

Daily Courier

Nun stays fit, and gets new calling

By A.J. Panian
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When Sister Mary Anita Bienia says she takes each step for the love of God, she means every word of it.

"Every step ... every one," said Bienia, a 69-year-old Mt. Pleasant native who in 1960 joined the Felician Franciscans, a Beaver Falls-based convent with 800 members who are dispersed across America.

In June, Bienia began taking part in "WalkingSpree, Excelsa Health's 1 Million Step Challenge."

The goal for participants was to accumulate at least 5,464 steps per day on a pedometer.

Between her start date and the end of 2011, Bienia — whose registered name in the program was "Felician" — was averaging between 20,000 and 30,000 steps daily.

In the process, Bienia proclaimed, she saw her weight drop eight pounds and, more importantly, her cholesterol level plummet from 265 to 149.

The walking "really betters your body's healing abilities," Bienia said.

Bienia recently completed nearly 12 years of employment in the hematology and chemistry departments of the laboratory at Excelsa Health Westmoreland Hospital.

Now, Bienia is preparing to embark on a journey in which she will use her newfound drive for long-distance walking to answer a call to service delivered to those in her order in late December.

That's when she received a letter from Sister Mary Barbara Ann Bosch, minister general of the Felician Sisters — Congregation of the Sisters of St. Felix of Cantalice — all the way from Rome.

In the letter, Bosch noted that Italy's dire economic situation has resulted in days in which up to 100 people arrive at the congregation gate in Rome seeking food.

"Even women and their children come, which is a real heartbreaker, and that has increased with the economic downturn, so the correlation is very obvious there," said Bosch, who in May will complete her six-year term as the order's minister general. "We certainly would not want to say we won't help them."

However, the task of preparing food for those in need, along with tending to any additional requests from those at the gate, have put a considerable burden on the sisters there, who each have their own full-time ministries within the extremely large convent.

Bosch was seeking a sister who would be willing to make the feeding of the poor her full-time ministry. But, she said, the sister who took on this task must be physically able to walk well.

Bosch said she heard immediately from Sister Anita.

"She was the first to answer the call, and there were quite many," Bosch said. "She said, 'I hope no one else has this ministry already.'"

No one did, and Bienia was awarded the task.

Since then, she has been preparing for her move with the help of Sister Mary Ambrose Wozniak, the order's secretary general, along with Carla Lucenti at Duquesne University, who are assisting Bienia in getting work permits to enable her to serve overseas.

Her upcoming mission, along with her decades of work in healthcare and education, were a natural calling, she said.

An Oklahoma University graduate, Bienia began her health care career as an X-ray technologist at St. Francis Hospital in Pittsburgh in 1963.

After two years working there, she trained as a lab technologist at St. Francis Hospital in Tulsa.

She then spent five years at St. Joseph Hospital in Port Charlotte, Fla., and 17 years at Okarche Hospital in Okarche, Okla., before returning to St. Joseph for another 12 years.

She arrived at Excela Health Westmoreland in 2000.

"She was an exemplary employee," said Barbara Day, system manager of Excela Health laboratories. "She was the person that, when everything was falling apart ... was very kind. We're a busy lab, but she'd come in her little habit and she would always be peaceful."

Working second shifts there allowed Bienia to continue her health ministry at St. Anne Home in Greensburg, a ministry of the Felicians dedicated to healing and supportive services for adults.

On Feb. 15, Bienia will turn 70.

Twelve days later, she will embark on her journey to Rome.

Bienia has been told her service in Rome is indefinite, so her co-workers, friends and family are seeing her off with a series of emotional get-togethers.

"We've already been doing the crying. I'll miss her," said Martina Pirl, 55, of Norvelt, who is Bienia's second cousin. "She's just a wonderful person and she's the perfect candidate for this calling. I'm very honored she's going to do this for the poor, but I'm not surprised they picked her to do it."

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