

Person of the Year 2007:

Blair is beacon of hope for homeless

By Terry Anderson • TAnderso@greenbaypressgazette.com • December 30, 2007



The Rev. Guy Blair, the priest at St. John the Evangelist Church, is the Green Bay Press-Gazette's 2007 Person of the Year.
Jim Matthews/Press-Gazette

Among the dozens of 2007 Person of the Year nominees sent to the Green Bay Press-Gazette in the past month were many worthy individuals who might have been chosen — politicians, sports figures, community leaders and newsmakers.

As nominees were reviewed the nominees, the underlying question remained: Did this person do something more than dominate headlines for a week or a month? Will their impact last beyond the moment?

One person stood out — the Rev. Guy Blair, a priest at St. John the Evangelist Church, who, as winter neared, made it clear he was prepared to defy city officials to care for an underserved segment of Green Bay's homeless population.

Eventually, with the Catholic Diocese of Green Bay openly supporting Blair and with an agreement to make some program changes, city officials relented and approved operation of a new homeless shelter at St. John's through this winter.

"Because of Rev. Blair's persistence, Green Bay can be assured that, for at least this year, it is not necessary for any man, woman or child to sleep outside at night in the cold," Jean Sullivan of Green Bay said in her nomination letter.

Blair, a 56-year-old Connecticut native and member of the Brothers of the Sacred Heart, expressed surprise and humility when he learned that he is the Person of the Year.

"This honor goes to the people who put this homeless ministry together and work to maintain it," Blair said last week in the church's rectory. "The fact is the homeless are here. The reasons are many and varied and there isn't always a resolution that fits our definition of a problem solved."

"Surely Father Guy Blair is the most worthy recipient of the 2007 Person of the Year," wrote Kathryn Daley of Green Bay, who made it a point to add that she is not Roman Catholic. "He (Blair) and his parish have demonstrated their faith in action as few others have in our community. By calling attention to the needs of 'the least of my brothers' they have awakened Green Bay's clergy and laity; they have provided proof that working together, we can all make a difference."

Guy Blair a champion for the homeless

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When push came to shove, the Rev. Guy Blair pushed back.

For daring to stand up to city officials; for enlisting the Catholic Diocese of Green Bay to raise its moral voice; but mostly, for caring about some of Green Bay's most vulnerable residents, Blair is the Green Bay Press-Gazette's Person of the Year.

"Besides being a good Samaritan to the homeless, he has inspired many others to take up the cause of loving care for others, thus providing many the opportunity for good works which are necessary to the human soul," wrote Peggy Burns of Green Bay, among the dozens of area residents who wrote nominating Blair.

"As a spiritual leader I need to stand up for the people we are praying for," said Blair, 56, who came to Green Bay in August 2005 to serve St. John the Evangelist Parish, the oldest in Wisconsin, and specifically the deaf community in the diocese of Green Bay. "I have to speak and act as a follower of Jesus."

Shortly after he arrived, Blair was also asked if he would be a member of the Brown County Housing and Homeless Coalition. He accepted.

"I am a hypocrite if I ignore all of these homeless people," said Blair, who confides that there was a time when his own parents were homeless. "What could be more vulnerable than being homeless in Green Bay in the winter?"

A Connecticut native and a member of the Priests of the Sacred Heart, Blair said it was never his intention to be a lightning rod for controversy. In fact, a search of Press-Gazette archives found little mention of his name outside of his official capacity until late last summer, when renewal of the Brown County Churches Operating Temporary Shelter program became a major issue.

City officials and neighborhood leaders were dissatisfied with the shelter that had operated the two previous winters on the St. John's campus, serving the chronically homeless. City leaders refused to issue a conditional use permit to allow it to open for another winter, and briefly sought to establish a new homeless shelter on the city's west side, a move that was blocked by staunch neighborhood opposition.

When it became apparent to Blair there would be no alternative to St. John's, he began preparing to defy city officials by reopening a shelter on the parish campus at 413 St. John St. that would ostensibly fill that void.

In response city officials intimated that they might fine St. John's up to \$600 per day for defying city zoning rules.



Rev. Guy Blair, pastor of St. John the Evangelist Church in Green Bay, sits next to what he refers to as the "first homeless family" inside the church.
Jim Matthews/Press-Gazette

That's when the diocese stepped into the fray. Milwaukee Archbishop Timothy Dolan said the diocese would assume responsibility for the shelter. And Dolan made it clear to city officials, including Green Bay Mayor Jim Schmitt, that he considered efforts to limit the diocese's role in serving the homeless a violation of the Catholic Church's First Amendment rights.

At the same time, diocesan officials offered to work with city officials to address their concerns. It was an olive branch the city accepted, even with the understanding that the new St. John's Homeless Shelter would remain at the parish, serving the same homeless population, and that Blair and some of those who had worked there in the past would still be involved.

