

Interview has been edited for clarity. Timestamps correspond to the original, unedited video.

Guy Caruso: [00:02:09](#) Well, hello, my name is Guy Caruso, and it's December 3, 2019, and we're here at L'Arche Erie at 3745 West 12th Street, Erie, Pennsylvania, and I'm with the Institute on Disabilities at Temple University as their Western coordinator located down in Pittsburgh, and I'm also on the executive committee of the Western Pennsylvania Disability History and Action Consortium. The purpose of the multimedia histories project of the Western Pennsylvania Disability History and Action consortium is to record firsthand accounts of disability history.

Guy Caruso: [00:02:44](#) The history of L'Arche Erie, the first L'Arche community in the United States, is part of that history. Today, we are interviewing Father George Strohmeier, who co-founded the L'Arche community in Erie in 1972, with the late Benedictine sister Barbara Karsznia. We're also interviewing Mary Ann Zarnick, who has worked at L'Arche in a variety of roles since 1976. Thank you, Father George and Mary Ann for being here today.

Father George S...: [00:03:10](#) It's a delight to be here. Back to you.

Guy Caruso: [00:03:12](#) Well, L'Arche Erie is a faith-based community where people with and without intellectual disabilities share life together. It is part of the International Federation of L'Arche communities. The worldwide L'Arche movement was founded by Canadian Jean Vanier, former Catholic seminarian and philosophy professor. Vanier established the first L'Arche community in 1964 in Trosly in northern France. He invited two men with intellectual disabilities who had previously lived in an institution to share a residence with him, in the spirit of the gospel and the Beatitudes that Jesus preached.

Guy Caruso: [00:03:46](#) The name of L'Arche translates in English to "The Ark," a reference to Noah's Ark. L'Arche Erie was the first community of its kind in the United States. The number of L'Arche communities worldwide now number more than 150 in 38 countries. In the U.S., there are communities in Cleveland, Boston, and other locations, including Syracuse, New York, which I personally have some experience with.

Guy Caruso: [00:04:12](#) My history around L'Arche is that I was fortunate to visit Daybreak [first L'Arche community in Canada] early on. Dr. Wolf Wolfensberger helped create the L'Arche community in

Syracuse, New York, and I had a chance to sit on the board for a number of years, which was just a wonderful experience for me. I had a chance in 1987, where I met Mary Ann [Zarnick], and we actually went to the International Conference in Rome, Italy, and equally had a chance to wash pots and pans in Inverness, Scotland, at a L'Arche community there. They figured out the best role for me. That worked out really well.

Guy Caruso: [00:04:50](#) Father George and Mary Ann, I've had the pleasure of meeting you in the past, as I have Vicki Washek, who is the current executive director of L'Arche Erie. It's really my pleasure to interview you today. Now, Father George, let's start with you. Tell us about the events that led to the founding of L'Arche Erie in 1972, hard to believe, 47 years ago. How did you initially get interested in the teachings of Jean Vanier and the L'Arche movement?

Father George S...: [00:05:14](#) Sister Barbara and I met Jean at a weekend retreat in Toronto, a spiritual weekend. We were referred to that by a priest in Toronto, who made that first famous retreat with Jean in 1968, just north of Toronto. We went. I was struck by his spiritual message; I had never heard any human being--lay, Catholic, Protestant, bishop, nobody--speak with such authority of the gospel message. I was moved by that, I was changed by that, I was knocked over by that.

Father George S...: [00:05:54](#) Came home, all excited about what we had heard. Didn't hear the word L'Arche and wouldn't have known what it meant. He didn't talk about L'Arche; he talked about the gospel. From there, a retreat in Chicago in August of 1971, just months later, we met people from L'Arche in the original founding in Trosly [France]. They came to be on retreat with us. Discovered that wider world [of L'Arche]. By then, we were very excited to come home and to receive, just by happenstance, an introduction or an invitation to an open house at Polk [Center].

Father George S...: [00:06:38](#) So, Barbara and I went to that open house and discovered people who are being ready for community release. We were ecstatic at what was going on around the world. It was not only Europe, it was here in the U.S., it was here in our home area. That started the ball rolling for us.

Guy Caruso: [00:06:57](#) Can you tell us a bit about the co-founder, the late Sister Barbara Karsznia, and how she became interested in Jean Vanier and the L'Arche movement as well?

- Father George S...: [00:07:06](#) I knew Sister Barbara, we were colleagues at Gannon University in Erie, and I was close to her community through that friendship. She met the priest in Ottawa who had been with Jean [at the first retreat ever given by Jean Vanier]. It was through her friendship with that priest that he came to Erie. [The priest] got to know a bunch of us and he invited us, the two of us, to go to that original [weekend] retreat with Jean Vanier in Toronto [in February 1971] that touched our hearts a lot.
- Father George S...: [00:07:37](#) She had a way of sharing friends, bringing people together, and it was fortuitous, it was a providential thing [for me]. I wouldn't have known Jean Vanier, I would never have met him, I would not have known of his work otherwise.
- Guy Caruso: [00:07:53](#) Now, you both met Jean Vanier on several occasions, as you've explained. Other than his pastoral and spiritual message, did he have a social justice message at all, in regards to how he looked at people with disabilities and what was happening with them?
- Father George S...: [00:08:11](#) He had an incredible open heart and mind. I don't think I've met anybody with as much universal sense of the human family, the interdependence of all people ... It was gospel-based, but also philosophically-based. He got his doctorate in Philosophy and Theology. But there was something about his heart that was open to everybody, including those who are farthest from the center and people [who are] neglected. He often said that the most abused people in the world were people of disability who were rejected and put aside.
- Father George S...: [00:08:53](#) Just as L'Arche began, within the year of L'Arche's beginning, he wrote a rule of life for men and women of peace. He was touched by Gandhi. When he went to India to found L'Arche, he discovered Gandhi, was immersed in Gandhi. Came home and wrote this rule of life for communities of men and women of peace. It was always social justice for Jean. He left the Navy, the Canadian Navy, because he learned all that he could about how to shoot missiles, but he didn't learn much about how to love other human beings.
- Father George S...: [00:09:26](#) He discovered a whole new world of peace and justice. That really is at the heart of L'Arche, it's underneath, it holds it up. It gives us a vision for each day. Often, people don't think of that. I'm glad you asked that because we think of them as founding homes. He was touched deeply by people of disability when he went to the institutions, but there was this deep, underlying sense of the humanity of the whole world. He was with his

mother in 1945 when people from the concentration camps were coming back to Paris. He was there on site, he saw how just disabled they were, how debilitated they were, how humanly cruel the treatment was for these people. All of that moved him beyond teaching philosophy in Toronto. He started that, but he did not stay there. He was called to something deeper and wider.

