

After death, two women remembered in Mary Garden

By Jenny Berg reporter@independentreview.net | Posted: Thursday, November 6, 2014 6:00 am



Blessing the Mary Garden

Bishop John M. LeVoir of the New Ulm Diocese blesses the Mary Garden at St. John's Catholic Church in Darwin. The garden and grotto was constructed in the mid-1900s, but parishioners recently paved a pathway to the grotto, added another bench and replanted the garden.

While swinging a golden censer filled with incense, Bishop John LeVoir of the Diocese of New Ulm blessed a grotto and garden at St. John's Catholic Church in Darwin on the evening of Oct. 20.

The blessing, which honored the new Mary Garden at the grotto, happened too late for the garden's biggest supporters to attend — organizers Diane Olson and Charlene Benoit both died before the garden was blessed.

But to their families and the congregation, the women remain present in the church's Mary Garden.

"Everything was meant to happen," said Benoit's daughter, Susan Steuck of Dassel. "I mean, we lost mom, but she lives on through that project."

Benoit died of cancer in May, and Olson died due to liver cirrhosis two weeks before the Mary Garden was blessed. But both were determined to see the garden finished.

The stone grotto, which encases a statue of Mary, was built sometime around the 1950s by parishioners, said the Rev. Joseph Steinbeisser, pastor at St. Philip's Catholic Church in Litchfield.

A unique — and colorful — element of the grotto's interior is the bright and shiny ceramic pieces that glow around the statue of Mary.

"When it was constructed, the mosaic interior was made from parishioners who brought pieces from their home — marbles, broken china pieces and different colored glass," he said.

The grotto and statue was designed to be an outside prayer space and a reminder of God's presence, Steinbeisser said.

"Its location and design is there to passersby from the train and highway can see a statue of Mary and remind them to pray to God and that God is watching over them," he said. "In the former days when it was erected, there were a lot or people riding the train."

When it was built, the grotto was surrounded by a garden.

"But over the years the garden disappeared," Steinbeisser said. "Our goal was to bring a garden back around the grotto and make it more accessible."

Olson, a member of the congregation, spearheaded the committee to raise money and bring the grotto and garden back to its glory days. Olson, who died Oct. 13 at the age of 66, was inspired to create the Mary Garden after seeing one on a vacation.

"She saw a garden in South Dakota," said George Olson, Diane's husband of 39 years. "We went out there and she fell in love with the garden."

The Olsons were members of St. John's Catholic Church for more than 10 years. They resided in Dassel on Diane's parents' farm, and had recently moved to Litchfield when Diane died.

A gardener herself, Diane worked to raise money for the Mary Garden and helped pick out flowering plants that were related to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

But funds fell short of the needed amount to pave a cement pathway, add a new bench and purchase the flowers.

Committee member Charlene Benoit, who was a member of the church for more than 30 years, decided to help raise the needed funds — but not in the way she had planned.

Benoit, who died in May at the aged of 75, discovered she had colon cancer in early May. Because she didn't experience any pain with the cancer, Benoit didn't realize she was sick before the cancer had spread to her liver and lungs.

"She was diagnosed with colon cancer, and she lived 27 days from her diagnosis, so she planned her whole funeral," Steuck said, noting the Blessed Virgin Mary and the rosary were very important to Benoit.

Benoit was determined to see the garden completed, so she requested all memorials be made out to the church for the Mary Garden, which helped other parishioners complete the project. Steuck said her family added to the garden a third bench in memory of her mother and father, and hopes to add more plants to the garden every year.

"It will probably be a work in progress for a while," she said.

While Benoit was never able to see the garden completed, Olson did. Olson missed the blessing of the garden by about two weeks, though.

"I wish she would have lived long enough to enjoy it," George Olson said.

Olson said he plans to visit the garden, as well as the cemetery near the garden where Diane is buried.

And while the grotto was built to face the railway to remind people of God, the pathway and garden now face the church as a way to welcome the parishioners toward the quiet escape the grotto provides.

"Today, it's kind of a meditation space, a prayer space," Steinbeisser said.