent increase. Trying to be cheerful, I ushered them to a table and explained how the family room works, telling them I'd be their waitress. But as soon as I stepped away, the mother started to let her tears fall. It seemed like they must be facing something more than a little bad luck.

Once their meals were on the table, I sat down and joined them. I asked where they were from, and the woman said she was from Erie. I asked the kids their names and ages, and where they went to school. At that last question, their mother grimaced.

"We haven't figured that out yet," she sighed. "Did you just move back to the area?" I asked.

Then the whole story came out: yes, they had just moved back to Erie, just last night. They had driven ten hours straight, from several states away, finally getting away from the man who had been abusing her for years. They went to her parents' home, but had been turned away out of fear of what her husband might do if he found them there. Despite all this, she was quick to say, she had a plan for how to afford rent, and had spent most of the day filling out job applications, and her last paycheck from her old job would land in her bank account in just a few hours.

We talked about how she had made the right decision, how brave she was, and what they needed that we could help get. By the time they were ready to leave, they were carrying bags of groceries from our pantry, having a clearer plan for how their next few days would go. And they were smiling.

We hugged our goodbyes, and I asked her how she had known to come to Emmaus.

"Actually," she said, "it's not quite my first time here. I came a few times when I was little." I asked what she remembered about it.

The mom smiled. "I remember we came at Christmas one year. Sister Mary (Director at the time) gave me so many homemade cookies, I couldn't even hold them all in my hands."



For the Record

Sister Val Signs Immigration Statement with Local Religious Leaders



On February 7 around 50 people, including six Emmaus staff members, gathered together at the Erie Federal Courthouse to voice support for immigrants and just immigration policies by delivering a statement to elected officials. Signed by leaders of Emmaus Ministries (Director, Sister Valerie Luckey), the Benedictines Sisters of Erie (Prioress, Sister Stephanie Schmidt), Benedictines for Peace (Coordinator, Sister Anne McCarthy, an Emmaus board member), and other local religious leaders—the statement read in part: “Immigrants, regardless of their legal status in this country, are human beings. Like all people, they are the beloved children of God, with immeasurable worth and dignity, who do not deserve to live in fear or have to hide in the shadows. We believe that we will be judged, by the God who knows and sees all, according to the way that we treat our neighbors, especially those who are most vulnerable. Therefore, we call on other Christians, on people of any faith who seek to follow God’s law of love, and on every person of goodwill to reject xenophobic and racist messages and actions. Let us re-commit ourselves to building strong, welcoming, peace-filled communities where all people can live safely.”

Emmaus Ministries Remembers

We are grateful to family members who asked that memorials be made to Emmaus in the names of their deceased loved ones:

Christopher Antalek	James Orth
George Paul Ferrick	Mary Quinn Scolio
Stanely Kmiecik Jr	Paul Thomas Siegel
Marlene Dal Canton Lucas	John Umpleby

We also remember Emmaus volunteers who have passed away:

Marilyn Spensley
Eileen Mary Custer

For the Record

WRAPPING UP 50 YEARS OF MINISTRY

The year 2024 marked 50 years since Emmaus Soup Kitchen first opened its doors at the former Immaculate Conception parish on East 16th Street. Here’s a look at a few more ways we made last year special at Emmaus.

Monthly Raffles at the Soup Kitchen and Food Pantry

Staff and volunteers who greeted guests paid extra attention to each person entering the soup kitchen and food pantry. Once a month, the 50th guest to pass through the door received a crisp \$50 bill or \$50 gift card. Here are some of the lucky recipients.



Emmaus Urban Bike Tour

Thirty friends of Emmaus, including staff, board members, and volunteers hopped on their bikes for a 18-mile bike ride around the city of Erie last September. At 12 stops, beginning at Emmaus Grove, riders learned about the growing fresh food movement in Erie. Erin Phillips, managing editor of the *Erie Reader*, said of the ride: “I am feeling invigorated and inspired from listening to all of the forward-thinking, community-focused, generous people doing so much good for our city [...] This is how it happens. A collective of neighbors who care more about building a healthy community than making themselves a buck, bringing in and educating more and more people on how to practically grow their own food in the city, and how to depend on one another to meet all of our needs. It’s so inspiring.”



For the Record

WRAPPING UP 50 YEARS OF MINISTRY

Christmas Backpack Giveaway

While a gift for each soup kitchen guest is the norm at the annual Christmas dinner, this year's giveaway went above and beyond. To mark the special year, Emily Ingram (left), a soup kitchen volunteer and member of the 50th Year Planning Committee, and a group of her friends, loaded 300 backpacks with toiletries, towels, washcloths, hats, emergency blankets, hand warmers, snacks, and other items. The results were obvious: smiles all around!



A "LITTLE" SNOW IS NO MATCH FOR EMMAUS

More than four feet of snow over the Thanksgiving weekend proved no match for the generous and resilient staff and volunteers at Emmaus. With some adaptations including dinner deliveries to local shelters, meals at Emmaus Soup Kitchen continued without interruption as the Erie area received record snowfall. Thank you to all who helped feed and shelter those in need during the dangerous weather, not only at Emmaus, but throughout the city!



Carly DiFuccia (left), soup kitchen cook, served up steaming homemade Italian wedding soup, straight from the pot. Konzal Construction worked through the night to clear up mountains of snow at the kitchen (right) to make dinner service possible.

STAFF: Valerie Luckey, OSB; Margaret Kloecker; Rosanne Linda-Hynes, OSB; Catherine Simon; Jane Wagner; Susan Doubet, OSB; Jacqueline Sanchez-Small, OSB; Liz Allen; Carly DiFuccia
Companion Staff: Valerie Luckey, OSB; Jacqueline Sanchez-Small, OSB; Liz Allen

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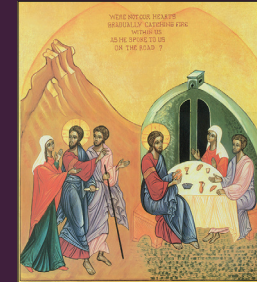
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EMMAUS ICON
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Iconographer: Sister Marie-Paul, OSB
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They came
to know Christ
in the breaking
of the bread.

Luke 24:35