Guy Caruso: [00:10:29](#) Now, how did the other established L'Arche communities, both the original community in Trosly, [and] you mentioned going to Daybreak [in Toronto, the first L'Arche community in North America] where Steve and Ann Newroth [founders of Daybreak] were mentors to you as well. Were there other mentors and how did the other L'Arche communities in existence impact the Erie community?

Father George S...: [00:10:49](#) The first community after Trosly was in Toronto, then L'Arche jumped to India, and then to northern [and] southern France and to Erie, then to the U.K. The U.K. was preparing before we were, but we opened before they did. There was friendships, but it was mostly with the people of Daybreak. We didn't have a network to rely on beyond them. So, it started there.

Father George S...: [00:11:21](#) Steve Newroth would come to Erie and we'd go to Polk together. He'd give a talk in Polk, he'd give a talk in Erie. Through that retreat, we also made friends, the retreat in Chicago. But we didn't have a big network at the beginning.

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:11:36](#) There was some connection too, I think, with Father Jim O'Donnell and Faith and Light that also drew you into [L'Arche]. He was there to support L'Arche Erie too.

Father George S...: [00:11:50](#) That's right, Jim O'Donnell, the priest who was very close to Jean Vanier and invited us to be part of a preparation for a whole year. Barbara and I went to Cleveland to prepare for a retreat that Jean gave the next year in 1972. That was all... Again, it wasn't L'Arche at first, it was spiritual message, transforming message, welcoming people of all abilities and disabilities, men, women.

Guy Caruso: [00:12:17](#) Now, you mentioned Faith and Light. Can you explain what that was exactly?

Father George S...: [00:12:21](#) Faith and Sharing was the name of the retreat movement. But Faith and Light was another movement that Jean Vanier founded with Marie-Hélène Mathieu and two men [with disabilities] in Trosly who were not permitted to go [on a

pilgrimage] to Lourdes. That they couldn't go on pilgrimage, because the parish from which they came said, "We can't welcome people of disability." That hurt the parents so much that Jean Vanier and Marie-Hélène Mathieu started this [Faith and Light] movement. Hundreds of people went to Lourdes, not just two, but hundreds, maybe 1,200, people went to Lourdes in 1971, for a retreat, for a time, a Holy Week retreat, but also an experience of community and dancing, singing, faith, joy.

Father George S...: [00:13:11](#) [T]o this date, it's still spreading over the whole world, Faith and Light. It's a community to draw people out of their loneliness, out of their isolation into a discovery of life when others welcome them out of this isolation into the light of joy and peace. Again, another movement of social justice.

Guy Caruso: [00:13:41](#) Maybe step-by-step, can you describe how you and Barbara got things going. I know the Gertrude Barber Center, that Gertrude Barber herself was an influence. Then Barbara, through her work in Gannon with students who were also involved in the beginning. Can you speak a bit about that?

Father George S...: [00:13:59](#) When we came home, we went to see [Gertrude Barber] because we recognized her as an outstanding person with a deep message regarding persons with disabilities. We went there, we were struck by her. We started volunteering. Every Sunday night, we'd go there and create a little family, a little community of singing, dancing, talking-

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:14:26](#) Prayer.

Father George S...: [00:14:26](#) Pardon?

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:14:26](#) Prayer.

Father George S...: [00:14:27](#) Prayer. We did prayer. We did that for a whole year, and that was very moving for us to be engaged in that. Barbara was in the high school, the Benedictine High School in Erie, and she knew a lot of women in the community who were professional, all sorts of professions. She called on them a lot as we began L'Arche.

Guy Caruso: [00:14:50](#) Okay. Now, Father George, L'Arche communities emphasize a spiritual bond between members of the community, downplaying the distinction between who has or who does not have a disability. I know that the term "core member" refers to those who are in the heart of the L'Arche community. Can you tell us a bit about the first four core members of L'Arche Erie?

We understand that they had lived at Polk previously to coming to L'Arche Erie.

Father George S...: [00:15:18](#) Yes, all four were from Polk. When we went to that open house, Barbara and I, we met this little group that was being formed by this employee at Polk. We met them, we went back a month later, and we spent time with them, and then we did that again, maybe in a month or two. All four, but there were more in the group, but they didn't all come to Erie, but four of them came to Erie. The day before Thanksgiving, we began at lunch in 1971 on the day before Thanksgiving.

Father George S...: [00:15:56](#) They would have called themselves high-functioning. They had these words to describe who was low-functioning, who was high-functioning. They really were well adapted, but for some reasons, particular reasons, they were sent to Polk years ago. But they quickly adapted. They all got jobs, every one of them had a job in Erie. We did this, of course, on our own; we didn't have that access to the Barber Center facilities at first. Two of them went off to... One to marry, the other to live in her own independence. The two men as well, the four of them were happy to be with us, but they wanted to be independent of us as well.

Guy Caruso: [00:16:46](#) When you first went to Polk with Sister Barbara, what was your experience there?

Father George S...: [00:16:53](#) It was an open house for clergy.

Guy Caruso: [00:16:55](#) Okay.

Father George S...: [00:16:56](#) I didn't get the invitation. But happily, I went. It was an open house and there was a day of some talking, and lunch and then a grand-

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:17:07](#) Tour.

