

CONNECTIONS

A Collection of Stories
Connecting Disciples of Jesus
with One Another and the Lord

Spring
2024

We are a Welcoming Community that Inspires Disciples of Jesus to
Share God's Love and Transform the World.



DIVINE MERCY PARISH

SACRED HEART CHURCH · ST. PHILIP THE APOSTLE CHURCH



STORIES DRAW US IN

I like stories. Stories in all their forms, like movies, TV series, novels, biographies. Stories draw us in. They enlighten. They encourage. They challenge us.

Isak Dinesen said, "To be a person is to have a story to tell."

What can be truer than that? We each are not just "a story," we are a collection of stories. Stories of growth and change. Stories of heroism. Stories of failure and learning from our failures.

Connections presents to us stories of disciples of Jesus trying their best to follow his life and his example. In the sharing of these wonderful stories, we are enlightened and lifted up. Through the stories of others, we come to know Jesus a bit better for the Holy Spirit alive within us reflects the Jesus Story.

The stories you will find in these pages are not the chapter and verse of Scripture. But in their own way, they are a holy word, a word of hope, joy and faith. In this Easter season, let us celebrate the many forms of

discipleship and the great stories we are empowered to tell through the work of the Spirit!



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SHARING GOOD NEWS
BY BEING GOOD NEWS

THE HOLY SPIRIT AT WORK
AT DIVINE MERCY



Simply...Connected

LOST AND FOUND, MY JOURNEY LIVING WITH EARLY ONSET PARKINSON'S BY MIKE DEBARTOLO

Living with early onset Parkinson's has been an amazing life journey of lost and found. For me, undiagnosed Parkinson's brought with it confusion, compromised coordination, less energy, sleepless nights, uncontrollable shaking, susceptibility to stress, and career transition. Upon diagnosis, Parkinson's motivated my resolve to live with Parkinson's in ways that inspire. I am hopeful my story can inspire your resiliency and journey with Parkinson's.

Seeing Parkinson's as an Opportunity

Facing compromised physical, mental and neurological health and an uncertain future, I was bewildered searching for answers to what I later came to understand was Parkinson's gone undiagnosed for over five years. Before diagnosis, I learned I couldn't handle my condition alone. Thankfully, I leaned into sources of strength, gifts in my life. Faith in God and a loving family. Upon diagnosis, I also came to better appreciate the vital importance of caring friends, playtime, attitude, community and expert medical care. I learned to lose stoicism, avoid playing victim and rather find opportunity, find grace.

My Parkinson's diagnosis lifted a veil of uncertainty. It identified a condition I have, not who I am. It provided certainty even while Parkinson's impact in my life ahead is uncertain. I was relieved. I understood Parkinson's is a

condition I can live with. And by sharing my condition with family and friends and reaching out to our Parkinson's community, I knew I wasn't alone.

Leaning into Faith – Giving Up

Overwhelmed and confused by Parkinson's, I chose to "give up." Yes, give up. Not quit. Rather, I found giving up control in life to God's loving care lightens my journey. I found leaning into my faith in God has been vital to my attitude, outlook and resolve living with Parkinson's. I trust God is for me, with me, by me and never against me. Amidst life-shaking confusion pre-diagnosis, I reminded myself life is not a sprint it's more like a marathon. I have come to recognize Parkinson's gifts in my slower pace, savoring the daily joys encountered in life and seeing God in others. Paradoxically, Parkinson's hardship brought peace.

Career Transition

Parkinson's meant I needed to transform my work life. After a fast-paced thirty year media and magazine publishing career in leadership roles with several of America's largest magazines, I found a second career where I could make a difference for communities in need at a pace I could handle. I discovered joy in fundraising for mission inspired causes important to me.

