

# Celebrating 5 Super Seniors' work in smaller parishes

written by Katie Zakrzewski |



You've probably heard a grandparent or parent say, "It's not easy getting old."

But in spite of the numerous challenges that come with growing older, many seniors all across Arkansas are just as vibrant as ever when it comes to volunteering in their parishes.



Tomasa Ochoa, 76, stands beside a statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe outside St. Barbara Church in De Queen. Ochoa reminds older parishioners there is a place for them in their parish. Courtesy Father Ramsés Mendieta.

## **Tomasa Ochoa, 76**

At 76 years old, Tomasa Ochoa strives to set an example for other parishioners at St. Barbara Church in De Queen, where she has been a member for 25 years.

Father Ramsés Mendieta, pastor of St. Barbara, said Ochoa's faith is an inspiration for Catholics around the diocese.

"Tomasita has been so faithful to our weekly Eucharistic adoration," Father Mendieta said. "She sings at the 12 p.m. chorus, leads rosary as part of the Legion of Mary and makes house visits with the Mission and Intercession Ministry."

Ochoa said her faith motivates her through the aches and pains.

"My service at the Church helps to spread a witness of Christ's love among us," Ochoa said. "Despite my age and physical pains, I support myself on God's call to holiness. There's no impediment to serve him through the little things in our parish — just accompany him in adoration."

Ochoa hopes to remind other older parishioners their work in the Church is still valuable.

"I also tried to show the elderly they are not alone, and they still have a special invaluable call in our community. It motivates me," Ochoa said. "He is calling me to serve, and all things I do to please him. I'd love to do more for Jesus, but I know what he has entrusted me. I do it in

gratitude and so much love.”



Marietta Marcotte, 84, takes pictures with her great-granddaughter, Nora Grace Radley, after her baptism at St. Leo Church in Hartford April 8, 2023. Courtesy Marietta Marcotte.

## **Marietta Marcotte, 84**

Faith can move mountains, and Marietta Marcotte’s faith has had an incredible impact on her devotion to St. Leo Church in Hartford. At 84-years-old, Marcotte brings a blend of tradition and ingenuity to all of her parish efforts.

Marcotte helped develop the parish Altar Society and organizes fundraisers to care for the church. She has helped with her parish’s Altar of the Dead and helps provide funeral dinners any time a death occurs in the parish.

Marcotte’s late husband, Idris, was a builder who helped restore the church’s windows and their frames. When she’s not organizing or repairing, she regularly meets with other parishioners to take inventory of things that need to be repaired and accomplished. Marcotte has also helped organize parish dinners and events.

A talented seamstress, Marcotte salvaged decorative altar linens and drapes during remodeling at the parish and used strips of the fabric to create chasubles and repair existing chasubles for the priest.

Marcotte has also become known as the archivist at St. Leo. Her love for history grew when the church she attended while living in Kansas was demolished.

“My husband and I made two or three trips to northwest Kansas where our kids were all

baptized. We were married there. And it just disappeared.”

Determined not to lose the history of her second parish, Marcotte and her family became deeply involved, keeping a record of the updates.

“I’ve tried to keep up with the changes that I’ve seen in the church,” Marcotte said, keeping a diligent record of when renovations and remodelings took place in the mission church, and which priests tended to the parish in which years.

Marcotte even remembers before St. Leo had indoor heating and plumbing.

“I’m just interested in the history of things like that,” Marcotte said.

Marcotte and her family were able to salvage some of the items from her former Kansas parish and bring them to St. Leo, ensuring the old parish’s memory would live on forever.

Marcotte said while the work she does might be harder to do now than it was before, her faith in God keeps her going.

“I feel like I am earning my membership to heaven,” Marcotte said with a laugh.

Father Joseph Chan, pastor at St. Leo Church, said when it comes to talking about super seniors, Marcotte is certainly one of the best.

“We are proud and blessed to have her and her family in our small parish,” Father Chan said.



Gail Zanoff, 83, speaks with Bishop Anthony B. Taylor as he signs the Book of Elect for St. Francis of Assisi Church in Fairfield Bay Feb. 18 during the Rite of Election at Christ the King Church in Little Rock.

## Gail Zanoff, 83

For Gail Zanoff, 83, no task is too big or too small if it helps her parish, St. Francis of Assisi Church in Fairfield Bay. Zanoff has been a member there for 33 years and has spent decades doing a host of tasks and serving in a litany of positions to help her parish. Zanoff is involved with the Liturgy Commission and Social Justice Commission. She helps families and prepares the church during funerals. Zanoff coordinates ministers to the sick and takes Communion to homebound parishioners and parishioners in nursing homes. Zanoff also coordinates picking up and transporting homebound parishioners to Mass, as well as washing and tidying church linens.

Zanoff, whose late husband was parish Deacon Frank Zanoff, said she has always done this kind of service to her church.

“In the 80s, I went to a talk by Father Richard Rohr. He said, ‘I hope when you retire that you don’t just spend your time entertaining yourself and your grandchildren — I hope you do something for others,’” Zanoff said. “That stayed with me. It makes your life more joyful, more interesting and more productive if you’re out doing. If I just sat home all day, I wouldn’t be moving at all.”

Zanoff said it’s never too late to get involved in your own parish.

