

By BRIAN ACKLEY
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(Editor's note: This is the first of a three-part column on the people and process behind the effort to elevate Father Nelson Baker to sainthood.)

Tucked beneath Our Lady of Victory's copper roof, 40 types of Italian marble and lava rock from Mt. Vesuvius is displayed the last will and testament of Father Nelson Henry Baker.

Like the man himself, it's unassuming, to the point, neatly typed on nothing more than notebook paper. Its first words reflect, as much as any actions might, his life: "I have no money in any bank." Yet, thousands of children would argue he was the wealthiest man Buffalo has ever produced.

It's been 15 years, and a couple of months, since Bishop Edward Head first penned the Vatican, starting the process of Sainthood for Baker, a man who people may be surprised to learn didn't even become an ordained priest until age 34, long after his service to the Union Army during the Civil War in a place called Gettysburg.

"It's very important to keep Father Baker top of mind to people in Western New York and throughout the country", said Beth Donovan. "The more we get the word out, the more chance there is someone will come forward with a story."

As Director of Public Relations for the sprawling complex that is Our Lady of Victory Institutions, she should know. It's her department that publishes the glossy brochures and fancy websites, an ironic juxtaposition of the mission's reverent aura. Saint Nelson, should it come to pass, will be an unavoidable mix of marketing and miracle.

"People wonder about that some times. It's just necessary," Donovan observed. "Here's a good analogy; many people kind of question how many individuals the current Pope has elevated to blessed or saint. People start to wonder doesn't that cheapen it a little bit? But the reasoning behind it to do that is to really show to modern day Catholics there are holy people among us.

"When I really heard that, kind of him defending his actions, I really saw that," she added. "With all the craziness in our world today, I think we need that. That's what his thinking is too. It helped me be more settled with the business and marketing behind it. It's just another way to promote our faith. We have to evolve with society, we're just keeping up with the times."

A product of public, not Catholic school, as she likes to joke, Donovan has spent seven years pushing the cause, along the way making it as much a religious crusade as a civic one.

"Something that's important to me -- this is a hugely important thing for Catholics -- but I also like to stress it's not just something for Catholics to embrace, but it's a local boy, born and raised here, who accomplished such amazing things that he's being recognized on an international level. It's for all of us to celebrate and embrace. This is such an exciting thing for all us, regardless of your religious affiliation. Buffalo needs a shot in the arm, and a lot of us are hoping it's Father Baker."

It wasn't until several years after joining the team Donovan fully appreciated the job she was undertaking. While responsible for spreading the word about all of OLV's charity efforts and programs, it was Baker's 1999 transferral from Holy Cross Cemetery to the Basilica itself which defined Donovan's daunting challenge.

"To see the outpouring of faith really blew me away. To see all these people showing up at the cemetery in the middle of a work day, in their suits, on a snowy March day, that really was an awakening for me how special it was. I even get goose bumps talking about it today."

(Brian Ackley is a columnist for the Weekly Independent Newspapers (WIN) of Western New York. WIN is a consortium of 19 community weekly newspapers in Erie and Niagara counties with a combined paid circulation of 75,000 homes, providing collaborative advertising and editorial support for member publications. For more information on WIN, or to provide feedback on this column, visit our website at www.wnynewspapers.com. Opinions expressed here are those of the author.)