

PIONEERING WOMEN OF WESTERN NEW YORK

First in a Series

The Front and Back Covers of the Book of Faith and Service ...

Sister Bea Manzella and Sister Mary Jo Colucci

By Sal Martoche

At first, these two women appear as different as night and day in demeanor and approach to service. Incredibly, the best friends since 1953 have given more than 133 years of combined service to God and neighbor.

One, Sister Bea Manzella, 86, is outgoing, confident, a born leader who fiercely charges forward to get things done, whether helping young women decide their futures or serving as president of her congregation. The other, Sister Mary Jo Colucci, 85, is quiet and contemplative. Her ministry is offered one-on-one, often behind closed doors, in the stillness of reflection and study.

What a team these two best friends make! What a combined force for good! The examples they have set of love and selflessness are inspirational. What appears so different at first glance now displays itself at its core to be the same. As Sisters of Saint Joseph, each is dedicated to the mission “to serve the dear neighbor.” Each adheres to the directive in the order’s constitution that “the quality of [their] presence is the essence of [their] ministry.”

Few names will resonate more profoundly among Buffalo area Catholics than that of Sister Bea. She influenced and guided hundreds and possibly thousands through her work in education at Mount Saint Joseph Elementary School and Mount Saint Joseph Academy. Her dedication, hard work and disciplined approach is legendary. Her service as president of the Sisters of Saint Joseph Buffalo Community, the position she served from 1993 to 2002, was exemplary. Rev. Richard A. Reina has long admired and respected Sister Bea.



Sister Bea Manzella

Father Rick, a graduate of the “Little Mount,” calls her “a force of nature” who knows how to get things done.

One day, as a teenager walking back to her North Buffalo home from high school, Sister Bea realized she had a vocation to serve God and those who need help and encouragement. She rushed home, determined to immediately share the good news with her parents. In her mind, the decision was made, and all must move forward. There was no time to waste. The following September, she entered the convent. Four years later, her sister Margaret followed in her footsteps and joined the same order.

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Sister Margy, 83, said all her siblings were blessed with a strong streak of independence, which she believes came from their mother. She painfully recalls an auto accident on an early Sunday evening around Christmas 2019. She was driving when a truck stopped unexpectedly in front of her. She and another passenger were fine, but Sister Bea suffered a punctured lung and spinal fractures. But, with characteristic determination, Sister Bea set about the business of recovery as best she could.

Sister Mary Jo says the notation under Sister Bea's picture in their high school yearbook, "Dares to be different," was spot-on, and that mantra has followed her throughout her life. Sister Bea was always an innovator, promoting new ideas that seem commonplace today, such as team-teaching and specialization in single subjects as a way to help young people prepare for the world outside of school. She also taught science lessons on educational TV for 17 years, working with WNED in a pioneering award-winning series.

After "retirement," she worked at the TRY Program (Teaching and Restoring Youth) as house manager, assisting her colleague, Sister Janet DiPasquale. "I shopped and cooked and met a lot of nice young women," noted Sister Bea. She has been a longtime volunteer pre-GED tutor at Gerard Place. It didn't matter to her what she did as long as she was being helpful to others. "I'm Italian, I love people," she said with a laugh.

The Federation of Italian-American Societies of Western New York has honored her with its God, Family and Country Award for her lifelong devotion to education. She told me she worried greatly about the lack of vocations as she saw the members in her congregation dwindling and growing older. With her usual optimism, she recognized the increasingly important role of laymen and women to carry Christ's torch and continue the ministries the sisters had begun.

She said the lessons lay people had learned from associating with the nuns had well prepared them to carry on to greater heights. "There are so many people



Sisters Mary Jo Colucci & Bea Manzella

out there -- single, married, widowed -- who want to make a difference. That's when I knew that the time for change had come and I am good with that," she said.

She pointed out that her friend and lifetime colleague, Sister Mary Jo, the daughter and only child of legendary Erie County Court Judge Ernest J. Colucci and his wife Josephine, was her counselor and sounding board. "That's what Mary Jo does better than anyone else I know," says Sister Bea. "She listens and enables you to take a different look at things, look at them in a different light. When things look bleak or frightening, she helps you see through the maze. It's interesting. She doesn't say much, but she guides you and helps you make sense of it all."

Sister Mary Jo describes herself as a spiritual companion. Even a brief conversation with Sister Mary Jo

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makes it clear she is a quiet force, guiding people to find how God works in their lives. “Helping people through the maze,” as she says. Her modesty, humility and goodness shine through; the force of this impact clarifies that this is her gift.

She works with everyone - Catholics, Jews, Protestants, atheists, gays, straights, married, single, poor, rich. Whoever finds the way to her door will be helped without reservation. She has led retreats and spoken at parishes throughout Western New York for decades. She regularly conducts sessions at Trinity United Methodist Church on Grand Island.

She had a wonderful relationship with her parents but, as an only child, she knew they were conflicted by her decision to enter the convent. She laughingly tells the story about her father wanting to see her when she was a novice at the convent. He became impatient and went to see the sister superior to tell her how much he and his wife missed their only child. It had been weeks since they’d spoken to her and they needed to see and

talk to her. He was not used to taking no for an answer, so when the sister superior said, “You can’t see your daughter because of canon law,” he looked at her and said, “When are you going to fire that canon?”

When asked about the benefits of pursuing personal spiritual growth in the 21st century, Sister Mary Jo responded, “Many (people) want to seek out where God is in all this mess to help them live more fully, lovingly and contemplatively. Having someone to listen to them, share their stories in a safe and sacred space is one way.”

That’s her way. Sister Bea’s way has been more public and more vigorous, but equally powerful. Together, these two religious women religious have made Western New York better for so many dear neighbors.

Future issues of Per Niente Magazine will tell the stories of pioneering Italian-American women judges, lawyers, artists, pharmacists and many more. Please send your suggestions to:

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Judge Ernest J. Colluci, wife Josephine, daughter Sr. Mary Joe