"I know there are some people who say I'm too much of a social worker and not enough of a priest," Blair said. "But I'm not a Lone Ranger. There is a homeless coalition."

In the initial week after the shelter reopened, Blair said he actually stayed there overnight, fearful that those who staunchly opposed its existence could attack it.

Blair denies enmity between himself and Schmitt, but he doesn't deny there was friction.

"I don't bear him ill will. I won't say that I like him, but I respect him," Blair said. "I don't think that he should see me as a rival. I certainly don't see him as a rival. We should be working together."

For his part, Schmitt said that he appreciated Blair's passion for helping the homeless, but added that substantial progress was made when Deacon Tim Reilly and the diocese stepped forward to assume authority.

"There's no question Father Blair raised the issue of homelessness. That was his single issue and his whole heart was with the homeless. I give him credit for that. But to bring it to resolution, we needed the broader view that included the neighbors and government," Schmitt said.

"I think that the real credit belongs to Deacon Reilly," said City Council President Chad Fradette.

"Father Blair would never admit to us that there were problems at (the old shelter). When the fact is, there were scores of police problems. It took Deacon Reilly to say, 'Here's how we're going to deal with it.'"

Blair and Reilly acknowledge that the St. John's shelter is not a permanent solution. While it is expected to close on April 15, no long-term alternative has been identified.

Fradette candidly admits that he believes St. John's will reopen next fall. And he is comfortable with the current working relationship.

It wasn't just Blair's willingness to challenge city officials that earned him recognition. His determination catalyzed the moral authority of a church that too often has found itself on the defensive in recent years.

"I've had other priests and clergy call me to applaud the action by the church. And none of this would have happened without Father Guy's initiative and vision," said Reilly, who is the administrative head of the diocese. "The way I look at it is, Father Guy initiated many aspects of service to the homeless and motivated many people and organized people. And when it ended up in limbo and it appeared on Oct. 31 the homeless would have nowhere to go, that offered the church the opportunity to step forward."

Editorial: Blair followed his calling, changed Green Bay's heart

He spent the last two winters providing shelter for people who had nowhere else to go to get out of the cold, and when the city of Green Bay tried to tell him he couldn't do that anymore, he dug in his heels and said, "Yes, I will."

For following his church's calling, even when government authorities blocked the way, the Rev. Guy Blair is the consensus choice of the Green Bay Press-Gazette's editorial board and readers as our first Northeastern Wisconsin Person of the Year.

Blair, pastor of St. John the Evangelist Church in Green Bay, has made care for the homeless his personal mission. In a guest commentary the Press-Gazette published Oct. 14, he revealed that his parents went homeless for a time when they were in their 60s, hiding their plight from other family members.

"Their experience as homeless people changed my perception of 'homeless' as a problem to be solved into 'homeless' as a person," Blair wrote in that column. "Often sleeping in their car and eating when they had money, they opened a world to me I never knew but came to understand can happen even to those who are careful and trusting."

As a result, Blair has helped put a face on the homeless for many people since he came to Green Bay, and he clearly was prepared to keep serving the homeless at any personal cost, especially as alternatives to St. John's were proposed and shot down throughout the fall.

Finally, just before Nov. 1 — the day the shelter has traditionally opened for the winter — the Catholic Diocese of Green Bay reasserted its First Amendment right to perform its mission under the principle of religious freedom. Milwaukee Archbishop Timothy Dolan, in a polite but firm letter delivered to the city by Deacon Tim Reilly, the Green Bay diocese's chief administrator, declared that the Catholic Church would continue to shelter the homeless and that St. John's had the best available building for that purpose.

In the accompanying article, city officials give Reilly and Dolan credit for breaking the stalemate, and they do deserve some of that credit, but it was Blair who opened his church for the shelter in the first place. The message from the higher church officials was they agreed with St. John's pastor: These people need shelter, and this is where they will go.

The idea to create a Press-Gazette Person of the Year started with a simple posting on our Community Conversation Web site that, in the natural course of events, snowballed.

In early December, we asked our readers to tell us who was the Person of the Year — and why. That was all we asked; we didn't set complicated guidelines or qualifications. We just posed an open-ended question.

Because we wanted someone whose reach exceeded the splash of a single headline, we sought nominations throughout the month. As the nominations arrived online and in the mail, and even in a few phone calls, we listened to what our readers said.

It became clear from this community conversation that the Rev. Guy Blair is the person who had the greatest impact on Northeastern Wisconsin in 2007.

So to that extent he is not our Person of the Year. Rather, he is your Person of the Year.



Joe Heller cartoon for Dec. 30, 2007