



# A Force of Nature

## Remembering Sister Ann O'Neill

By Jonathan Liedl

“A force of nature.” That’s how those who knew Sister Ann O’Neill often described the St. Joseph of Carondelet sister and longtime Catholic Rural Life member and supporter, who passed away this past January.

But what kind of “force of nature”? A driving wind or a clap of thunder? A mountainside avalanche, or maybe a quick-spreading prairie fire?

Perhaps one colleague captured the essence of Sister Ann’s impactful persona best when she remarked that engaging with the religious sister was like “stepping into a moving stream.” Indeed, the North Dakota native and longtime Minnesotan shared many qualities with the waterways that crisscross the Upper Midwest.

Like a river, Sister Ann was “relentless, in a good way,” recalled close friend Connie Bowen. She was a persistent advocate for causes she cared about, always finding a way to circumvent obstacles and help things flow forward. Likewise, Sister Ann had a gift for making connections—connecting seemingly disparate ideas, but especially for connecting different people in her world

together—all for the sake of creating new currents and bringing new life to the world around her.

Both aspects of Sister Ann’s river-like character—her dynamism and her ability to draw others into causes she cared about—were perhaps best exemplified in her passionate advocacy for Native Americans, a people for whom she had developed a great respect for from a young age, thanks to her father’s friendship with the indigenous people living near their family’s western North Dakota farm.

Bowen, for instance, recalled meeting Sister Ann in 2012, at a meeting of the Carondelet sisters’ Native American Awareness Working Group. Sister Ann saw that Connie was taking notes, so at the start of the next meeting she approached her and asked, “Do you have everything you need?” Caught off guard, Bowen asked, “For what?” The sister replied, “You’re our new recording secretary!” It’s a role in which Bowen served for the next 7 years.

Being enlisted into the cause is something many who knew Sister Ann can relate to, but perhaps no experience was remembered more widely than being on the

receiving end of one of her “literature dumps.” Sister Ann wouldn’t see anyone without making sure to pass off a healthy stack of pamphlets, papers, and even books, all somehow related to Native American concerns, from maps of watersheds to histories of indigenous peoples in Minnesota to contemporary challenges on the reservations.

“I always had to make sure I had extra room in my briefcase whenever I was going to meet her,” recalled Craig Hassel, professor of Food Science and Nutrition at the University of Minnesota. Hassel first met Sister Ann through her advocacy on behalf of the Dream of Wild Health indigenous farm in Hugo, Minnesota.

Sister Ann’s passion for Native American concerns flowed from the conviction that Catholics of European descent had much to learn from indigenous culture, particularly the relational, integrated way the Anishinaabe people and others saw the connection between themselves, the created world, and the Creator. But even more foundationally, she was convinced that advocating on behalf of Native peoples was a matter of justice, considering the his



tory of mistreatment indigenous Americans have experienced, as well as present day threats to their way of life and wellbeing.

It was these convictions that brought Sister Ann to CRL's doorstep in Spring 2008, when Jim Ennis became executive director and operations moved to the campus of the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, close to where she lived. Ennis remembered that it was no more than three weeks after he'd set up shop that the sister came to his office, introduced herself as a longtime CRL member, and promptly asked if the organization was doing anything with the Native American community.

Ennis admitted they weren't, and acknowledged that he had no expertise on the subject. Not missing a beat, Sister Ann replied, "Well, I can help you with that."

She made it her mission to bring CRL's executive director up to speed on some of the challenges and injustices facing Native communities, from widespread poverty to traditional practices of harvesting *manoomin*, or wild rice, being threatened by corporate attempts to introduce genetically modified species and industrialized processes. Once a month, Sister Ann and Ennis would meet for coffee, always bringing her customary stack of literature and articles.

As Ennis learned more about Native communities and the challenges facing them, he saw a clear fit with the mission of CRL and plenty of opportunities for ministry. In fact, he sees engagement with Native peoples as cutting across all three organizational

principles: rural ministry, ethical food and agriculture, and stewardship of creation. In particular, Ennis saw the importance of helping to revitalize Native culture—a culture that he says Catholics like St. Kateri Tekakwitha and Servant of God Nicholas Black Elk were "fully alive in"—especially in an era of rising secularism and widespread addiction and depression.

"When you're cut out from your culture, you lose your identity, you lose hope, you're not grounded anymore," he noted.

But Ennis also recognized potential obstacles, stemming from the fact that members of the Catholic Church have, in some cases, undercut Native culture. For instance, boarding schools established by religious groups, including Catholics, played a significant role in stripping Native peoples of their traditions and language. As a result, division and mistrust can linger.

