

Environmental activism blooms at SS. Columba-Brigid

By **PATRICK J. BUECHI**
STAFF REPORTER

There's a small parish in the inner city of Buffalo that has set a benchmark for environmentalism. SS. Columba-Brigid on Hickory Street has replaced the green of the grass with bright reds and yellows of flowers that generate oxygen and provide food for butterflies and bees. This effort earned the parish a Saint Kateri Habitat designation by the Saint Kateri Conservation Center.

Inspired by their pastor, Father William "Jud" Weisknar, OFM, who often preaches on Pope Francis' environmental encyclical, "Laudato Si," the parish took steps to care more for creation. Now a team of 15 Gardenin' Angels keep hard at work digging up large patches of grass and replacing it with native plants designed to thrive in the area.

When the current church was built in 2006, two stands of arbor vitae were planted, one of 33 trees, the other 17. In 2019, inkberry and potentilla were introduced. Virginia creeper was planted along a stretch of chain link fence to attract hummingbirds. In 2020, the grass on a parking lot island was replaced with colorful butterfly weed and goldenrod.

"We do not have a masterplan because there is so much that can change. But, we're kind of taking one section a year and transforming it," explained Melissa Weisknar, one of the Gardenin' Angels, as well as the pastor's sister.

The project has three distinct benefits for the parish: it beautifies the area, it improves the ecosystem, and it builds community.

"One is just visual. People have come through and said, 'Wow, it's so nice to see how things look' and in these tough times, having something beautiful to look at makes a difference," said Weisknar. "I think it's walking the talk about Care for Creation; really having native species that attract birds and butterflies and bees and so forth. And it's an opportunity to bring the parish community together in a different way. When you look at all the hours that people have put in so far this season. We just enjoy coming to plant



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Tom Talty, parish council president at SS. Columba-Brigid Parish, takes on the role of "Holy Waterer" as he makes sure the butterfly weed and goldenrod do not dry out. SS. Columba-Brigid Parish have transformed the parish's greenspace into a colorful, environmentally healthy garden, earning them designation as a Saint Kateri Habitat.

and weed and water and spread mulch and trim. It brought that part of the parish community closer together."

This has been a learning experience for the angels, as they grew to understand the difference between native and invasive plants. Native plants belong in the particular region where they are planted. They grow there naturally, provide habitat and food for wildlife, and don't cause any harmful effects on the environment. Invasive plants are always non-native. They sometimes take over when introduced to a new habitat causing problems for the local ecosystem. This could cause negative effects on wildlife, insects, trees and other plants. The Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper offers a handy native plant guide.

"I've always done the gardening, but she really put a better emphasis on

natural planting," said Betsy Tirado, referring to Weisknar's direction. "It's been a learning experience for me. I enjoy gardening, so it was very easy to take part in this."

Tom Talty, parish council president, leads a team of Holy Waterers, who come in every night to water the plants if there's no rain. They are in constant contact with Weisknar for updates on the weather.

"This is our meeting," he said, pointing to the eight people of all ages digging in the dirt. "We try to keep social distancing going, so we'll have a big circle in the parking lot and communicate as to what we're doing."

Talty and his wife joined the parish in 2017 after moving to North Buffalo. They stopped in to visit and found themselves swept up in the diverse energy the parish offers.

"The culture here and the atmosphere here is dynamic. It's a wide breadth of communities. It's a melting pot. I learned a lot of different things," he said.

The parish is always looking for ways to better its stewardship to the environment. Already, it supports renewable energy through a Community Solar program, uses compost bins, recycles, brings in young environmental activists to speak with the youth. There is even a bike rack to encourage people to cycle to church, rather than drive a car.

The Saint Kateri Conservation Center offers a habitat ministry that encourages individuals, parishes, schools, religious orders, and working landowners to restore their homes in a way that praises God and fosters a

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St. Kateri Habitat Program focuses on God and the Catholic Faith

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greater connection between people and nature by restoring yards, gardens, schools, farms, and wetlands into healthy habitats for people and wildlife. Creating healthy habitats can be as simple as planting a tree or growing wildflowers for bees and butterflies.

With a focus on God and the Catholic faith, the Saint Kateri Habitat Program provides living, sacred spaces for people to engage directly in the care of God's creation at home and in their communities. By restoring habitats with reverence and gratitude for the Creator, the program draws people closer to God and his Church while protecting the integrity of creation.

Saint Kateri Habitats should provide food, water, cover and space for wildlife, as well as native trees, shrubs and wildflowers to promote biodiversity. Food, water and space for people, such as vegetable gardens and farms. There should be ecosystem services, such as pollination, clean air and water, carbon storage for climate regulation, and a control of invasive

species. Clean, renewable energy and sustainable practices for buildings and property should also be included. Lastly, a sacred space for prayer and contemplation, such as a Mary garden or shrine should be included. SS. Columba-Brigid has a monument to Sister Karen Klimczak, SSJ, a tireless supporter of peace and justice. At least one Catholic religious expression is

required, which may include crosses, wayside shrines, grottos, stations of the cross, Saint Kateri Habitat signs, or statues of Mary, an angel, or a saint. This religious expression is a reminder that God – the Holy Spirit – is present and active in every corner of creation.

For more information visit www.kateri.org or www.columba-brigid.org.



PATRICK J. BUECHI/STAFF WRITER

Melissa Weiksna (left) teaches young Ariyanna the importance of using native plants to have a healthy garden. The two are part of the "Gardenin' Angels" at SS. Columba-Brigid Parish in Buffalo, who have transformed the parish's greenspace into a colorful, environmentally healthy garden that earned them designation as a Saint Kateri Habitat.

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Sunday Mass

9:00am, 12:00 Noon, and 5:00pm

Rosary Procession and Benediction with
 the Blessed Sacrament, 3:00pm

Pilgrimages for September cancelled, including Vietnamese Day, Blessing of Oranges,
 Korean Day & NF Rosary Crusade. Individuals and Families Welcome!



BIBLE REFLECTION GROUP

Mondays w/ Fr. Peter Calabrese, CRSP in Fatima Hall at 7:30pm.

Sat., Sep. 5 FIRST SATURDAY DEVOTIONS

11:00am Rosary & Confessions 3:30pm Rosary & Confessions
 11:30am Mass 4:00pm Mass
 12:15pm Benediction

Sun., Sep. 6 HEALING MASS

6:30pm Following Mass, Individual Blessings with the Blessed Sacrament / No laying on of hands

Sat., Oct. 3 FIRST SATURDAY DEVOTIONS - see above for schedule

Sun., Oct. 4 HEALING MASS 6:30pm Fr. Dan Young / Music Ministry: Mary Palmer

Sun., Oct 25 BLESSING of CARS following 3pm Rosary Procession & Benediction

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