Father George S...: [00:17:08](#) ... tour. We were struck by what... Of course, we were filled with Vanier by then. We had just come back from L'Arche in Trosly, in fact, where we had discovered what was going on in Trosly, what life was like. We were intoxicated with the idea of community. We started chewing on this [Polk employee's] ear about what we had just discovered, and he was the one preparing people to be released.

- Guy Caruso: [00:17:38](#) Okay. For the people who came to L'Arche initially, did they share any of their experiences of Polk with you and what that was like living at Polk?
- Father George S...: [00:17:49](#) They did. They talked about things that weren't easy for them to talk about or easy for us to hear. Loneliness, not succeeding in the greater community. I remember one of our founding members was in Pittsburgh and had failed in living alone in Pittsburgh. There was a certain sense of defeat there. People would put their anger at having been placed at Polk for some reason. Some judge somewhere had agreed that they didn't belong in the neighborhood and they were sent to Polk.
- Father George S...: [00:18:32](#) Yet, some sense of industry as well. They found their life there. They fit in, they could express themselves in their own work, what they were doing at Polk, their own creativity. One of our men worked in the tailor shop. He was good at sewing. He could manage a sewing machine quite well. But they all wanted to be out. They all wanted to find some... I remember Bill saying when he got to our house, he said, "I always watch people on television in their homes, but I never had my own home to watch television myself."
- Guy Caruso: [00:19:09](#) Right.
- Father George S...: [00:19:10](#) That simple, that he had a home, and that gave him the courage to go out and create his own home as well, alone, he lived alone until his death.
- Guy Caruso: [00:19:23](#) Did you serve other people in L'Arche Erie that came from institutions other than Polk?
- Father George S...: [00:19:30](#) Mary came from...
- Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:19:33](#) Laurelton.
- Father George S...: [00:19:33](#) Laurelton.
- Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:19:35](#) Mary and Frances were from Laurelton. Sam, it was years later, 1978, he came from Warren State Hospital.
- Father George S...: [00:19:44](#) Then Butler, what's near Butler? An institution near Butler.
- Guy Caruso: [00:19:56](#) Yeah. Okay. How was the experience for people who came from their families versus from an institutional setting? How was that experience for people? How was it different?

- Father George S...: [00:20:06](#) We didn't have much experience of that.
- Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:20:08](#) In the beginning.
- Father George S...: [00:20:10](#) We're really happy that we were focusing on people who had no family. In fact, [L'Arche Erie] became my family. Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter celebrations, nobody had family to go to. We didn't shut down for a week or two so people would go home for vacation. There was no place to go.
- Guy Caruso: [00:20:30](#) So, L'Arche Erie became their family.
- Father George S...: [00:20:32](#) Exactly. Even to this day, we try to pay attention, insofar as we're free to, to welcome people who have no family.
- Guy Caruso: [00:20:44](#) In the early days, where was the first house? Can you walk us through what a day was like when you first started off with people?
- Father George S...: [00:20:56](#) The house we were in was 112 years old, and there wasn't one straight floor in the building. But it was our home, and it was just wonderful. We were all excited about living there, being there. I lived at the university and I came over for all the meals and I didn't stay there overnight, there was no room.
- Guy Caruso: [00:21:20](#) No room.
- Father George S...: [00:21:20](#) We didn't have big homes. Some of L'Arches in the world have big homes, we didn't. We took care of things. Everybody had their own chores to do. We had two assistants who lived... One lived in at the beginning. Again, Barbara and this other assistant lived in. We had assistants coming, but they couldn't all live in. So, we didn't have a big L'Arche group. But we just [lived] normal life. We didn't have any money, nor were we approved by the state of Pennsylvania. [laughter]
- Guy Caruso: [00:21:59](#) Tell us a little bit about that, Father George.
- Father George S...: [00:22:01](#) We just did it. We just did it. We were inspired to create community. We worked with Vanier for a year, it's not that we just popped up and said... Vanier approved, finally, that we be L'Arche, and we began when people came to live.
- Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:22:18](#) We developed a board.

- Father George S...: [00:22:20](#) We developed a board over that year of preparation. We were well prepared that way, but we didn't know anything about what we needed to do with the state of Pennsylvania.
- Guy Caruso: [00:22:30](#) You weren't receiving funding from them.
- Father George S...: [00:22:33](#) No funding, we ate a lot of apples and onions, and we had people bring leftovers. We threw our money in insofar as we could. Like rent, room and board so that we could all thrive.
- Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:22:49](#) I know when I came to L'Arche in the early days, the thing that I always remember was, we wanted to keep L'Arche secret and were going to nestle in the neighborhood just like any other family. That's what we did. We were just in the neighborhood, and nobody would even know that our house was L'Arche, or a group home, if they want to call it a group home. Very simple. I remember the strawberry barrel, and we would just pick [berries to make jam]. As you said, our meals were whatever came along.
- Father George S...: [00:23:31](#) We had to get approval that we change the zoning to C3. Is that what it is?
- Father George S...: [00:23:43](#) Commercial. We had a little bit of unrest with the neighbors. For all they knew, we'd tear the house down and put a gas station there. They didn't like the idea of commercial zoning. But even there, we didn't have any opposition there. The City of Erie Council approved it. But it was hidden. In fact, the neighborhood was in great transition, and the older folks were so happy to see us come. Finally, when we did get funding and we had to renovate the home to meet standards. The older folks in the neighborhood were all excited about this: People are coming; they're investing in their property.
- Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:24:25](#) Well, we also purposely chose to own homes in the inner city. [W]hen we had the opportunity down the road to find homes, we always wanted to be where other people were devalued or poor. So, we chose to be in the inner city.
- Guy Caruso: [00:24:51](#) Right. But tell me just quickly about when the state heard of this and came to see you to, I guess, ask a few things.
- Father George S...: [00:25:02](#) Mel Knowlton was a disciple of [social psychologist] Wolf Wolfensberger. [Knowlton] was in charge of the [developmental disabilities] program in Pennsylvania. People would tell us that they were in Meadville, or somewhere, a day-long training or orientation, and Mel Knowlton would say, "I could close them

down, they should be closed down." I don't know if he said that publicly. But we got that message.

