Yes, it is that time again! The wonderful Creche Festival has come and will be gone December 2nd, and what a way to start the holiday season. Jamie did her usual unbelievable job on the wreath, and that was only the start! The theme this year was "Angels"---and angels were everywhere---I've never seen a more moving expression of the theme. Everyone was awed! My one word was “WOW.”

Mepkin continued to be very dry and we have been watering most of the month. It has been quite a job, along with heeling in the Mundo, replanting some of the Mundo, and having new areas sodded. In the Columbarium 2nd Phase, the pots in all areas have been refurbished and they also required watering on a regular basis, as did the overgrown materials in the pots that had been replanted in various other areas of the grounds.

Our biggest accomplishment by the Volunteers was the remulching of the entire grounds. I cannot begin to thank those who came extra days to work plus their regular days spent mulching. Craig led the charge. He even fed the crew one day at lunch! The mulch job looks better than ever and we received many, many compliments on the grounds from the Visitors.

December will find us continuing to clean up the gardens and prepare them for winter. This involves cutting down dead materials and disposing of them, pruning when trees and shrubs have gone dormant, as well as keeping up the winter pots we have put out now. Putting things properly to bed pays big dividends in the Spring, when materials pop out again. We have had a minimum of diseases because of the good horticulture practices. Our Volunteers deserve a big pat on the back for all they do. As Ursula says, “They are AMAZING!”.

**GARDEN UPDATES:**

**Store/Parking Court:**

Jamie had done her magic at the Store to welcome Visitors.
After checking in with Father Guerric, our Visitors started down the path in St. Clare. Here was their first sight:

Angels in St. Clare
Next came the traditional Crèche that is in St. Clare each year:
Traditional greeting Creche (beyond it to the left you can see another angel). More beauty:
From here, as you stroll through the gate, the next angel greets you.

Angel outside the gate
Crossing the road, you came upon this angel:
On the Walk to the Church, as you arrive at the permanent Creche this angel welcomes you:

Angel at the bridge to permanent Creche.
Moving on and up to the Breezeway, these angels greet you:
Angels at Breezeway

Banners spelling peace in many languages welcome you to the major Crèche at the Breezeway:

Major Creche in Breezeway
Newly commissioned Creche

To the right, you sight the beautiful Wreath at the entrance to the Library and another banner of peace in many languages:

Peace banner in many languages.

Entering the exhibit you see the following:
Angel at the entrance of the Creche exhibit.
From here you will note that all the windows are covered by such banners. I understand these were done by young children and older adults. Being over the windows, they lent a lovely glow as one processed down to the Conference Room to more of the exhibit.

Window Banner. Can you imagine how awesome this was?

Entering the main room, you are greeted by one of my favorite Creches, which almost always is on display:
From here, I will picture a sampling of different angels, and creches, on pillars of white, and even angels and creches flying from the ceiling. I cannot tell you how moving this show was.
Returning to the Store, the Creche Shop nearby had something for everyone:
Finishing shopping at the Creche Store and the Store, as you exit out into the porch, hot drinks and warm cookies await you for purchase.
Exiting out into the Arbor, Ursula had done a beautiful greenery arrangement:

Arbor arrangement

Now how does all this happen? They work year around. Here are the Creche Store workers unpacking their wares, coding them and putting them on display:
Creche Store Volunteers

Jamie and her crew arrive the week before and work in the area where we usually garage our Gators, Tractor, and Zeroturn. They work like elves putting it all together. (I forgot to tell you there were greenery arrangements throughout the exhibit by Jamie also.)

The Wreath in progress.
Not only is their work amazing, but they come year after year….and even invite the regular garden Volunteers to share a lunch spread that is unbelievable. Everyone pitches in—and when a saw broke we took it over to the garage and sure enough, Bill had another one we could use. We try to do our best to have the settings for these Volunteers' work in great condition.

Ed loading mulch for Greg to spread (note our wonderful new Tractor and Gator).

The STARS of the SHOW:

Julie Yaeger , Chairman (in white blouse)
Fran Taggart - head of the cookie and hot drink group this year.

