

Mike Fenn

Executive Director, Mt. Irenaeus

Late in the 1980s, a friar at Mt. Irenaeus asked a St. Bonaventure University student: “And what can I learn from you,” at Sunday Mass. That friar was the late Fr. Dan Riley, ofm, and the student was Mike Fenn ‘91, now executive director of the Mt. Irenaeus Franciscan Community, whose transformation began that day.

“No one else had ever asked my opinion of being a follower of the Gospel,” Mike remembers, “and it was absolutely life changing.”

A 1991 graduate of St. Bonaventure University, Mike is a native of Palisades, N.Y., where he grew up the youngest of four—two brothers and a sister—two of whom graduated from St. Bonaventure before him.

“Fr. Dan was close to my brother (Tom ’85) and sister (Kathy ’88), and he was probably one of the reasons I came here,” Mike recalls. “I had gone to Catholic school since third grade, but my previous experiences with priests were all in a church; here at St. Bonaventure, friars were everywhere.”



Mike immersed himself in campus life, playing soccer and rugby, where friars like Fr. Gerald McCaffrey, ofm, and Fr. Richard Flaherty, ofm, were regulars on the team bench, and serving in campus ministry and at The Warming House.

“I had soccer buddies, but also Students for the Mountain friends, which was a community that was so important to me that I spent two summers, in 1990 and 1991, as a summer intern at the Mountain,” said Mike. “Being a summer intern was an amazing experience: The chapel had just been built, and we sanded the wood floor, planted grass outside and then we would cook a meal for eight people. We also led prayer, which was instrumental in building leaders strong in their faith.”

Service is a key part of Mike’s faith journey, and he spent a year with the Franciscan Volunteer Ministry, at the St. Francis soup kitchen, now known as the St. Francis Inn, in Philadelphia,

after graduation. At the same time, he had discerned joining the Franciscans, but near the end of his Bonaventure journey, he met Julie Appel, and they married in 1992. By the time he was 26, Mike and Julie had three children under the age of four, and he was living in Buffalo and working as a cost accountant at Dunlop Tire.

“Majoring in accounting was probably the biggest mistake of my life,” Mike said, “but it eventually led me to my MBA at Canisius University, and to a 17-year career in marketing at Fisher-Price, which was fun for a very long time.”

He was elected to the Mountain Board of Trustees in 2007, delving deeper into the Mountain, and was elected board chair in 2011. Several years later, the board was looking for its first executive director, and in 2015, Mike accepted the position.

“I have to pinch myself sometimes that this is real,” he said with a smile. “It is the passion of my life beyond my family, and working alongside Fr. Dan every day was a privilege.”

At Fr. Dan’s suggestion, Mike embarked on a Master’s in Pastoral Studies degree, which he completed in 2022 at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. He learned a great deal in areas of youth ministry and Catholic

Social Teaching, which he has been able to integrate into his work with the Mountain.

“I became much more grounded in the business of working in ministry because of this program, which was an absolute joy,” he emphasized.

“Once you move from a job to a vocation, everything becomes integrated, and I would not want it any other way.”

While Mike continues to live in suburban Buffalo, he spends time each week in his Mountain office in St. Bonaventure’s McGinley-Carney Center, staying with the Mountain resident community for evening prayer and meals.

“My role is dramatically different since Fr. Dan died. We have all been called to fill the space he left with the charisms and gifts we have,” he said. “I work closely with Br. Kevin (Kriso, ofm) and Karen (Pulaski) to bring the gifts of the Mountain to others; the Mountain is about our ministry on our 360 acres, but as important is our ministry of going “into the valley.” Maintaining that cycle is super important.”

He noted that, as recently as three years ago, the Mountain was a somewhat unknown ministry, a bit isolated from the rest of the

Franciscan world. Through our recent strategic plan, we focused a lot of energy to change that, and we've had great success. Along with more engagement with the Province of Our Lady of Guadalupe, we have expanded our network with many partners including the Franciscan Federation, Franciscan Action Network, and other entities in the Franciscan-hearted world.

Mike acknowledges that challenges do exist, but that the Mountain community is poised to meet them.

"Communicating that the Mountain is built on a solid foundation, a foundation based on Clare and Francis of Assisi, and Jesus Christ, is foremost," he noted, "as is continuing to think about the richness and vulnerability of our community, as everything emanates from ministry. I believe my primary role is to support the resident community in every way I can."

In addition to the resident community at the Mountain, Mike noted that long time Mountain community staff like Michelle Marcellin and Mary Giardini, both of whom hold down the fort in the University Ministries office, are key to sharing the Mountain charism with others.

"Our vibrancy comes from our community and the communities we serve," Mike said. "I have been around the Mountain since 1987; for 37 years, I have lived in community, saw the Mountain in its initial stages and lived later parts of my life here, too. My Mountain experience is authentic, and I try to bring that authenticity to every aspect of ministry."

With a passion to "Make All Things New Through Jesus Christ," Mike Fenn's ministry is one of steadfast dedication, joyful service and faith in the Mountain's mission and relevance for years to come.