Learning to Walk Again

Parkinson's has me learning new ways to enjoy my favorite athletic activities by adapting my game plan

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and the way I play. While I can no longer run a marathon, I can enjoy walking them. I rediscovered Chicago's beautiful Lake Front. Parkinson's showed me new joys to savor with family. My loving parents had often encouraged me to slow down my, at times, hyper active pace in life. Recognizing their encouragement and an unexpected gift from Parkinson's, I have learned to walk again.

Enjoying the Journey

Once ultra-focused on life goals, I've learned to slow down and enjoy life's journey. I've learned to pay more attention to people and places I encounter day to day in the



Mike pictured above delivering food to A Just Harvest. Mike is one of our active Outreach volunteers, always stepping up to help.

moment. I am learning that the better things in life sometimes come as interruptions to my plans.

I am learning that living with Parkinson's inspires my faith and invites gratitude for loving, caring people in life; sharpens my empathy towards others who face challenges in life too; encourages patience to savor life's joys; and find new ways to play favorite activities. Maybe living with Parkinson's isn't such a bad thing after all.

**Look for more from Mike on "Parkinson Players" in a future issue of Connections.*

Children's Ministry: Engaging Children's Hearts

SAM FIFER: FINDING HOME IN THE CHURCH

Sam Fifer is a natural born storyteller. And he has a lifetime of rich, interesting stories to share.

Sam's parents were Jewish Holocaust survivors. His mom was from a small town in Poland – she lost both her parents – and his dad, from a somewhat larger city in Poland, lost both his parents and two siblings in the war (two survived, by the grace of God, and emigrated to then-Palestine, now Israel); all told, the couple lost many relatives. His parents met in a munitions factory in his dad's hometown of Czestochowa where they made artillery shells as slave laborers to their Nazi captors. (Sam's dad, "a character," once removed all the leather straps off the 100-pound artillery shell boxes loaded in a Nazi truck and made them into a pair of boots!) In 1949, Sam's parents came to the U.S., and moved to Chicago where he and his two sisters were born and raised and he celebrated his Bar Mitzvah.

"I was a pretty faithful practitioner in my youth and young adult years," Sam recalled. "I received outstanding religious training – after-school and weekend programs where I learned a lot of Biblical background, how to read and write Hebrew (I still can read it pretty well) and even studied for one year at an advanced level (the Talmud). The Yeshiva where I studied was eventually merged into the Hebrew

Theological College and I recently learned I may be the only Catholic listed as an alum there!"

Sam graduated from Roosevelt High School, Northwestern University and DePaul University College of Law, the first in his family to attend college and post-graduate school. At Northwestern, he studied speech and communications, noting that WGN radio host Bob Sirott was one of his classmates. After law school, he joined Kirkland & Ellis, where he began his media and law practice. More importantly, it was there that he met Barbara, who was head of the paralegal program before they married. After their daughter and son were born, the Fifers moved to Winnetka. "We loved raising our children," Sam recalled, noting Barbara was involved in every volunteer board possible.

Sam's "stirrings" began in 2008-09. "I was called into our faith on three separate occasions – two times I said 'no' and on the third occasion, I said 'yes.' There are only so many times that you can turn God down.

"The first time around, I was attracted by Catholic religious traditions – the saints, martyrs, the continuous line, in my view, that I saw connecting Judaism and the early church. I read a lot about the monastic traditions (How the Irish Saved Civilization by Thomas Cahill is a good book on that topic), but something always seemed

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Engaging Children's Hearts

to get in the way, and what I had perceived as an authentic 'call' to step into the faith, I responded to with a 'no.'

"The second time, we had a family loss, and I sought comfort in the church. We lived near St. Ita, and I spent some time there but again there was a 'no.' But it was a different kind of 'no,' and this time I took a big step and was baptized as a Lutheran (my wife's faith tradition), so I was getting closer.

"We raised our children in the Lutheran faith. There is lots of interesting history associated with Luther and his evangelical church. Luther was an Augustinian monk who left the Catholic Church and married a former nun (actually he was more kicked out, which led to the Reformation in Europe and a Counter-Reformation in the Church.) We became part of the Lutheran faith community in Chicago; I served in many capacities, including, lay leader of the congregation. Go figure!

