

SAINT CLARE PARISH PROFILE JENNIFER & MIKE VAN HELVOIRT



Ever since she was a kindergartner in the Wisconsin village of Butternut, Jennifer Van Helvoirt knew she wanted to be a teacher.

That aspiration stuck with her through college as she pursued a teaching degree at Carroll College.

But she didn't intend on teaching at a Catholic school, in part because she wasn't exposed to any during her youth or student-teaching experiences. So she was all set to graduate and move to California, where she'd teach and live with her cousin.

"Then I decided at the last minute to stay in Wisconsin," Jennifer said. "I got a job in a Catholic school, and I've never looked back. I remember thinking, 'Where has this been my whole life?' I loved it from day one, and I've never looked at a public school job since."

Twenty-two years later, Jennifer still embraces her role as a Catholic school teacher. She's in

her fourth year teaching at St. Clare Catholic School; she's the fourth-grade homeroom teacher and part of a cohort instructing grades 2-4 (she handles religion, math and cursive handwriting).

Jennifer's commitment, caring demeanor and teaching talents haven't gone unnoticed. Last spring, she was among a select group of educators in the region to receive a prestigious Teacher of Distinction honor as part of the Greater Green Bay Chamber's Golden Apple Awards.

"She still has students who stay in touch with her who were her students 20 years ago," said Jennifer's husband, Mike. "She's so good with relationships with kids and has such an impact on their lives. She's passionate about it and spends a lot of time preparing and doing individual work with the kids. It's amazing to see how much love there is in the classroom. ... She's got a special gift to reach kids and create a relationship that's really unique."

Jennifer's entire family is involved in St. Clare Parish, where they have been parishioners for five years. Mike serves as a sacristan, and the couple's three oldest children — Owen, 17; Emily, 15; and Alex, 12 — are altar servers. Their youngest son, Eli, 8, soon will become an altar server as well. Alex and Eli attend St. Clare School.

Jennifer's teaching career began in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, primarily in Brookfield and Germantown.

"When I was at the Archdiocese of Milwaukee I taught second grade for six of those seven years, so I prepared students for First Reconciliation and First Communion," she said. "Ever since I stepped away from that there was a hole, if you will (when she devoted about 12 years to raising her children). While I am so grateful to have stayed home when raising young children, getting back into a Catholic classroom has fulfilled my personal teaching aspirations. My favorite subjects to teach are religion, math and cursive. The students truly love religion class. Sharing God's word, which is the truth, is very easy for kids to absorb and I get to watch as they build personal relationships with God and Jesus. Nothing beats being able to be a part of that!"

Jennifer and Mike met on Jennifer's first day of classes at Carroll College. They were friends for four years and began dating after college, eventually getting married in 2000 in Butternut.

When they were living in the Milwaukee area, Mike was working overseas in China when Jennifer let him know they would be having their second child. So they re-evaluated their work-life balance and moved to Kaukauna, where they lived for 10 years and attended Holy Cross Catholic School and Parish.

Then they moved to England for a year, before returning to the area and settling in Wrightstown about five years ago.

"We had so many connections at Holy Cross, so it was really hard for us to think about moving parishes when we came back," Jennifer said. "But when we came here to St. Clare, it was so nice to see how many families were welcoming and inviting us to activities. Getting to know the community happened through the parish and the school."

Added Mike: "We've gained a lot of friends through the parish. They've been very welcoming to us."

Mike works at Miller Electric and is familiar with this area of the Fox Valley. He was raised in nearby Little Chute and attended St. John's Catholic grade school. He values being able to help as a sacristan at St. Clare.

"It makes you feel good that you can help out with the Mass," he said. "Sacristans are mostly

behind the scenes, but that's fine with me. I just like to be involved in some way, shape or form."

Mike and Jennifer also served on the parish's Welcoming Committee and Raffle Committee.

As a family, the Van Helvoirts try to attend confession regularly. They learned through a priest that going to confession is a time to celebrate.

"So after we go to confession as a family we always go out for ice cream or go out to eat or do something to celebrate the cleanliness of our soul," Jennifer said. "Also, on the way to Mass we encourage the children to think about what they'd like to offer their Mass for. I hope they carry those things on with their families as well, along with the morning prayer, meal prayers and nighttime prayers."

Mike and Jennifer said St. Clare Parish and St. Clare Catholic School have had a positive impact on their children's development.

Jennifer added that she fell in love with the school environment early on. Upon moving to Wrightstown, she worked as a substitute teacher at St. Clare Catholic School for a period of time before transitioning to a full-time teacher.

"It didn't take me long when I was a sub to see the family-like atmosphere is the overarching theme of the school," she said. "The teachers know and care about all the students in every grade. We look for each other, we look out for each other's kids. That stood out to me right away as a substitute teacher. I could tell how easy it would be to fit in and teach there. The teachers function as a family, and all of our St. Clare students are 'our kids.'"

These days, Jennifer strives to continue being a positive influence in the lives of her students ... just like her teachers were to her when she was little.

"It's fun to see the kids in my class who say they want to be a teacher now, and I can see it in their eyes that it's something they really want to do someday," she said. "A couple of my former students are now teachers. Maybe some of my current students will be too. Whatever my students become, I feel honored to have been a part of their lives."