“Don’t be afraid to jump in,” Zanoff said. “Not only will you be doing something for your parish, but in the long run, you’ll deepen your faith.”



Ethel Baker, 80, stands outside St. Augustine Church in North Little Rock. Baker says being involved in her church helps her keep moving. Courtesy Debrah Mitchell.

## **Ethel Baker, 80**

For Ethel Baker, 80, the work she does to help St. Augustine Church in North Little Rock paves the way for younger parishioners to get involved.

Baker is a eucharistic minister, lector and is in the choir. She takes pride in tidying up around the church, decorating to make it feel more like home. Baker has been a parishioner at St. Augustine Church since 1963.

Even though Baker says aging is “a challenge every day,” her parish motivates her to keep moving.

“You can’t sit still — you’ve just got to keep moving as long as you can go,” Baker said. “That’s what I like — trying to help somebody else.”

Baker is eager to get younger parishioners involved too.

“By the grace of God, I’m still doing things,” Baker said. “I don’t do as much, I had to back up a bit ... But young people coming into the Church need to do some of this stuff too. Don’t let them be sitting around and watching you do stuff. They better follow your lead.”

Baker said working in her church improves her faith, which improves her outlook on life.

“I tell folks all the time, you need to start trying to make a point to laugh at yourself,” Baker said with a laugh. “It’s been rewarding for me. I will tell anybody that if you can help somebody else, if you can do something for somebody else, that’s what makes the difference in life, in your life and everybody else’s life around you.”



Charlie Ray, 80, stands by a stained glass window at his house. A talented craftsman, Ray built

the frame and put in all the stonework, and works on construction projects at All Saints Church in Mount Ida. Courtesy Diane Campbell.

## **Charlie Ray, 80**

If you looked up “handyman” in the dictionary, you’d likely find Charlie Ray’s picture. Even at 80 years old, Ray is often seen fixing and building all around All Saints Church in Mount Ida.

Diane Campbell, a parishioner at All Saints, described some of the many tasks Ray undertakes.

“Charlie Ray is a very faithful man who has answered God’s call to serve, and he does so much for All Saints Parish in Mount Ida,” Campbell said. “From anything that needs to be fixed to major projects getting completed, Charlie is the first to step up and see it through. He developed a Memory Garden where parishioners can have a brick with a loved one’s name put on it. When a steeple was donated to All Saints, Charlie was the on-site foreman for the construction of the tower that had to be built for it and then completed the project with the landscaping around it.”

Even though Ray has only been a parishioner at All Saints for eight years, the work he’s done seems enough for 80 years.

Ray, who originally lived in Van Buren and attended St. Michael Church, retired to Mount Ida. While his home changed, his dedication to the Church did not.

Ray said God gave him the gift of being a handyman — so Ray likes to return the favor.

“I don’t know if it’s giving back, but I look at it as a role that I’m qualified to do,” Ray said. “What we give, we get back. (Me and my wife) like to sit in the background and do stuff — we don’t like to go up and be in front of people. People call us for the little things, like if a light bulb goes out. We enjoy doing things like that.”

Ray has worked on projects big and small to help around his parish, humbly coordinating in the background. Ray is thankful for other parishioners and their eagerness to get involved, making parish projects easier.

Campbell shared more of the projects Ray worked on.

“When outdoor Stations of the Cross were donated, Charlie led the crew of parishioners that completed that project,” Campbell said. “When large dead trees were threatening to damage the Marian Grotto, Charlie arranged to have them removed. He built a ramp to the storage building so everyone has easier access. He makes sure the HVAC systems are working and maintained. When a new church sign was donated, Charlie had the site prepared and had a crew ready to place it.”

For Ray, the work you do with your hands is a reflection of the faith in your heart.

“When somebody moves on, somebody takes their place. If we slow down, somebody will be right behind us,” Ray said. “And you’re showing somebody that you’re not only faithful to your church and to God, but you’re faithful through what you’re doing. When they see that, they follow through and ask if there’s anything they can do to help — and they enjoy it. That’s the biggest thing I get out of it — people wanting to know what they can do to help.”

For Campbell, Ray is a blessing to the parish.

“In short, if there is anything that needs to be done, Charlie steps up and generously donates his time and expertise and gets it done. All Saints is blessed to have Charlie Ray. He is a wonderful example of what true discipleship means.”

## **It takes a village**

One such parish, St. Elizabeth Church in Eureka Springs, has over 22 parishioners who are 75 and older. All of these super seniors volunteer in the parish gift shop, altar serve, lector, serve on the parish council and use skills from their previous careers to help bookkeep, garden and keep an eye on the parish's finances.

Nancy Elfter, 80, is the parish's part-time secretary and bookkeeper, and has been involved in the parish since retiring from teaching elementary school in Kansas City, Mo. and moving to Eureka Springs 18 years ago.

“The majority of us are senior citizens,” Elfter said. “Probably because many people retire down here.”

Elfter said retiring from a career doesn't mean your work is over, and at least 22 other parishioners at St. Elizabeth Church are inclined to agree.

“Be active in your church, and don't quit when you get older, thinking that you've done your part and now the next generation can take over,” Elfter said. “The next generation needs your experience and wisdom, plus working in your church is very rewarding. You'll find that you belong to a community of people that believe as you do. It's beneficial for one's physical as well as mental health.”