

A Saint in the Making

Farm Girl on Journey to the Communion of Saints

By Kara Storey

In a little valley about 60 miles west of Bismarck, North Dakota, lies the unincorporated community of Haymarsh. It's Ken and Mary Ann Duppong's little piece of heaven on earth, where they operate a grain and Angus cattle farm, along with u-pick fruit groves.

Although the place is barely a speck on the map, it has made a large impact on the Catholic Church. Since its founding in 1890, the area has produced over 20 religious vocations. And now, with the Duppongs' daughter, Michelle, formally named a Servant of God, it may one day boast as the home of a canonized saint.

"I've always felt that the saints are with us, and the community praying for the poor souls and them interceding for us has been real for me for a long time," said Mary Ann, 73. "You just don't think of your own daughter becoming a canonized saint!"

The Duppongs have experienced quite the change from the quiet country life they knew for

Michelle Duppong (far right) leads FOCUS disciples on a four-wheeler ride over the prairie near her North Dakota home in 2013.

(All story photos used with permission from the Duppong Family.)

decades on the farm where they raised Michelle as the fourth of six children. While Ken still tends to farmwork, Mary Ann is tasked with answering inquiries related to Michelle, who died in 2015 at age 31 from complications of abdominal cancer. Ever since Bishop David Kagan of the Diocese of Bismarck opened Michelle's cause for canonization on November 1, 2022, the Duppongs' lives have been filled with speaking engagements, conferences, interview requests, and people coming onto their farm for tours, talks, and visits to Michelle's grave. Mary Ann distinctly remembers the night that Monsignor James Shea, a friend of CRL, called her to relay the news that the bishop had announced he was opening Michelle's cause. He told her that a caravan of cars containing FOCUS missionaries who were attending training at the University of Mary was on its way out to Michelle's grave that very minute.

"He said, 'There's about 100 cars here lined up, and we're all heading out. If you could meet us there, we would love to see you,'" she recalled. "I get off the phone, and I'm in disbelief, and I call my husband who's in the shop working, and I said, 'Kenny, oh my goodness! You won't believe this! You've got to come in and get cleaned up!'"

Responding to media requests and attending speaking engagements has been a daunting task that Mary Ann often wonders if she and her husband are cut out for. They're ordinary, imperfect people, she insisted. They just happen to have a daughter who is a prospective saint. In their more nervewracking moments, the Duppongs send up a quick prayer, asking for Michelle's help.

"We go, 'Michelle, you really got us into something here. You have to help us. Give me the words. What do you want us to

say? Because I'm just a nobody. I'm nothing. I'm not the same as you are, but you know what I need," Mary Ann said.

These little talks with Michelle, who joins the company of Servant of God Emil Kapaun and Blessed Stanley Rother as potential saints who grew up on farms in rural America, serve as a reminder to Mary Ann that Michelle is always with her, even if she also now belongs more widely to the universal Church. Pope Benedict XVI reminded Catholics of this fact in his Angelus address on the Feast of All Saints in 2009, stating, "We are never alone! We are part of a spiritual 'company' where profound solidarity reigns." The communion of saints "is a mystery which, in some measure, we can already experience in this world, in the family, in friendship, and especially in the spiritual community of the Church," he said.

Receiving Bad News

During the fall of 2014, Michelle had been experiencing pain in her abdomen that by Thanksgiving made it difficult for her to stand. An ultrasound confirmed she had ovarian cysts, and Michelle was told they'd go away on their own. However, by Christmas she was having trouble walking and eating, and a subsequent ultrasound found the cysts were growing, so surgery was scheduled to remove them after the Christmas holiday.

But nothing prepared the family, or the doctor, for what was discovered.

"The doctor came out and said, 'I can't believe this. Her abdomen is full of cancer from front

to back, side to side,'" Mary Ann recalled.

Michelle was diagnosed with stage four abdominal cancer and given two months to live. She sought a second opinion from the Mayo Clinic before receiving treatment at the Cancer Treatment Center of America in Illinois, where she underwent surgery to remove tumors and some organs. The treatment came with an intense amount of suffering for Michelle, who at times couldn't sleep or eat for days due to bowel restrictions.

Through this suffering Michelle never pitied herself, Mary Ann said, and instead reached out to other patients and families at the hospital, listening to their stories and encouraging them.

"She didn't want consolation in this life," Mary Ann said. "What she wanted was Jesus, and she focused on Him and His suffering."

Seeking Jesus

Mary Ann said that Michelle had a simple faith, and loved practicing devotions such as First Fridays and Saturdays, the Rosary, daily Mass, and Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Although Michelle graduated from North Dakota State University with a horticulture degree, she decided to pursue evangelization work after college, first by becoming a FOCUS missionary, and later taking on

the role as the Director of Adult Faith Formation for the Diocese of Bismarck. Mary Ann said her daughter's focus was always on giving glory to Jesus, not realizing until after Michelle's death the impact her daughter had on others.

"She never told us, 'Oh, I have this many disciples. Oh, this one converted to the faith,'" Mary Ann said. "No, she never talked about that. I didn't know until I got the letters—500 cards after her passing—one story after another, saying how Michelle had journeyed with them, led them in a new way of growing in their faith or converting to the faith."