Here is another hardworking and most necessary team, “The Golf Cart Team”, who meet you and greet you along the road into Mepkin and lead you to where to park in the fields and then ferry you back to the Store. When you are done, they pick you up at the Store and take you back to your car. A wonderful volunteer service of these men, year after year.

While all of this is going on, the regular garden tasks continue.

**Orchard:**

The weather is cooling off at Mepkin. Norm and I spent some of the last 2 weeks trying to protect the citrus from the cold weather to come.

Thanks to the mushroom crew we were able to get some heavy cardboard. We
searched the barns and came up with poles to support the boxes. The oranges are big enough that we have to join two boxes to completely surround the trees. We put some pine straw and leaves at the bottom to protect the grafts. It would be ideal to have a heat source too. Perhaps we can cobble something up before it REALLY gets cold.

There are 3 or 4 oranges on one of the plants. Not ripe yet so we will check them each week. Hard to see them when they blend in with the leaves.

The smaller oranges (Cara cara) we enclosed with tomato cages wrapped in several thicknesses of cardboard enclosed with tar paper. They suffered most last winter so we don’t want to take any chances.

Howard

Orchard covered for the cold weather.

**Luce Garden:**

For some time we have wanted to develop a new way for the Retreatants to get to Luce Garden without using the old and dangerous original brick steps. Craig and several Volunteers took the initiative, graded, and purchased stepping stones, so now they have a new way to enter Luce Garden.
New steps from Retreat Center to Luce Garden (Craig Clark)

Columbarium:

The Second Phase of the Columbarium continues. Additional drainage has been put in and sodded, and the construction that will hold the niches is well underway.
We are also making progress on the Bridge and the Steps Up to it.

Progress on renovating bridge to Laurens Cemetery
Odds and Ends:
This month we are featuring another way that Mepkin Abbey supports itself:

The Creche Festival.

For years, Julie Yaeger and Fran Taggart have headed up this effort.

The Creche Festival introduces many from the area to Mepkin Abbey. This year it “sold out” weeks before it opened. By sold out, I mean all time slots were taken for the entire run of the Festival. The Trappists do not charge for the privilege of coming to see this extraordinary exhibit. They do hope that those who come will give a free will donation, so they can continue to stage this show and also to commission new creches from artisans from many areas. The Creche Shop does have items for sale, and there are as well the hot beverages and warm cookies, but all the labor for this is done by approximately 125 Volunteers. It has become a special way for many people in The Low Country to begin their holiday season --- looking for the coming of Jesus, our Savior and the ultimate Gift of our God.

Spotlight on a Volunteer

In an effort to get to know each of you a little better, we are choosing a garden volunteer each month to answer a few questions and submit a brief bio for the monthly newsletter. This month we have chosen volunteer Kathy Mitchell. Kathy arrived on the scene and I knew she was a winner as she was from Knoxville! (ed. Note-Dottie is also from Knoxville) Kathy is one of those Volunteers who shows up early and feels a real responsibility for her area of St. Clare. St. Clare has never looked better in her capable hands.

“Kathy” Kathleen Pompa Mitchell
I was born in a small western Pennsylvania coal mining town, Barnesboro, PA, near Johnstown. I’m the 5th of 8 children. My early years were very happy in our little town surrounded by many extended family members, and close family friends. My father was the son of Italian immigrants, and a very devout and faithful Catholic. My siblings and I were greatly influenced by our Italian heritage, and the faith. My Mother was Pennsylvania Dutch, and Welch. My Dad always said she became Italian by marriage.

Barnesboro was a mix of immigrants from many eastern & western European countries. It seemed as though everyone’s grandparents were immigrants. Our ears were accustomed to hearing several different languages every day. Most of the town’s population were Catholic, and each ethnic group had its own Church. Ours was the Italian Church, Our Lady of Mt Carmel. Barnesboro was famous for its many Catholic Churches all within just a few blocks of each other. I remember all of the Church bells ringing on Sunday morning calling people to Mass. Each Church had its own distinct bells. It was glorious!

