

BONAVENTURE

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School Spirit

From University Ministries to Mt. Irenaeus,
service is at the heart of spirituality at St. Bonaventure

PLUS: The Fosters' remarkable commitment to the liberal arts

The Rise of the Mountain

By Tom Donahue



Holy Peace Chapel today (above) and under construction in 1988 (below, left)



The backdrop for an Oct. 17 concert, Mass and supper celebrating the 25th anniversary of Mt. Irenaeus was supposed to be one of those spectacularly clear, crisp, autumn afternoons when the hillsides are ablaze with color.

But an early winter storm had rolled through the day before, dumping half a foot of snow on the mountaintop retreat in Allegany County. Huge tents meant to shelter the concertgoers sagged under the heavy blanket of white, and everywhere the ground was a slushy mess.

When events were moved indoors, Br. Kevin Kriso, O.F.M., the newest member of the friar community at Irenaeus, remembers thinking that the sloppy weather might keep some people away.

But the cars kept coming and Holy Peace Friary, the retreat's community house, kept filling with people. Visitors who couldn't squirm their way into the spacious main room joined those standing in the kitchen or just gave up and waited outside, chatting and shivering on the porch.

"A lot of people truly wanted to be here so they put up with having to park way down the hill, walk up a muddy road through snow, and being cheek to jowl with a couple hundred other people," said Br. Kevin.

It was affirmation that Mt. Irenaeus, this grand experiment cooked up by a few friars a quarter century ago, continues to quench the spiritual thirst of thousands.

Establishing Mt. Irenaeus on a remote hilltop some 35 minutes from campus truly was an act of faith, recalls Fr. Daniel Riley, O.F.M., one of the retreat's founding friars and its guardian today. "When we started, we didn't even have money for the down payment," said Fr. Dan. "And when we said we wanted to build a chapel up there, even the builder thought we were crazy."

Those who would become major benefactors of the Mountain, like Raymond C. Dee, a classmate and close friend of Fr. Dan's and current vice chairman of the university's Board of Trustees, were also skeptical at first.

"I was a little concerned about moving part of the campus ministry element off campus," said Dee. "It did seem like a stretch, and a risk, frankly."

PLANTING THE SEED

It was 1971. Richard Nixon was president, the Vietnam War was still raging and college campuses everywhere were a hotbed of political and social upheaval. St. Bonaventure was no exception.

"There was a lot of struggle between students and faculty and friars at the time over inter-visitation and all sorts of politics on campus," said Fr. Dan. "I was led into the middle of it as a young friar."

Fr. Dan and the late Fr. Gervase White, O.F.M., a popular professor and former dean of students, hoped to ease tensions

"When I went to the Mountain I would leave everything behind, down in the valley. I was going to the Mountain to be myself, and to listen to myself."

Patrick Brutus, '09

by taking members of Student Government off campus for a weekend. "We needed to step aside and give some space and time for quality human interaction," said Fr. Dan.

It was hardly a new idea. The practice of taking a moment, catching your breath, beginning anew — phrases still used on the Mountain today — is an ancient religious tradition that predates St. Francis of Assisi.

But to a generation tired of everything society was dishing up, including a conservative clerical model of religion described by Fr. Dan as "get 'em up and get 'em to church," it was a breath of fresh air. And it was the catalyst for conversations Fr. Dan would have with the late Irenaeus Herscher, O.F.M., St. Bonaventure's beloved librarian, about establishing a place away from campus where students, in the words of Fr. Irenaeus, could "walk quietly ... and consider their lives."

There were organizational meetings, an advisory group was formed, and in 1982 Fr. Dan signed a certificate of incorporation for a Franciscan Mountain Retreat

that would be called Mt. Irenaeus, in memory of his friend and fellow Franciscan.

Initially, Irenaeus was a mountain retreat without a mountain. Kate Nolan Clemens, '84, remembers those early days: "When I was a student we would have retreats set up at different houses off campus and my friends and I loved the whole concept. I think it was the seed of this idea that we were planting back then."

In the summers of 1983 and 1984, Mt. Irenaeus took up residence in what was then Collins Hall, a university-owned house on Union Street in Allegany, as the search began for a permanent home.

At Fr. Dan's side those summers, and a member of the friar community at Irenaeus to this day, was another Fr. Dan — Fr. Dan Hurley, O.F.M., a member of the Campus Ministry team at the time. "We let the word out that we were there and people from the area came," said Fr. Dan Hurley. "I could see that this was something that would grow."



Members of the Mt. Irenaeus friar community are (seated, from left) Br. Joe Kotula, Fr. Dan Hurley and Fr. Bob Struzynski and (standing, from left) Fr. Louis McCormick, Br. Kevin Kriso and Fr. Dan Riley.

SEARCHING FOR A MOUNTAIN HOME

The search for land took members of the advisory board to more than 50 parcels within a 45-minute drive of campus, including the hillside behind campus that is home to Merton's Heart. Thomas Merton, the Catholic writer and Trappist monk who taught English at St. Bonaventure in 1940-41, would go to the heart-shaped clearing to meditate.

"The Heart was too close," said Fr. Dan Riley. "You could look down upon campus, so it wasn't giving people a break-away, which, classically, is what a place like this is for."

They were even offered land for free — acreage in Allegany's Five Mile Road valley, only about 20 minutes from campus. But it was important to Fr. Dan to be on a mountain.

"Any place is a place of encounter," he said, "but you hear of oceans, deserts and mountains as places of encounter. A hillside or mountaintop sort of thing was an early image that was given to me."