Father George S...: [00:25:27](#) We were hearing that Mel Knowlton was going to close us down. Other people weren't so happy with our starting either. We didn't start with a lot of permission, nor did we start in conjunction with anybody in the [administrative structures]. We didn't know about those things that we were really ignorant of. We were just excited, and we were capable, and we did it, and we found out that Mel was not pleased with us.

Father George S...: [00:25:54](#) He finally came to our home, and he walked in the door, I'll never forget, and said, "You know, I could close you down tomorrow." [laughter]

Guy Caruso: [00:26:02](#) What a lovely greeting.

Father George S...: [00:26:03](#) He might have said hello first and introduced himself. **[Clarification from Father George Strohmeier: "Knowlton was not unkind or unprofessional, just very clear about things."]** Then he went around the house and took pictures of our whole house, and we discovered later that when he was giving workshops around, he would show these pictures as examples of what life could be like for people who were institutionalized. That was a big confirmation. We found much later that Wolf Wolfensberger, who was a wonderful man, was very instrumental in our being allowed to continue.

Father George S...: [00:26:36](#) We didn't know that at first, but Wolf told me years later that because of his relationship with Mel Knowlton, he convinced Mel to give us a chance. We wrote a proposal [to the state]. I remember, we said, "We don't want money." [Knowlton] said, "If you don't want money, that's one thing. But you can't just do a program without approval." So, we did both. We wrote the proposal for programming and for renovation of our home.

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:27:09](#) So, people had to move out.

Father George S...: [00:27:11](#) Oh, yeah, we all had to move out.

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:27:13](#) How long were people out of the house?

Father George S...: [00:27:15](#) Oh, my gosh, six months-

Guy Caruso: [00:27:17](#) To get it renovated and fixed up and to code and all those things?

- Father George S...: [00:27:22](#) We had the nicest up-to-date home with the crookedest floors in all the City of Erie. It didn't do much for the home, except that it became up to standards.
- Guy Caruso: [00:27:34](#) Right. You were the pastoral leader for the home. What did that role entail for you?
- Father George S...: [00:27:46](#) At first, it probably was getting in the way of Barbara, Sister Barbara, because we had this notion of being co-founders or co-directors. Well, that wasn't good. That didn't work. I was occupied, employed at Gannon. She had left [Gannon] by then. So, she was clearly the director of the community, and I was an assistant, I didn't think so much about being a priest of the community. That developed later in L'Arche because other L'Arche communities were looking for, oddly enough, it was priests, mostly. A lot of communities were founded in the Catholic tradition. So, priests of L'Arche was a name that we used.
- Father George S...: [00:28:33](#) That developed for me, and then I certainly had that role in the community. But I was also just, I drove the van, I did the dishes, I cooked the food, just like everyone else. But later, as L'Arches proliferated, I did a lot more traveling and leading retreats or inviting people to come to Erie for times of prayer. We had a little prayer center at a certain point, a spiritual center where people could stay. That got me out of Sister Barbara's hair. [laughter]
- Father George S...: [00:29:09](#) I was able to find my own way there ... and then that ended at the right time, because for a long time, here I was the founder, co-founder and I'm still at the heart of authority. It was time to leave in about 1998, I think. I went back to the university. But since then L'Arche is my home, my family. I do a little bit of spiritual animation now and again.
- Guy Caruso: [00:29:40](#) Okay. Mary Ann, you began working at L'Arche in 1976, four years after its founding. How did you become interested in L'Arche, what was your role in the early years? I think you had an opportunity to visit L'Arche in Trosly and meet Jean Vanier as well. What was his impact on you?
- Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:30:00](#) Well, my coming to L'Arche was just by accident, I would say, or a little surprise. I had been in a religious community, and I was just looking for what my next call was going to be. I had been speaking to another priest who put me in touch with Father George. However, every time I tried to call to make that

appointment, [Father] George was in India or someplace else. It was quite difficult [to reach him].

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:30:34](#) We finally connected while he was at Gannon. I still remember sitting across from his desk, and he just looked at me. I didn't know how to spell L'Arche, I knew nothing about it. I was just open. [Father] George goes, "Would you think about going to a 'crash pad' [at Daybreak in] in Toronto?" As open as I was, I said "yes" because I didn't even know what I was saying yes to. But he said, "Well, go visit the house in Erie, and then come back and see me in a couple of weeks."

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:31:10](#) So, I did, and I remember, he called Ann Newroth [at Daybreak] and said, "Did you get my message about Mary Ann coming to the crash pad?" She goes, "Well, yeah, I have it right here." He turns to me, and he says, "Oh, you're accepted. How are you going to get there?" I lived in Erie all my life, I didn't know what to say. So, I said, "I'll take a bus."

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:31:39](#) I always say, I jumped on the bus, and I came to L'Arche. That crash pad was a two-week experience of L'Arche, which was just amazing to me. It was educational, it was life giving, profound in learning about L'Arche. During that week, the first week, we had different talks throughout the day, and we did get a chance to visit an institution, we saw some films and, not having any experience with persons with disabilities, it just really affected me of how mistreated people were and how limited they [appeared] to the rest of the world and things like that.

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:32:36](#) But then on the other side of it was the second week where we actually got to be connected to one of the L'Arche homes on the Daybreak property. I had the chance to just be with people in their day-to-day, whether it was helping someone pick strawberries or I had a chance to work in the bakery and just seeing the abilities that people had and the friendships that developed, I was very, very touched by the whole thing. Probably the thing that was most surprising to me was that we had a break, and I was going through some things in my purse. I had this little notebook, and I started looking through this little notebook, and here, it was a notebook [from when] I had heard Jean Vanier speak in Erie a couple of years before that. But again, there was no connection whatsoever. I just remember that his message was just profound, and he just talked from his heart.

