

Neerology

Joan Mary Wilichowski
1945-2019



On 6 July, 1945, Joan Mary Wilichowski began her journey through earthly life. The youngest child of Carl and Margaret (Corda) Wilichowski, she grew up in Marathon WI and attended Newman Catholic High School in nearby Wausau. After graduation, she went to work for Marathon Cheese Corporation in Marathon until the summer of 1971. In the first week of August, 1971, she began a new journey — a journey that would enrich the lives of countless people within the Capuchin community and beyond. That is, she began her journey of ministry at the St. Anthony Retreat Center (known since 2009 as the St.

Anthony Spirituality Center) in Marathon.

St. Anthony's had served the province as a house of studies from 1919 until 1969. In 1970, when the house was transformed into a retreat center, a good secretary was needed to help the friars keep things running smoothly in such a large and complex ministry. Provincial leadership surely knew that they had found an outstanding secretary in Joan Wilichowski, with her efficient work habits and organizational strategies, her top-of-the-line proofreading skills, her confidence in solving problems, and her phenomenal memory for names, faces, and events. The province probably didn't know that they had found "the glue," as one friar put it, "that sort of holds this place together."

For 42 years Joanie served as an anchor for the Capuchins' ministry at St. Anthony's, helping friars who were new to St. Anthony's transition smoothly into the ministry, maintaining ties with friars who had moved on to different ministries, and consistently sharing a good dose of Capuchin joy with all who contacted St. Anthony's on foot, on the phone, or on the internet. Her ready smile and her unconditional willingness to embrace — both metaphorically and literally — the stranger embodied St. Anthony's very mission. She made good use of her phenomenal memory, easily recalling the names of hundreds of retreatants — even those whom she hadn't seen in years — so that she could offer a personal welcome to all who came through St. Anthony's doors. It is no surprise that Joanie became known as the face and the voice of St. Anthony's. It is likewise no surprise that Joanie was named an affiliate of the province on May 4, 1994, in recognition of her friendship with so many friars and her dedicated service to the Capuchins' retreat ministry at Marathon.

Joanie served at St. Anthony's until December of 2013. Her retirement coincided with the transition from Capuchin to lay leadership at St. Anthony's on January 1st, 2014. After her retirement, Joanie continued to serve St. Anthony's as a volunteer, serving on committees and, naturally, greeting guests. In 2015, she expanded her volunteer service to include membership on the board of directors of St. Anthony's of Marathon, Inc. In her role as a member of the board, she was able to share her experience, wisdom, and deep understanding of the ministry of hospitality with the new lay leadership at St. Anthony's.

In retirement, she also continued dedicating time and much love to her family, her faith, and her friends. Joanie treasured relationships above all else, and no relationships were more precious to her than those that she shared with family. She took great joy in traveling with her sisters and nieces, and she loved to celebrate milestones in the lives of her nieces and nephews, such as a marriage, the birth of a new child, or the reception of First Holy Communion. She was a dedicated friend and care giver to her older sister, Lucille, with whom she shared a home for 15 years. During the last four years of her life, Joanie was delighted to share a home with one of her great-nieces, her great-niece's husband, and her two great-great-nieces. Being there with and for family and friends was always a priority for Joanie. The great-niece with whom she shared a home recalls that Joanie never put herself first; she was always thinking of others: thinking of what they struggled with and how she could help them.

This humble, generous, and beautiful-in-every-way person brought her earthly journey to a close on June 19, 2019 after having suffered a brain aneurysm on the 14th of June. She had spent the day of the 14th volunteering with friends at her beloved St. Anthony's, and she died on the 19th surrounded by her beloved family at the University Hospital in Madison.

As we remember Joan Wilichowski in prayer today, we are confident that she would have asked that we join her in praying for those most in need of our love: the hungry, the homeless, the outcast – the lepers of our day. Joanie was a model of joy and love, and those of us who work and live at St. Anthony's are proud to do our best to keep that love and joy alive for each other, for our volunteers, for our guests, for our neighbors, and for the Capuchins from whom we inherited this ministry of hospitality.

One of our staff members noted that she frequently, when confronted with a challenging situation, finds herself asking, "What would Joanie do?" Surely Joanie's response would have been one of joy, generosity, and love. So may our response to others be on this day when we remember Joan and always.

~ Lori Randall

Executive director, St. Anthony Spirituality Center