Throughout her six years in FOCUS, many of Michelle's disciples were able to visit the farm on one of her "Haymarsh Experience" trips. She loved bringing friends home, believing there was something special about her community that provided a place where

Michelle eats a picnic on the North Dakota prairie with her dad, Ken, and a hired hand in 2013.



Michelle (in green) teaches University of Mary students a group dance in 2013 at her family's farm in Haymarsh, N.D.



one could be away from the distractions of the city and learn how to listen for God's voice, Mary Ann said.

"It could be 40 below zero, and they're out there playing 'Murder in the Dark' in the hay bales and having prayer time in that little country church without heat," Mary Ann said, "but they were before our Lord, and it was mystical. It was a beauty of faith that these young people were searching for and they were receiving answers to their own vocations."

Vocational fruit stemming from Michelle's witness has been evident to her mother, as a number of priests, religious, and FOCUS missionaries have told Mary Ann that they trace their vocations back to Michelle's influence.

Entering Eternal Life

In late November 2015, Michelle suffered cardiac and respiratory arrests and had to be intubated. Doctors gave her a 1% chance of surviving the ordeal,



and although Michelle pulled through, it was evident that she was nearing her final days. Unable to bear the thought of Michelle not dying at home, one of her doctors reduced the amount of pain medication she was receiving so that she could stand up, proving to other staff that she could endure the flight home. On December 5, Michelle arrived home to her beloved farm in Haymarsh. However, despite the recommendation to begin hospice, Michelle refused, believing Jesus still had more planned for her.

A couple of weeks later, at 11:23 p.m. on December 25, 2015, Michelle finally went home to meet Jesus.

"It was a holy death," Mary Ann recalled. "We were all able to be there on Christmas Day to say our goodbyes to Michelle, and we saw her take her last breath as we were praying together. It wasn't like a mystical experience or something. It was just peaceful."

A few weeks after her death, a religious sister who had cared for Michelle one night before she passed away approached Mary Ann and said that Michelle had told her she was going to die on Christmas day. Although the sister reminded Michelle that only God knew when He would take her, Michelle insisted that it would be Christmas Day.

"I think that one of the reasons why she was delaying hospice care was because she was wanting

to suffer as long as she needed to suffer, because our Lord wanted her to," Mary Ann said.

Early on in Michelle's cancer journey, she had a prayer experience where Jesus told her He would heal her, Mary Ann recalled. When Michelle asked Jesus if it would be in this life or the next, He told her it would be on earth. Although the family had been expecting a physical healing, Mary Ann said they've since realized the Lord was faithful to His promise.

"We feel God did heal her completely," she said. "He healed her in this life with all her suffering, and He took her home very quickly after her passing."

As for the subsequent flurry of activity surrounding her daughter's potential canonization, Mary Ann said it's been a "wild journey." The family has been told not to destroy or give away any of their daughter's possessions, and have passed along her writings and any letters or cards they've received to the postulator of her cause.

"Are we surprised? In a way, no. In a way, yes," Mary Ann said. "We can't conceive what all this entails. Every time we receive a story of another miracle, another couple that's been able to conceive, another person that saw her in their dream with a message, it's mind-blowing. It's just, how did that happen? 'Oh, Michelle, how did you do this with

Servant of God Michelle Duppong, 1984—2015.

your simple faith?”

Mary Ann said she finds it fitting that they’ve received several letters from people who believe they have conceived through Michelle’s intercession, one of which was a birth announcement for another little “Michelle.” She believes Michelle will one day be known as an intercessor for those struggling with infertility, as Michelle’s reproductive organs were removed during her cancer treatment. It was a great cross for Michelle, who had always dreamed of giving birth one day, Mary Ann noted.

Continuing Her Work

While Michelle was in the hospital, a psychologist asked her to describe her perfect day. Knowing Michelle had traveled internationally, he was expecting a grand answer. Instead, she described one of her favorite Sunday activities: “I would like to be at Haymarsh in my home, riding a four-wheeler, and having a picnic in the pasture.” Michelle

loved her home, and she loved her farm. She loved Haymarsh. To her, it was the most beautiful place in the world.

That is why it was only proper that Michelle was laid to rest on a hill in St. Clement’s Oratory Cemetery in Haymarsh, overlooking her family’s farm.

“She just loved bringing people out here—and she still is,” said Mary Ann, pointing out that hundreds, if not over a thousand young people have made a pilgrimage to Michelle’s grave, sometimes stopping by the farm to see where she grew up.

Mary Ann anticipates that those numbers will grow as more people encounter Michelle’s story and are inspired by her simple faith, giving them another connection to the community of those who have already “finished the race” in the Church Triumphant.

“We believe in the communion of all the faithful of Christ,” wrote Pope Paul VI in “Credo of the People of God,” “those who are pilgrims on earth, the dead who are attaining their purification, and the blessed in heaven, all together forming one Church; and we believe that in this communion the merciful love of God and His saints is ever listening to our prayers.”

Servant of God Michelle Duppong, pray for us.

On November 12, *FOCUS* will show “Radiating Joy: The Michelle Duppong Story” for one night only in select theaters throughout the country. For more information about Servant of God Michelle Duppong and her cause for canonization, please visit michelleduppong-cause.org.

Michelle Duppong harvests grapes in 2012 on her family’s farm.