Aware of this challenge, Sister Ann knew the best way to move forward would be to facilitate connections between Ennis and CRL and Native communities. She introduced him to, among others, Joe LaGarde of White Earth Nation, a longtime advocate for protecting his people's culture and traditions.

"To build credibility or build relationships, you have to build trust, and that takes time and keeping your word," Ennis said.

But Sister Ann didn't just provide CRL with connections to Native leaders. She also provided crucial support, helping to establish the Earl and Kathy Hoaglund Sacred Manoomin Fund in 2013. The fund assists efforts to protect

*manoomin*, which is not just a source of food for the Anishinaabe people, but is an integral part of their heritage and spiritual and cultural practices today. While the fund is managed by the Catholic Community Foundation, CRL administers the donor advisory committee, of which LaGarde, Hassel, and Ennis are members.

Initially, the fund prioritized providing scholarships to help Native students attend workshops, conferences, trips, or even full academic semester trainings focused on cultural issues. Since 2013, \$165,000 has been distributed in the form of scholarships.

But eventually, those involved recognized that for the resources to be more effective, creating an organization singularly dedicated to protecting *manoomin* and Anishinaabe culture through cultural education programming needed to be prioritized. Thus, in 2017, resources from the fund were used to establish the Niibi Center, an educational nonprofit that takes its name



from the Ojibwe word for water.

"It's given us a voice that we needed," said LaGarde, who serves as the Niibi Center's founding executive director.

Today, the Niibi Center has grown from a concept to a fully-fledged 501(c)(3) organization capable of receiving outside grants, with its own board of directors, a dedicated staff of three, and an office in Callaway, Minnesota, located in White Earth Nation.

Inspiration for the endeavor was drawn from similar organizations around the country, such as The Salish Institute in the Pacific Northwest.

The center has played an important role in developing and co-sponsoring important initiatives that align with its mission, such as the bi-annual Nibi\* Minawaa Manoomin Symposium put on by the University of Minnesota and Anishinaabe Nations. Recognizing that *manoomin* is traditionally the domain of Anishinaabe women, the Niibi Center hosts small and large gatherings that lift up the leadership of indigenous women and their role in passing on

knowledge and ceremony about *niibi* and *manoomin*. The center is also creating a White Earth-specific approach to learning about and addressing historical trauma, which LaGarde said isn't about "stirring the pot," but promoting community healing. Additionally, the center's Institute for the Rights of Nature focuses on fully enforcing White Earth's Rights of Manoomin legislation, designed to protect *niibi* and *manoomin* under tribal law.

LaGarde said he's most excited, however, about the Niibi Center's efforts to revitalize the Ojibwe language among the Anishinaabe people, particularly the youth. The center recently received a grant to develop an immersive language model toward that end, and currently has two Ojibwe language teachers on its board.

"Losing our language was a huge thing," said LaGarde, linking it to a wider loss of identity and understanding of tribal teachings. "So we have to start bringing that back in order to make change in our community."

A unique aspect of the Niibi Center is that it isn't just dedicated to end goals like protecting *manoomin* or restoring Ojibwe language skills. Its approach is also grounded in indigenous culture and knowledge, which Hassel said is a huge step forward and perfectly in line with Sister Ann's vision for the fund she helped establish.

"Where in society do Anishinaabe people have a chance to create something based solely on their culture?" he asked. "Here is a place where they can center and ground their own cultural tradi-

tions and identity unencumbered by mainstream forces."

Michael Dockry, a professor of Forest Resources at the University of Minnesota and a relatively recent addition to the committee that oversees the Hoaglund Sacred Manoomin Fund, is especially excited about the Niibi Center's capacity for youth engagement.

"Supporting students is vital, because that's how we move forward building opportunities for people," said Dockry, who is a member of the Potawatomi Nation and a Catholic. He hopes the Niibi Center's efforts can help more indigenous people find roles in tribal natural resource departments, or even with state or federal government agencies that work with the tribes. He also believes the center's focus on culture and relationship building—not just public policy—is essential for healing divisions not only between peoples, but also between humanity and creation, and humanity and the spiritual.

The Niibi Center is well-poised to play a transformational role in healing some of those relationships. And though, in the words of Hassel, Sister Ann "led without footprints," never drawing attention to herself, those who know her and carry on the work she was passionate about know the contribution she has made. Her mission continues on, like a vital tributary to a river now newly capable of flowing forward, downstream.

\**Niibi* and *Nibi* are used interchangeably to mean water in Ojibwe.

