

The community at St. Walburga Monastery in Elizabeth, NJ has experienced major changes over the past year. Last June, Benedictine Preschool, which was located on the grounds of the monastery, was closed due to drop in enrollment. The city of Elizabeth, as well as several neighboring towns, began to offer free preschool services. It was quickly discovered that it's hard to compete with "free."



Although still enjoying our house by the shore in Ventnor, NJ, the community began to question how much longer we would be able to hold onto the house since the cost of taxes was high and renters were becoming scarcer. In June, the beloved sun porch that overlooked the ocean collapsed right down to the basement. The discrepancy between insurance payment and cost of repairs made it clear that it was time to divest of the property. The property has since been sold, razed and is awaiting a new home for the neighbor who purchased it.

This June the community experienced one more loss after it was determined that it was no longer feasible to maintain our high school, Benedictine Academy.



The following article was in the summer issue of The Listening Post newsletter:

*Benedictine Academy completed its 105 year-old history this past spring. The difficult decision to close the school came after more than 30 years of financial struggle to maintain the institution, but it was declining enrollment that led to the closure. Only 20 freshmen registered*

*at the Academy for the year 2020-21 and the total enrollment was projected to be 115. This would be an insufficient number of students to fill classes and activities needed to maintain Benedictine's standard of education.*

*Through the diligent work of the past and present Academy Presidents: Sister Germaine Fritz, OSB and Sister Sharon McHugh, OSB along with the principal and staff, the support of the Benedictine Sisters, a dedicated advisory board of trustees, the unwavering efforts of the Advancement office and the generosity of donors, the Academy provided a quality education, tuition assistance and Benedictine values to a dwindling school population.*

*Benedictine Academy leaves a legacy of many successes: As a college prep school it sent most of its graduates to institutions of higher learning— including Princeton and Notre Dame Universities. This year, 34 of the 35 Academy graduates were accepted into colleges and universities where they hope to study in the fall. Students also did well in athletics. Older alums will remember basketball victories. In recent decades the volleyball, track and baseball teams have had moments of glory at various times. For example, in 2010 NJ Today was impressed by the track team it described as “breaking some state records and winning competitions .”*

*The school's faith and values were reflected in its motto “Whatever hurts my sister hurts me and whatever helps my sister helps me.” It was demonstrated by track team members who stopped mid-race to help a competitor who had fallen, and also by the reception of the Jefferson Gold Medal Award for Outstanding Service for 2 consecutive years. Junior Chinelo Okolo had the exciting opportunity to meet Pope Francis in 2018 when she participated with students from Benedictine schools all over the world in the celebration of the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of San Anselmo College in Rome. All Academy students, however, were enriched daily by the opportunity to “Listen, Learn, Love and Lead” in a community of young women of diverse cultures and backgrounds, and they share that experience today in their adult lives. In 105 years, the Academy has produced outstanding professionals and contributing citizens, including Justice Virginia A. Long (NJ Supreme Court 1999-2012).*

*In spite of these efforts and successes, the school joined a ten-year national trend that closed 1000 Catholic elementary and secondary schools especially in cities. At one time, the Academy drew freshmen from 15 Catholic elementary schools in the City of Elizabeth. In the year 2020-21 Elizabeth will have only one remaining Catholic grade school.*

*After the announcement of closure, Sister Sharon McHugh, OSB, President of the Academy, contacted Catholic high schools in the region to secure a place for Academy students next year. The schools responded positively and agreed that BA students would be able to continue at their current tuition in their new school.*

*A letter from the Benedictine Sisters expressed “a deep sense of sadness” in announcing the closure and thanked students’ parents, supporters and alums encouraging them to remember the Academy’s “lasting legacy of educating and empowering young women for the future,” and “to be very proud of the significant impact Benedictine Academy has had on Catholic education and on generations of women.”*

On a brighter note, over the past couple of years, the community has been working on Strategic Planning to deal with the issue of right sizing buildings and space. Shane Larsen from Schemmer in Des Moines, IA began the process of helping the community to look at needs, wants and imaginative desires. Based on that, Shane developed a basic concept from which to work. Deciding to have a local architect, the community brought in Don Fiore from Heintz and Fiore Architects. After looking at the original concept as well as a couple of other possibilities, the community agreed on a concept that will involve the renovation of space for a new infirmary and new residence for the Sisters. The demolition of a couple of buildings will help to right size and make the overall complex more manageable and cost effective. Once the contract with Heintz and Fiore is signed, which should be imminent, the creation of schematic drawings will begin. The project is expected to be completed in about two years.

The community continues to do what they can while the pandemic rages through the country. Below are just some of the sights to be seen in and about the monastery since the pandemic started:



*Social distancing in the church and dining room became the norm.*





*Our Prioress, Sister Mary,  
and Infirmiry Director,  
Sister Sharon were  
quarantined for two weeks  
due to exposure to a COVID-  
19 patient.*



*The community watched  
Mass with our pandemic  
parish in Milwaukee – Old  
St. Mary’s – good preaching,  
good music, good video – felt  
like we were really there.*

*St. Benedict says the monastery is never without guests.  
Here are a few that have graced the monastery grounds throughout the pandemic:*



*Oh  
Deer!*