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:33:47](#) It just struck me that oh, my goodness, here it is. As I look back in terms of my journey, probably seeds were planted well

before that, because even as you talk about the Barber Center, when I was in high school, all of the seniors had to sign up to go to some company or industry or whatever. I don't know...if I signed up myself or I just got put into the group, but I ended up going to the Barber Center. Again, I never made that connection that it was to be with people with disability.

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:34:32](#) There were those little things like that [which helped me see where the seeds had been planted]. When I came back from the Daybreak experience, I was working at a camp that summer, and I took some materials to read more about L'Arche. There was just something stirring in me. In fact, one of the other women who was on the crash pad with me ... sent me a letter and said, "Oh, will you come to Nova Scotia? We're going to create a home, but it's not going to be L'Arche." For some reason, it just didn't set well with me.

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:35:12](#) Again, I was very open to going to wherever I was needed. I had sent a letter to Daybreak, saying, "I really would like to experience L'Arche, can you tell me where they might need someone?" As I sent that letter, I received a letter from Sister Barbara saying, "Would you like to come to Erie?" That happened just the day before I was leaving to go on vacation to visit some of my friends. I thought, well, it doesn't make any difference to me. So, I responded back and I said, yes, that I'd come to Erie.

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:35:55](#) Even though I had those little experiences, I didn't quite know what I was saying "yes" to. I didn't have the experience of what it was to live in a home and share life with the people, other than the few moments at the crash pad. When I left, I said to my mom, "Well, I don't know if I'm going to be here two days or two years or two months or whatever. But it's been my life, and I'm so grateful for it."

Guy Caruso: [00:36:29](#) You had the opportunity to work with Sister Barbara. She died in 1982. What was her influence on you, and what might be the legacy that Sister Barbara left for the community?

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:36:45](#) First of all, I didn't even really know Sister Barbara was the director of the community when I came. Because when I came to visit, I went to the Hearth, to the first home, and Paula Simon was there. I thought [Sister Barbara] was the assistant at the house. I thought [Paula] was in charge, or it was Father George.

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:37:09](#) Sister Barbara, she was a woman of compassion. I felt that from the very beginning, where, she definitely was there for the

person. It was always centered on the core member. She was very exact with things. She liked things in order, she knew exactly how she wanted something run, and she was an English teacher besides. She was a perfectionist when it came to speaking. But, underneath that all, there was this woman of deep faith.

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:38:01](#) I could tell that she believed so much in L'Arche and what she wanted for our homes, for our community. She fought to get what we wanted in L'Arche. But yet, she had a heart that was also a heart of fun. She would be part of the skits and want life to be fulfilling for people. I think in all of that, I think there was a tenderness and just a real, beautiful spirit of caring and loving people that I really appreciated.

Guy Caruso: [00:38:43](#) It's just so interesting all the connections in your life of how they've come full circle. You've been in many administrative roles over your career with L'Arche. Can you talk a bit about how, from the early days, L'Arche has either changed or been influenced? You walk in this line between a community and yet you're receiving funding and you've got certifications and other things to address. How has it been over the years being in the roles you've been in?

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:39:12](#) Well, there were many challenges at times. I remember it wasn't until 1980 when the state came back in again, and now we were going to be inspected. That went so against our grain because we were here to just have a family home to share life. Let's live life like you or I live in my own family life, and we didn't want to have to take notes and progress notes and [do] goal planning. I remember having classes on goal planning, and as assistants we all found that very upsetting.

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:40:00](#) Yet, I think even Sister Barbara helped us to realize that it was there for a reason, there was a purpose behind it. In the sense of doing it, we were also helping our core members to grow, to share maybe some of their hopes and their dreams, and how we can help them in those little steps to achieve some of the things they've never had the opportunity to [do].

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:40:33](#) When you looked at it in that respect, we could begin to see the value of some of those regulations that had to come down. I know, the very first inspection we had was very rigid. The inspectors were crawling up into the attics, and looking for smoke detectors and everything. It almost felt demeaning in a way, because we had something that was more essential, being present to people, and that was really at the heart of what we

wanted, not everything being measured out and written, because I think in the end, that doesn't always mean a quality of life, and that was our focus.

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:41:26](#) Over the years, I think we know that we have to meet those regulations, we have to abide by them for our homes to exist, just as George found out in the very beginning, that they could close us if we didn't meet those [state regulations]. It's helped to educate our assistants, also to know that there's a value behind some of these regulations. We don't like them, but hopefully we can balance that with a life of community, and a life of relationship with people.

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:42:04](#) Jean always spoke of something so primary as, "Can you be a friend to a person?" To me, in growing up in L'Arche, I think that was always so much at the heart of who I was, and yet, I would always attend to the regulations. I think life has changed, and as we get larger, and there are more things to be concerned with, sometimes it's really hard to know when you're an agency, when you're a community and how to blend those two elements together. It's a constant journey.

Father George S...: [00:42:51](#) Can I add something there?

Guy Caruso: [00:42:52](#) Yes, Father George.

Father George S...: [00:42:55](#) Right at the beginning, when I was on the International Council, I was giving my report about the region that I was part of and my community. At the end of my presentation, Jean said, "You talked a lot about the regulations of the state, and that was a challenge, and a distraction maybe, but your real issue is community, the challenges of living community." But from the beginning, we had regulations. Many L'Arche communities didn't have them, not even in France for years later.
[Clarification from Father George Strohmeier: "We in Pennsylvania were much more accountable to strict regulations of civil authorities."]

Father George S...: [00:43:37](#) But I remember also that Vanier at one point said that we learned how to love one another in Trosly, but we didn't always know how to advance somebody's capacity. We didn't always pay attention to what they needed for their own practical development. We had a beautiful vision of people and what their capacity is and how we're to call it forth. But again, he knew the balance from the other side. It's always a balance.