Like most of the men in Barnesboro, my father was a coal miner. He was seriously injured in the mines when I was very young. That event changed our lives. After a very long and difficult recovery, Dad got a job in Michigan. I remember moving day vividly. We all piled in the car with our dogs, and cats, and various necessities. We must have looked like a scene from the Grapes of Wrath. I was 6 years old. We suffered from culture shock in MI for a while. It was hard to go from our very ethnic, mostly Catholic, small town community, to a mostly protestant rural community. Every summer we’d spend several weeks “back home” in Pennsylvania. It was like living in two different worlds. I always preferred PA.

In Michigan, I grew up in a big old country farm house near Rochester, MI. My husband Mike and I went to the same High School, and we knew each other, but I could never have imagined that I would marry him one day! We began dating when Mike was in college, and married in 1968. Within 7 years, our 4 children were born. Three daughters and a son. I was a very busy stay at home Mom in our early years, but managed to get in some community college courses in banking principles and accounting. When our kids were older, I got a job in a bank and worked in various banks for many years. In 1979 Mike was transferred to Knoxville, TN with Sea Ray Boats. That was another huge culture shock for our family, but eventually we all came to love Knoxville and it became home. Mike was transferred around a bit in the years that followed. First to Illinois for a few years, then back to Knoxville, then Florida for two years, then back to Knoxville. Those moves were difficult, especially for our children.

The world of finance was certainly not where my passion was. I retired in 1996. I’ve always been a bit artsy, and love the creative process. I’ve dabbled in many different artistic mediums throughout my life, but my focus for many years was on designing and creating stained glass projects. I’ve been saving water color for my old age. I think I’m there!

I absolutely love the Mepkin Abbey Crèche Festival!
Retirement enable me to become a very active volunteer in my Parish, Diocese, and local community. I volunteered at a Women’s Shelter for several years, and became a volunteer RCIA Coordinator for our Parish in Lenoir City, TN. I was also very privileged to sit on an RCIA Advisory Board for the Diocese of Knoxville. [RCIA – Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. It’s a faith formation process by which adults become Christians]

Retirement also enabled me to pursue a childhood dream to learn how to tap dance. My older siblings had dance and music lessons, but as the 5th child in our large family, there was no extra money for dance lessons when I came along. I heard of a retired dance teacher in our area who was teaching adult tap classes for fun and exercise. I joined her class. Eventually a group formed. In time, we became quite good at our routines! Our teacher wanting the group to perform publicly, but we refused! After relentless prodding, we finally caved and agreed to take our show on the road! We came to really enjoy dancing for folks, and started performing all around Knoxville and East Tennessee at various community events, senior groups, and pretty much anywhere we were invited. The price was right. We performed for free! We did accept donations to help with our expenses. Honestly, the smiles on the faces of the people we entertained was payment enough. We practiced together 5 or 6 hours a week, and usually performed one show a week. Two during the Christmas season. I was with the group for 17 years. It was so much fun, and I have so many great memories from those years! In 2016 we lost our teacher/director/choreographer, and beloved friend to cancer. The group disbanded shortly afterward. We all share a very close bond, and gather occasionally to reminisce, and see if we can remember our dances?

In 2015 Mike took a job with a company in South Carolina which brought us to the Charleston area. We love it here, but it was hard to leave our family and friends in Knoxville. We now have 9 grandchildren, and 3 great grandchildren. We plan to return to Knoxville when Mike retires in a few years.

On May 3rd, 2018 Mike and I will celebrate our 50th wedding anniversary.

The Questions

1. Who would you want with you if you were stranded on a deserted island?

Definitely my husband Mike. He makes me laugh every day, and I know he could build a boat to get us off the island.

2. If you could do anything you wanted right now, what would it be?

This is a very hard question! There are so many things I want to do right now, but I think I’ll just be content to do what I’m doing right now.
3. If money was no object, what would you do all day?

I’d travel the world, and take family and friends with me.

4. Where do you most want to travel, but have never been?

The Holy Land. I had a trip booked to go there in November of 2001. The US State Department banned all travel to the Middle East for Americans after 9/11 that year, so the trip was cancelled. I never rebooked.