"The third call came after we moved to Winnetka. We became members of the Winnetka Congregational Church, a well-known liberal Protestant church. Our children participated in religious education and youth groups; I served as a lay leader, and participated in religious and adult ed.

"In 2008-09 I participated in an adult ed program, where I led conversations and study on the Psalms of David. The drama that played out between King Saul and David, as far as I was concerned, had God's fingerprints on it. I read this material seriously and saw that God had a plan for His people and that plan was still in play in the world. It was profoundly impactful.

"Around that time, we lost a couple of friends, one to cancer and one to suicide – both Catholics – and we went to requiem masses for both of them. A priest friend joked that it's at these masses where you see the church at its best. After attending, I was deeply moved, called a friend, and asked if there was a book or a class I could take to learn more about the faith. Of course, that was RCIA and I started in 2009. Barbara gratefully joined me. We came into the church a bit over a year later."

After Barbara volunteered them, Sam began serving as a catechist in 2011. He has taught numerous grades, was always a sought-after teacher, and spent many years leading our 7th grade Youth Alpha, where he was

famous for getting the children to open up and ask questions about life and faith. This year he even led four Parent Catechesis sessions for Children's Ministry with the goal of providing parents some of what they might need to effectively pass along the faith.

"Faith is a way of living that gives life color and meaning," Sam said. Sam travels a lot professionally and always tries to fit in a daily or weekend Mass even if he is on the road. In visiting churches all over the world, he believes you really begin to realize what the word Catholic means -- it's a universal church.

"My only regret is that I did not do it sooner, but we're all on God's time, no matter what age we are."



"The difficulty of explaining 'why I am a Catholic' is that there are ten thousand reasons all amounting to one reason: that Catholicism is true."

– G.K. Chesterton



Sam and his wife Barbara on the day their marriage was convalidated by the Church. Convalidation is a ceremony that validates a marriage as a sacrament in the Catholic Church.



Sam pictured above at last year's Alpha reunion with Rita Compton, Aimee Garrison and Kathy Janega. Sam is often seen taking photos around the parish.

Connecting with Sacred Heart School

CONNECTED TO EACH OTHER

One of the blessings of Sacred Heart School is that our smaller class sizes create opportunity for robust collaborations across grades, providing all students from preschool through 8th grade, with unique opportunities to connect often and in meaningful ways.

In addition to multi-grade activities, outreach projects, events, and field trips, two of our most special programs that traverse the classroom walls, are our **Prayer Families** and **Class Buddies**.



At the beginning of each year, **Prayer Families** are organized with an 8th grade leader and students from every grade in each group. These groups meet formally once-a-month around a lesson, and complete other service and outreach projects throughout the year.



Our 8th graders enjoy the responsibility of preparing a themed lesson and activity to share with their group each month and develop leadership and presentation skills through teaching and engaging their enthusiastic mixed-age audience. Our theme this year has been *Corporal Works of Mercy*, with a different work highlighted in each session. The 8th graders have also dedicated lessons to teaching about special seasons of the church year, like Advent and Lent.

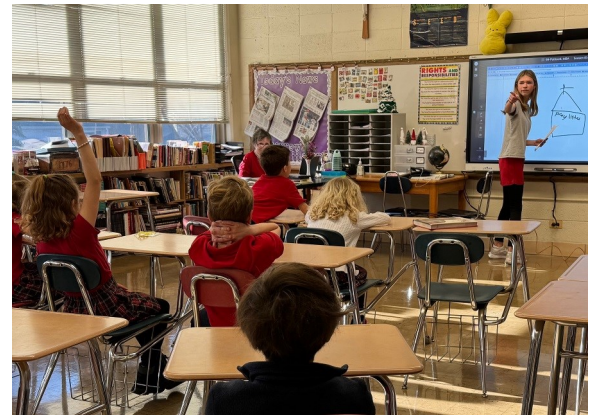


Prayer Families create a unique opportunity to share and celebrate our faith across grade levels while providing our 8th grade Confirmation candidates a chance to lead, teach, and connect with our younger students and vice versa.