Dennis Culhane, '85, a member of the founding board for Irenaeus as an undergraduate at SBU, was with Fr. Dan the first time he visited the Allegany County hilltop that would become the retreat's home.

"The owner drove us around on a flat-bed trailer that he pulled on his tractor," said Culhane. "As we went up the main pathway, it was just resplendent. And standing at the knoll, above where the chapel is now, there was that special vista looking out over the Allegheny Mountains."

Documents for purchase of the 207-acre site were signed on Nov. 13, 1984.

The next 25 years would see significant growth and development. Trails were cleared, a pond was dug, cabins were built, a chapel was erected from oak,

cherry and maple stands on the Mountain, and a three-story main house, known as House of Peace, was constructed to serve as the hub of activity at the retreat.

And all the while visitors kept coming — not just students, but residents from surrounding communities as well.

Why? Two reasons, said Fr. John O'Connor, O.F.M., provincial minister of the Franciscan Friars Holy Name Province, a member of the university's Board of Trustees, and a colleague of Fr. Dan's in the Campus Ministry in the retreat's formative years.

"Dan has worked hard to develop the ministry there, and he's got that very outgoing, almost magnetic personality that clearly has helped draw people to the ministry," said Fr. John.

A STUDENT-DRIVEN INITIATIVE FROM THE START

Fr. Dan is forever trying to set the record straight. To some, Mt. Irenaeus may seem like his baby, but it's the students and alumni who have always been the lifeblood of the place.

"Students were part of this from the very beginning," said Fr. Dan. "Students



Fr. Dan Riley, O.F.M., welcomes an overflow crowd to Mt. Irenaeus' House of Peace during an Oct. 17 anniversary celebration.

"Society has become incredibly complex. People are experiencing an awful lot of stress and the ability to find a place to go where you can step back from the so-called craziness of life is becoming more attractive to people," he said.

And then there's Fr. Dan Riley.

wanted this to happen and there is a real youth-movement part of life here."

Many students, alienated by a top-down model of the church, find on the mountain a ministry that not only welcomes them, but urges them to get involved. Fr. Dan may draw them there, but they

return because the Mountain “fits what their spiritual needs are,” said university Trustee Dee. “There’s an involvement that I think young people are very keen on. They feel like they have a piece of the action there.”

Some 900 St. Bonaventure students visit Mt. Irenaeus each semester, said Michelle Marcellin, who has served as the Mountain’s administrative assistant for the past 14 years.

“It helps the students get away from the pressures they feel on campus,” said Marcellin. “Just to be able to walk away from all that, even if just for a couple of hours, and be some place where it feels like more of a home is so important to them. So many students have told us that one of the big reasons they stayed at Bonaventure after freshman year is the Mountain.”

Shawn Sood, ‘09, who is in his first year of medical school at George Washington University, remembers having a typical reaction his freshman year when he learned his floor in Shay Hall was headed to Mt. Irenaeus for a program. “They were all talking about going to the Mountain and I’m like, ‘What mountain?’”

It didn’t take long for Sood to learn what drew people to Irenaeus.

“On campus, you’re always so busy with classes, studying, going to basketball games or whatever, that you really don’t take time to self-reflect,” said Sood. “Going to the Mountain, I could take a deep breath, really take in the beauty of the world around me, and get to know myself better.”

Patrick Brutus, another ‘09 graduate who is in his first year of law school at Ohio Northern University, first visited the Mountain on a men’s overnight his

freshman year. By his senior year he was coordinator for Students for the Mountain, a group that plans student-led activities at the retreat.

“I was one of those students who was always attached to electronics. I never went anywhere without my phone, my iPod and my laptop,” said Brutus.

“When I went to the Mountain I would leave everything behind, down in the valley. I was going to the Mountain to be myself, and to listen to myself.”

THE MOUNTAIN IS EVERYWHERE

What’s so special about the Mountain? Everything, and nothing, you might say.

“St. Francis invites us to create within ourselves a place where God might dwell. We invite people up to the Mountain where they might learn to be open to a place within them where something else can be going on,” said Fr. Dan.

“And so it isn’t just the Mountain. The Mountain can look like something you need and I say, no, it’s pointing to a deeper need — a fundamental human need to not only find peace, but to find ways to make peace.”

Mt. Irenaeus, then, is both mountain and metaphor. And as for the latter, Fr. Dan likes to say, “you don’t need a bicycle to get there.”

Paul Kline, ‘76, a friend of the Mountain and a member of its board of trustees the past three years, said he is among the many for whom Mt. Irenaeus is “more than a cherished oasis for personal spiritual renewal. The Mountain is a model for healing and renewal for our church at a time when so many are searching.”

The spirit of Mt. Irenaeus has even spawned outreach programs, such as Mountain on the Road and Franciscan Sojourners, meant to help alumni and



St. Bonaventure students are greeted by Fr. Dan Riley, O.F.M., following a hike at Mt. Irenaeus.

others keep tapping that “deeper need” that many first mined at the Mountain.

“The Mountain is contagious,” said Fr. Dan. “And as is the Franciscan tradition, it’s going out into the world. It’s not just on the mountain top.”

Ann Flynn McCarthy, ‘74, a founding trustee of the Mountain, said one of her favorite family photos is a black and white print of her and her then-toddler son, Dan, taken while they were watching the chapel being built on the Mountain.

“That kid is now about to graduate from St. Bonaventure and, like so many others, the Mountain has been an important part of his years there,” said McCarthy.

“I sincerely believe that the Mountain is forming the future of the church. I have seen it over and over again, not only in my own son’s life, but in so many others. Mt. Irenaeus is a blessing to us all.”

Mt. Irenaeus photos, videos, a blog and more! www.mounti.com

