

"That year without a building, we were very much cast adrift, where we didn't have an anchor tying us all together. And I feel like without Bettie steering the ship, we would have gotten lost at sea." — Drew Van Boenig, Senior

All Eyes On: Bettie Lesczynski

Newman Center's director retires this year and will return to family in Texas

BY BETHANY COURY
Staff Reporter

When Bettie Lesczynski was first asked in 1987 to enter the Newman Center's staff as secretary, she replied, "Absolutely not." She had children in preschool, enjoyed her teaching profession and was not thrilled about figuring out how to operate computers. But the director at the time, a priest, assured her she could bring her children to work and just come in for a few hours a day.

"I took it because I liked the students," Lesczynski said. "I liked working, I liked being around the students. I wanted to do something for them. It was a part-time job, initially, and it was like working in the church, which was important to me. And then I just fell so in love with the students."

She stayed on staff and began to get more involved until, in 1991, the director told her she was doing much more work than a secretary, so he promoted her to Newman's campus minister. She said that was when she decided to get a degree in pastoral studies through online classes at Loyola University-New Orleans to make her work at Newman more credible. By 1996, she had her degree and was asked to be the Newman Center's new director.

"Mainly, I see my job as helping train students to become leaders," Lesczynski said. "Especially in the church, but not necessarily. Just giving them the opportunities to be leaders and learning how to plan events, do service projects or run retreats, plan retreats, things like that. I just kind of help them bloom."

Now, after 14 years at Newman, she is retiring to her hometown, San Antonio, Texas, where she and her husband, former professor Dave Lesczynski, always had planned to retire. When her husband died of a heart attack nine years ago, she stayed in Kirksville because two of her children were attending Truman. But now that they've graduated, and because her family lives in Texas, she thinks it's time to move back.

"My parents are very elderly and they need our help, and since I'm a widow, it's time to retire, time to move on," Lesczynski said. "My youngest that graduated from Truman three years ago is teaching in San Antonio, so I'll be

close to her, and my son ... works in Texas, so I'll be close to two of my three children."

But Lesczynski said she will miss the students and has enjoyed her time here.

"Working with the students, watching them grow and bloom and blossom and just — it's really fun to watch a student over the four years that they're here," Lesczynski said. "How they just become a leader and get more involved with Newman. ... And I just love seeing how they end up, you know. It's great."

Lesczynski said there have been some challenges along the way, the biggest one being the aftermath of the lightning strike that burned down the Newman Center in May 2007. Newman did not get a new facility built until November 2008, and she said ministering that year was particularly difficult because there wasn't always a set place for mass, let alone for events and fundraisers.

Senior Drew Van Boenig, treasurer and a member of the Newman council, said he remembers that year as a very trying time for him as well. He said he wanted to quit the council nearly every other week because he felt like he was pulling teeth trying to get students to participate.

"I didn't feel like that was the way campus ministry should go," Van Boenig said. "It was a bad time for me, but seeing Bettie and seeing her perseverance and her dedication — she was like, 'Yes, this was a tragedy, but we're going to keep going through this, and we're going to come out of this better than we were,' and that was really inspiring for me."

Part of the issue was the conflicting mindsets about the construction of the new center, he said. Older members wanted to keep traditions, younger members wanted to just make things work and new members, who had no experiences with the old center, were just thrown into an exiled group, Van Boenig said.

Without Lesczynski, he said the members would have too often ended up fighting among themselves. Lesczynski, who Van Boenig said was known affectionately as the Newman mom, was a compromise between mindsets, and she made sure they were all focused on the same thing, he said.

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Senior James Williams, vice president for internal affairs in the council, said Lesczynski a necessary leader for the year and a half without a facility and that the way she directs



Mayank Dhungana/Index
After the May 2007 lightning strike burned down the Newman Center, Director Bettie Lesczynski helped inspire the members to continue working for a new building.

empowers the students.

"She's really part of the core of the Newman community," Williams said. "Because she cares about all the students, and she's a strong leader and she has strong opinions about everything, and so she has a direction she leads us in, but at the same time, she is able to sit back and let the students lead themselves."

Williams said he was a little surprised to learn Lesczynski is retiring, but is happy that she'll get to go back to her hometown.

"Because she's been around for so long, we kind of think of her as a part of New-

man," Williams said. "She's kind of a fixture there. But I'm happy for her, because she's going to be going back to Texas with her family, and so I'm glad she'll be closer to [them]."

Lesczynski thinks it is time to move on, by going back to where she started. But Truman hasn't seen the last of her.

"Truman, and Newman obviously, both will always have a special place in my heart," Lesczynski said. "I know I'll be back to Kirksville occasionally. It's a long way, but I'll be back."

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