The **Buddy Program** is a less formal annual grouping between two grades, like Kindergarten & 5th grade or 3rd & 8th, with 4th grade serving as the exciting milestone year when students transition from being the little buddies of 8th graders to being the big buddies of Junior Kindergarteners.

These buddy groups participate in informal gatherings,

activities, and projects throughout the year providing little buddies mentorship and a glimpse into what lies ahead at Sacred Heart, while enabling big buddies an opportunity to develop leadership skills, flexibility, and empathy. Like Prayer Families, our Buddy Program is about providing students from different grade levels with opportunities to get to know one another as a larger school body, and to form bonds outside of their immediate peers.



Sacred Heart School has always maintained great passion for community, outreach, and genuinely supporting one another. We share the drive to lift each other up in meaningful and authentic encounters throughout this journey we travel together. Just as so many Sacred Heart parents are at the ready to embrace new families with open arms - eager to invite, engage, connect, and help ensure a comfortable and welcoming transition to a new school – that desire to connect is promoted and celebrated in our culture and through the students of the Sacred Heart Community.



Connected Through Alpha

MEET THE MUSSERS

We are the Musser Family: Margaret, Jack, James (3) and Christian (1). I, Margaret, grew up in Cincinnati Ohio and have a number of pastors in my family, dating back multiple generations. I currently work as a Research Scientist and love that I get to work daily on developing new medications for patients with diseases like Parkinson's, cancer, and more. Jack grew up in Naperville Illinois and works in corporate finance. We married in 2017 and have been blessed with two boys. Becoming a mom has been the most humbling and exciting blessing in my entire life - the privilege of raising our boys with Jack is a dream. James is a physically active, verbally excited, newly 3-year-old. His exuberance for life and curiosity cannot be matched. Christian is a relaxed, loving second child who is becoming more verbal and interactive each day. He loves anything musical and brings such a peaceful calm to our home. Watching them grow together as brothers has been an indescribable joy over the last 17 months.

We found Divine Mercy Parish on two parallel paths around the same time - through both Sacred Heart School and the Alpha course. As we started to think about our boys' education, we encountered the high quality and virtuous Sacred Heart School. As we consider sending our kids there, we decided we should explore mass and the parish as well. Additionally, we've been seeking a robust faith community to participate in small groups or a course like Alpha. As a couple we haven't had the opportunity to grow our faith together in that way, and we've been yearning for it as a meaningful part of our marriage. Jack found the course and we enrolled with the idea that we would alternate weeks of attending so the other could stay home with the kids. It was recommended that we do all sessions and fully commit to the course. We didn't want our experiences to diverge, so we hired a standing babysitter for Tuesday nights and attended nearly all the sessions together.

The Alpha course surprised us in a number of ways. First off, how meaningful each of the sessions truly were each week. The shared communal meal provided a low key setting to get to know other Alpha attendees. The videos contained a depth of content that initiated excellent discussion in the last 30 minutes. The small groups were immediately vulnerable and people shared an immense amount

about themselves, their life stories, and their faith journeys.

The biggest tangible impact to our faith as a couple and family has been the increase in prayer. Neither of us had a strong habit of praying and since the Alpha session on prayer we've both made a big change in how we pray, and we've felt the immediate impact in our lives. It has helped us pass over some of life's burdens to God and opened our hearts to more fully enjoy the incredible daily experiences we have as parents.

If you take the time and mental energy to invest in your faith, it simply pays off. We've seen this in so many ways in the last few months alone. Taking 90 mins per week for the Alpha course jump started our faith journey as a couple and family and we feel the impact every day. We seek out more opportunities to invest in our faith and participating in the course has truly moved our faith to be a more common and simultaneously meaningful conversation topic.

