

Holy Hill refreshes cafeteria

Oconomowoc chef oversees meals at transformed cafe



Kelly Smith/Special to Conley Media

Karen Arndt of Oconomowoc, manager of the Holy Hill Café, prepares coleslaw.

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TOWN OF ERIN — Managing the Holy Hill Café is going to be one of the biggest challenges that Karen Arndt, 46, of Oconomowoc has faced in her culinary career.

A culinary management graduate from Waukesha County Technical College, Arndt is taking over the establishment as it completes a transition from a full-service cafeteria to a coffee, sandwich and breakfast café.

With its large commercial kitchen and buffet line, and seating for up to 150 customers, the café is in the Old Monastery Inn, which was built 102 years ago onto the side of a hill directly below the Basilica and National Shrine of Mary, Help of Christians at Holy Hill.

Robert Mitchell, executive director of the Holy Hill church and shrine, explained the transition from buffet to café is intended to provide cost-effective, quality food and refreshments, to the hundreds of thousands of visitors — described as “pilgrims” by church officials — who come to tour and worship at the shrine.

“We have a menu of soups, salads and sandwiches. Our primary mission is to serve the pilgrims,” Arndt said.

“But we want to go beyond that, we want to reach out to the com-

munity,” she added.

“A lot of people don’t know we are here.”

“We want to add some items to our menu and maybe make some changes in our hours to attract the people in the local community who come here to bike and hike and enjoy the beauty,” she concluded.

For example, pumpkin chili is a new addition to the café menu that Arndt says is receiving favorable reviews.

Instead of using the traditional beef along with tomato paste broth, she uses chicken and a chicken broth with a pumpkin puree to create a unique flavor.

“I have never had anyone who tried it say they did not like it,” she explained.

One of the biggest challenges that Arndt faces in managing the café is the extremely seasonal nature of its business.

During the Kettle Moraine’s spectacular fall color season, it can be standing room only in the café.

‘Feast or famine’

However, in the midst of winter the dining area and kitchen are almost empty.

“It can be feast or famine,” Arndt explained.

“During the fall color season, we are packed with a line of people outside waiting to get in,” she continued.

During peak seasons, beginning in June, the café is open four days a week from Wednesday to Sunday.

It is open three days a week, Friday through Sunday, during the winter and spring seasons from November until June

After spending about 25 years working in various manufacturing jobs, Arndt, at the age of 40, and after taking a European trip with her teenage son, decided “it was time for a change.”

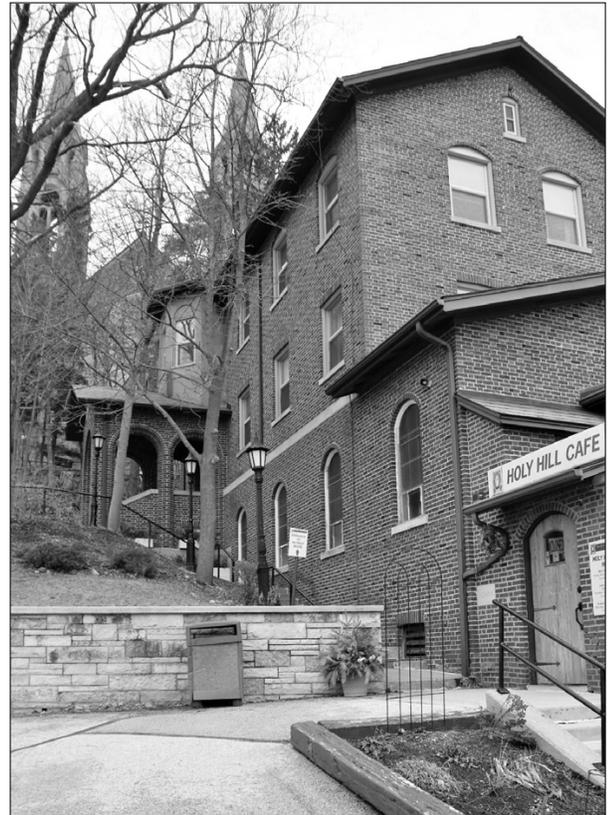
While enrolled in the WCTC Culinary Management program, she interned as a kitchen manager at the Inspiro Catholic Youth Retreat Center at the intersection of highways K and C in the Town of Merton.

After the retreat center closed in 2017, she held various part-time food service and grocery jobs until she learned of the Holy Hill Café opportunity from former co-workers at the retreat center.

Arndt says it is a coincidence that most of her culinary career has been spent managing kitchen and food operations at religious facilities owned by the Catholic Church.

A basilica’s roots

Catholic and Protestant churches in Europe and the eastern United States sent missionaries to the Upper Midwest in the mid-1800s to serve the thousands



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The Holy Hill Café is located in the Old Missionary Inn, which used to be the residence for friars who lived at Holy Hill. The inn is more than 100 years old and was built into a hill below the church.

of settlers lured to the lakes and forests by cheap land prices and new opportunities.

One of them was Father Francis Paulhuber of Salzburg, Austria, who was struck by the beauty of a large hill near a farm he was visiting and purchased 40 acres for \$50.

“I feel sure that hill will become one of the most noted places in all of this land; when it shall be consecrated and made holy; a place of worship and pilgrimage when tens of thousands shall come to do homage to the Virgin Mary and her son,” he wrote.

Through the stewardship of the Roman Catholic Church’s Order of Discalced Carmelites and the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, the property grew to 432 acres.

The first church, a tiny log cabin, was build in 1863. It was replaced by a larger structure in

1881 and the existing church was constructed in 1926.

With its soaring towers and majestic stained glass windows, the church is 168 feet long, between 80 and 90 feet wide, and 88 feet high; sitting nearly 1,500 feet above sea level on the highest elevation in southeastern Wisconsin.

Holy Hill was declared a shrine in 1903 by Pope Leo XII and the church designated as minor basilica by Pope Benedict XVI in 2006.

It is among 84 churches in the United States that have received special recognition and rites by a pope.

It is listed on both the Wisconsin and National Registers of Historic Places and was declared by Gov. Tommy Thompson in 1998 as “a valued historical landmark and an architectural masterpiece.”