- Guy Caruso: [00:44:14](#) Father George, talk about what you would see as some of the accomplishments [and] joys of the community, as well as what maybe has been some of the greatest challenges.
- Father George S...: [00:44:26](#) The accomplishments are that here we are after 47 years, and that as I look around, even L'Arche generally in the U.S., but here especially, people are well, they're well cared for, they're loved. There's a spirit of joy among us. Our core members seem to have a certain autonomy and a creativity, and they don't need permission to get up and take the microphone and express themselves. The friendship is evident, and we have some wonderful assistants.
- Father George S...: [00:45:04](#) From the beginning, we did not all live in [the L'Arche house]. Other communities made that a requirement, you have to live in. Barbara never saw that as essential. She didn't think that we were going to ever cause people to suffer because we didn't have enough assistants, because we didn't have enough people wanting to live in. We've always had people who lived out, but were committed to our mission and our charter, and that's true today. We have a broad network of people who come and go, they have their own families, they have their own life, but they're essential to our life as well.
- Father George S...: [00:45:44](#) I see that today, I'm really struck by that. I'm struck by the second generation, third generation of leaders in L'Arche. We went way beyond.... There were so many religious who were touched by Vanier's spiritual message, we all founded communities. Now, we're into another generation entirely, or maybe three generations later, we see people who are capable and creative and still have the spirit of L'Arche. I see that as always the beauty. The challenge is things are changing. Assistants don't jump in with both feet in the same way that we did at the beginning. We have to honor that, that people have lives of their own. We also have regulations about how many hours a week you can be part of the effort of the community. That's a challenge for us. But spiritually ... you know, Jean Vanier is an incredible visionary around religion. The three legs of the stool of L'Arche, he called therapy, spirituality, and community. These three he said, "If one's missing, it isn't going to stand up."
- Father George S...: [00:47:08](#) That's the challenge still today. [Vanier] had a deep sense of the spirit of every human being and the deep sense of what community can do for people and a deep sense of what he called L'Arche's authentic therapy, which was mutual relationship. That challenge is as fresh today as it was the first day. I remember when we started, after all the excitement of

starting was over, Barbara and I looked at each other one day and said, "What do we do now?" Or as Dawn Follett in the book *Sharing Life* said after she started in Africa and got everything going, she said to the others, "What do we do after breakfast?" [laughter]

Father George S...: [00:47:55](#) That's always the challenge, "What do we do after breakfast?" What do we do after we've fallen on our nose? What do we do after we've gotten tired and thought it was a beautiful thing and discover it's not?" Vanier said that we begin by saying everybody's a saint, six months later, everybody's a devil. Then eventually, everybody is just who they are. That challenge is as fresh today as it was at the beginning.

Guy Caruso: [00:48:22](#) Yeah. Well, your community now has seven homes and 29 core members. You have more than 70 employees. What is L'Arche like today with this? Have elements changed since the beginning? You've talked a bit about some of the changes through regulations, and people not necessarily living in, but it's a pretty large community right now. What changes have you seen, Mary Ann, since the early days?

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:48:53](#) Well, certainly as we've gotten larger, there are things that are harder to do. I think one of the biggest changes is that many of our core members are aging. They have retired from being at a day program. We have many more people at home during the day, yet we want to engage them in activities out in the community, still keep them active. Listen to some of the things they like to do.

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:49:31](#) That's one aspect that has changed. Their medical needs are greater. We've had to have our own nurse, and that's challenging too, to just meet some of the day-to-day and the seriousness of people's illness. From an assistant standpoint, we've gone through our ups and downs with not having enough assistants, to having plenty of assistants and meeting needs. Probably in the last couple of years, it's been very challenging to encourage people or recruit people to want to come to the community.

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:50:18](#) Then it's also finding that right person who wants to embrace the mission of L'Arche. I think that's a major challenge in and of itself, because being a French word, in Erie, most people have no idea, even though we've been here 47 years. "What's this L'Arche thing?" It's hard to explain, because I know even for myself, it's a lived experience, and it's that connection with people, that relationship that's building. The other things that

have had to change [are not being] able to do as many community gatherings or events. Maybe in the early days, we were small, so we could, as a whole community, go to a retreat weekend, and we'd invite other people from other L'Arches to come and help form us in that way.

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:51:23](#) When you have that large a group-

Guy Caruso: [00:51:25](#) It makes it harder.

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:51:26](#) ... it makes it so much harder. We've lessened the number of meetings we've had, and we've also welcomed people of many faiths, no faiths. Yet, receive them as part of the community. As we said, people really thought that we were all Catholic. That whole faith tradition thing has been here. It's a growth that I think we all needed, and it opens us up to diversity and welcoming people. There's a lot that has changed, and there's probably more to change in the future.

Guy Caruso: [00:52:21](#) Right. But one of the things that I've always found unique about L'Arche is when you make a commitment to a person, that commitment is a lifelong commitment. You have people who have been here for a long time who are getting older. Yet, you still find ways to connect and support people. That has to be hard. What allows that to happen?

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:52:49](#) I think it becomes part of who we are. Because of relationship, I think we want to be there because we care about the person, we love the person, we want them to have the best quality of life they can. That friendship, that bond was created through our relationship in L'Arche, even as they age. Some people may have had to go into a nursing home, or they're in the hospital for a long time. We tried to look at ways of being present to them, and they too know that we're part of their family.

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:53:32](#) Just as my mom was in the hospital, I'd go visit my mom. Well, I want to visit my friend in community too. I have a dear friend who was one of the early core members of L'Arche, Frances, who still lives in her own apartment. It's like we've always been connected. We've known each other for 43 years, and I probably get a call from her almost every day, or every few days.

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:54:08](#) I think that's one of the great things about L'Arche, even though we have seven houses and [29] people, we know one another. Our core members know everybody in the community, we're just not our individual home. Because it's broader than just the

four people or six people in a home. We live that out through our prayer life, allowing us to pray for each other and hold each other in difficult times. All of those are ways to stay connected with people as they age and need us.

Guy Caruso: [00:54:53](#) You have the L'Arche Erie community. The L'Arche is a much larger community, it's international. I think we said L'Arche homes and communities are around the world. Father George, can you speak a bit about the international aspect of it? Are you here at L'Arche Erie in touch with other L'Arche communities? How does all that work? How does L'Arche create this larger that just a local community, a much broader community?