5. What is your favorite memory?

So many, but I would have to say, summers in PA with my cousins and friends. The high light of our summer visits was “Mt Carmel’s Day”. Our Italian parish, Our Lady of Mount Carmel, celebrated its feast day in July each year. It was a spectacular celebration! The whole town turned out for it! It started early with Mass followed by a procession through town holding the statue of Our Lady up high. Hundreds joined in the procession, and lined the streets to see it. A beautiful walking prayer. That was followed by fabulous Italian food, music and games in the Church yard. It went on all day long, and well into the night, and ended with a spectacular fireworks display. Everyone in town looked forward to Mt. Carmel’s Day! It ranked right up there with Christmas Day for us kids! Mike and I took our kids to PA a few times so they could experience “Mt Carmel’s Day” with the children of my cousins and friends. They loved it as much as I did. Sadly, all the wonderful ethnic Churches were consolidated into one in the 1980’s. So, our beautiful Our Lady of Mt Carmel Catholic Church is no more, but what great memories!

6. What is your favorite movie?

The list is very long! I can’t pick just one. My ultimate favorites would have to be Christmas movies. It’s a Wonderful Life, all of the Christmas Carol Movies, The Grinch!

7. What is the one thing that should be taught in school that isn’t already?

Social Justice issues!!!!

8. What one thing would you change if you had to do it over again?

I would still marry my Mike, but not until we were much older.

9. If you could share a meal with three people from the past, who would they be?

I’d have to say 4 people. My 4 grandparents. They all passed away when I was young. I’d love to just sit
and talk with them, and hear about their lives. I’d have a lot of questions for them too.

10. What actor/actress would play you in your life movie?

I have no idea? Sally Field maybe? She can be serious, and goofy.

11. Why do you volunteer at Mepkin?

I learned about Mepkin Abbey shortly after moving to this area. I had never been to a monastery before, and was anxious to visit. I was blown away by the beauty of Mepkin Abbey on my first visit, and every visit since! I took one of the volunteer pamphlets, and decided to volunteer to work in the gardens. My first contact was Ursula. We all know how friendly, and inviting she is. She made me feel so welcome! I was anxious to join in the garden volunteer group. I chose to work in St Clare, and initially found it very overwhelming! After almost 2 years of working in Clare, I’ve learned what should be there, and what not. I’ve established a routine, and now find it very manageable. I absolutely love all the gardens, and the history of Mepkin, and all that Mepkin Abbey represents. It’s such a peaceful and graceful place to just be. I recently learned that the founding Bishop of the Diocese of Knoxville, TN, Bishop Anthony J. O’Connell, known as “AJ” at Mepkin, spent the last 10 years of his life at Mepkin Abbey, and is buried in the Monk’s Cemetery. That revelation literally gave me chills. Rev. Bishop O’Connell was a most beloved, and good Bishop. I feel a very special connection to Mepkin Abbey, and the Monks, because of Bishop O’Connell’s presence. I’m very blessed indeed to be able to spend time in Mepkin Abbey gardens each week. I recently became a Mepkin Abbey docent as well.

Our Family 2011-We’ve grown since then! Grandfather Rocco Donato Pompa -center
Great Grandchildren

Tellico Tappers (Floating Tappers)

Christmas Costumes

Wooden Soldier Dance
MERRY CHRISTMAS EVERYONE!

Many thanks to Craig for the photograph and Spotlight article, to Howard for the Orchard Report and to Langhorne for editing. I hope you could tell how exciting the Creche Show was this year. The grounds never looked better and the extraordinary work that Jamie, Dennis and their crew did was unbelievable. The Creche people are tireless. It is very heartening in this day of the commercial Christmas to see people seeking this place of peace in order to add an aura of holiness to the real reason for the season.

“As we await the arrival of Christmas and the rebirth of Spring, may we embrace the change of seasons as reminders of the unchanging triumph of our Lord, who has promised, ‘Heaven and Earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.’ “

Merry Christmas to each of you. May the Blessing of the Christchild be to yours and to your family. dottie