Father George S...: [00:55:18](#) All right, we've all had experiences of that in our time. But, my time is over with that, pretty much. I got a chance to speak to the leaders of L'Arche in the U.S. back in the spring, early summer. I really appreciated that. I haven't been to an international meeting in a long time. Vicki, our director, would be well current with that. But, I just remember that I was at the second Federation meeting ever, and there were 25 of us, and we spoke French or English.

Father George S...: [00:55:53](#) Vanier was saying, "In a number of years, we will be welcoming people who are enemies culturally and historically, and who do not speak each other's languages. We will be together in Federation meetings." It's true. Over the years, hundreds of people come, not just 25, and the languages are diverse, and the cultures, crossing cultures, which are not especially peaceful, back where they come from. But I don't have current touch with all of that. I'm aware that L'Arche is going through a real time of testing now with the death of Jean, our founder has died. We loved him dearly. He had a vision that kept us going, that encouraged us. We're a little bit like children without a mom and dad. Do we get together? How do we get together? But that's my own sense of where we are. I don't have a good touch with that.

Guy Caruso: [00:56:58](#) Mary Ann, how about yourself?

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:57:00](#) I think L'Arche International provides opportunities for retreats, different formations or trainings. If we could send people to Trosly, that's a gift in itself, and we have been able to do that. Certainly, people come back blessed and changed from being there. We have our regional gatherings every two years. In L'Arche USA, we have the various regions.

- Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:57:37](#) Those communities, there are five or six in our region, and we all come together for three days, four days, a long weekend to celebrate, to hear what the other communities are doing. Certainly, L'Arche International has made aware the first Saturday of October is L'Arche International Day. We have access to newsletters. I think social media has been [helpful]. The internet has been wonderful. We have the whole "I Am" series about L'Arche, where we have presented that to our community.
- Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:58:19](#) You begin to realize, you're not just this little community or just us, we're so much broader. I always get excited when I know we can send people [to other L'Arche communities for trainings, formations, or retreats]. Because what you experience on your home level, the spirit and the mission of L'Arche is so true. Whether you're in Canada, India, Syracuse, wherever, it's amazing when you walk into a L'Arche home, you know it's a L'Arche home, just by the welcome, and the spirit that's present there. The spirituality is universal in that way.
- Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:59:02](#) I think it's so important that people have that opportunity to experience trainings and formations and everything, or just visit communities. That's even important. Sometimes, other communities will call us and say, we're traveling through, can we come and visit your community? Can we stay overnight on our way to wherever? Those opportunities make us realize, yes, we're all sharing the same mission.
- Guy Caruso: [00:59:38](#) Right.
- Mary Ann Zarnic...: [00:59:40](#) It's really good.
- Guy Caruso: [00:59:41](#) We had spoken earlier about the 1987 international gathering in Rome, Italy. I remember as you were indicating, Father George, sitting at a table, and I spoke English and no one else did, okay? Trying to converse and have a meaningful conversation. What kept us all together was obviously the meal that you're sharing, you're breaking bread together, but you had this commonality around the L'Arche life, and it's a unique aspect. You mentioned ecumenicalism, that L'Arche, oftentimes people think about it as a Catholic community, but it transcends and goes across all faiths. I think in that we learn to live with one another, with our differences.
- Mary Ann Zarnic...: [01:00:25](#) I think that's really, truly a gift. When I look at my own experience in L'Arche, I think, boy, if I hadn't been here, I probably would never have been open to so much that L'Arche

.... Just the differences in all various aspects of who we welcome in faith and celebrations and everything. You see the equality of us as one body.

Father George S...: [01:01:00](#) Can I add something?

Guy Caruso: [01:01:01](#) Yes, Father George.

Father George S...: [01:01:02](#) About the meaning of L'Arche, welcoming people and then walking with them to their death. We've got some wonderful community members who were just leading us as they came to the end of their life with love and compassion, where they didn't always know how to express that before. But you know why I'm here, because L'Arche is my home, my family, and I'm getting older. I look forward to that being held at the end of my life as well.

Father George S...: [01:01:33](#) I have a lot of grace given to me, that would normally not have been experienced, because I would have lived a bit of a life of isolation. Clerics are a little bit isolated. They're in touch with many people, but on another hand, their family is not direct and intimate. [Through L'Arche], I've been part of an intimate, direct family for 47 years, which has worked through me for the benefit of other people as well.

Father George S...: [01:02:04](#) I must say that I have been to L'Arche at Trosly for programs, retreats, orientations, trainings over the last ten years, and I see a whole host of new leaders around the world coming together. It's amazing, lay leaders, young men and women, with just capacity to lead and a vision. It's really exciting. But one day, as I become less and less that, I'm going to rely on the people around me to hold me.

Guy Caruso: [01:02:34](#) Mary Ann, you've been with the community now for so many years. You've shared a little bit of this, but what's it meant to you, perhaps to your family, and what's this experience of L'Arche really meant for you? You've talked about some of the original members of the community still being in touch with people, assistants who've come to the community who have left still having relationships with the community. It's just a sense of community. Even though people aren't here, they still have this connection. But what has all this meant to you?

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [01:03:13](#) It's been truly a blessing, a true gift. Again, it was something that I would have never probably said, "Oh, this is what I'm going to do with my life." But I feel it was total gift, and it was the working of the spirit to be part of L'Arche. In the very early

days, even probably within my first year of L'Arche, I was just totally amazed to think, "Oh, I'm doing something," but I never thought I would experience community outside of a religious community.

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [01:03:53](#)

As a lay faith community, I was just awed by the whole experience of it. I just value the prayer of our core members, which is universal in L'Arche. Of sharing after a meal, passing the candle around, and their deep, deep love of God. I think that has helped me to build a better relationship with God, because of who they are, and just their simplicity of life.

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [01:04:34](#)

I think it's affected my everyday life and how I live and just my own relationship with people. I know even my daughter just said to me, "Your uncle, he just can't believe how Mary Ann can just be present to people." That kind of thing. I think experiencing and having time with Jean [Vanier] and so many wise and faithful people in L'Arche, they've carried me at moments of real struggle and hardship. You just feel a belonging and a oneness that I think my life would be just so totally different had I not been at L'Arche.

Mary Ann Zarnic...: [01:05:33](#)

It truly is family ... My relatives will always say, "L'Arche will always be part of your life." I am very blessed that my husband supported me in this journey, even though he wasn't fully a part of L'Arche all the time, but he knew how much it meant to me, and that enriched our own relationship. I think the core members are really ... teachers I value so much. They've taught me about forgiveness, welcoming, their simplicity, just their honesty. All those things have been just total gift. I don't know, we'll see where the future takes me. But, I'm sure L'Arche will be part of it.

Father George S...: [01:06:34](#)

We can hope that

Guy Caruso: [01:06:36](#)

Well, Father George, in a recent email, you shared a reflection about how L'Arche communities are inspired with a deep vision of daring to believe in human community. How that vision plays out as the community moves forward over years and decades. I'd like to, if it's okay, read a reflection and ask you to say more. Here's what you had said, "L'Arche communities have been inspired with a deep vision of daring to believe in human community, become filled with aspirations, sensing that we have been searching for such meaning and purpose. We sooner or later fall over our own heightened expectations. But, wondrously, we are picked up by someone in our community, someone we thought we were caring for, who in fact, sets us

back on our feet, little more humble, but a great deal more human. We learn to continue together as fellow travelers on the way."

Father George S...: [01:07:29](#) I don't know what I would be like if I were not in a L'Arche community. I don't know whether I would have grown humanly as I have. That's with all my defenses in place. If I had really given all my defenses away, and just gave myself completely, I probably would be a little farther along the road. But people accepted me the way I am, as I am, and they're teaching me how to do the same with them.

Father George S...: [01:07:57](#) In 2001, in north of Toronto, Vanier gave this day-long workshop on "Dare We Believe in Human Community?" That focused me, even after all those years that I had been at L'Arche, it focused me again on what we're doing and how we're doing it. I don't know where I'd be in terms of what I've been able to do to break my own heart open and to be intimate with people. Again, it's difficult for me to be intimate, that's who I am. That's how I am. But I've been given a wonderful group that just holds me there and waits for me to discover with them. It isn't just one way, either way, it's mutual. With them, I discover others more intimately as they discover me.

Father George S...: [01:08:54](#) We do it together. We do it without a lot of ideas. We don't have big discussions around the table about ideas or what books we've read last or what we think about this or that, but there's a heart-to-heart exchange that I find nowhere else in my life. It's pretty human, and sometimes it gives me indigestion when I'm up against myself or someone else. [laughter] But I tell you, it's worth passing through those *defies* in French, those challenges.

Father George S...: [01:09:37](#) The opportunities for being human are immense, immense, and I wouldn't have learned about those opportunities in me without people around me like I have in L'Arche.

Guy Caruso: [01:09:51](#) Well, I think Mary Ann, you said it, the core members oftentimes know, who've oftentimes come from lives where they didn't have community and they were alone and wounded in many ways, and even broken in some sense. In L'Arche, because of the love, I think, that's expressed, and just the breaking bread together and being together and worshiping, their gifts just shine. Sometimes the gift is just that they're loving back. It's quite incredible when that occurs. All too often, that's forgotten in the human service world or elsewhere, where in L'Arche that tends to be what is held tightly.

- Father George S...: [01:10:41](#) That would be so against the gospel of Christ, or of any major religion that if we do not help a person to know that they are capable of loving, that's the greatest disease... and the greatest tragedy in our world is that we have learned to be partisan, we have learned to be divisive. We wonder, in our own culture right now, how did we get this way? We learned to do it, and we don't know how not to be partisan. We don't know how not to be critical, how not to be fearful. It's a school, L'Arche is a school of love. It's a school of risking to find another way.
- Guy Caruso: [01:11:30](#) Well, people sometimes hear the word community, and they have these high hopes and dreams and perfection and beautiful. That's not what community is, is it?
- Father George S...: [01:11:44](#) No, we can be a little bit crazy. We can be emotionally moved to great heights, we can stumble over ourself and become sad in community. Everything human is possible, and everything possible is worth paying attention to, and lifting it up and encouraging us to go forward no matter the circumstances. That's what community does. It sticks around long enough to give us another chance. As I said in that [reflection], too, we fall down, we get up, we fall down, we get up, we fall down, we get up.
- Guy Caruso: [01:12:27](#) We're coming to a close here, is there anything else either one of you would like to share before we end this interview?
- Mary Ann Zarnic...: [01:12:35](#) I guess, as I was sitting here thinking about all that we've shared, I think the one thing that is also very important about community and when I think of our core members, and I think of assistants as well, there's so much transformation that has gone on in L'Arche. People have grown so much through trust, especially our core members, they finally feel that they're being held too, that they're loved, and to hear someone say, "Oh, you're my friend." I just value when we have "Chat and Chew," and Linda comes into my office every Tuesday, and will just say, "You're my friend, friend." I think that says it all, and it's so sincere. I'm grateful I have her in my life.
- Guy Caruso: [01:13:37](#) Thank you. Father, George, anything else?
- Father George S...: [01:13:39](#) I'm impressed with what Mary Ann has said this morning, if for no other reason for me to be here, it was to hear Mary Ann say what my heart knows to be true. I really value her friendship as well. She didn't say what struck me most about her when I first met her across that desk was that she was a cook. Cooking for people all summer long. Mary Ann is one of the most peaceful,

serene, productive cooks in our community. But there's more, she's cooked up a lot of love and support for her because she offers it so freely. She's a good person, and thank you for what you said today.

- Guy Caruso: [01:14:28](#) Well, I thank you both. It was just so very joyful for me. So, thank you so much.
- Father George S...: [01:14:33](#) Thank you.
- Mary Ann Zarnic...: [01:14:33](#) Thank you.