BARB GILLESPIE, BS, MSPD
by Jane Kennedy

Barb Gillespie was born in Milwaukee and raised in Brookfield, WI. When Barb was in second grade, she noticed that another student was having difficulties with schoolwork. She loved playing school and reviewed the lessons with this little boy after school each day. Her teacher noticed that this child was making definite progress and thanked her for her work. Right then, she decided to become a teacher and never looked back. She worked at Easter Seals camps during her high school and college years, in Holler Park, Milwaukee, and Camp Wawbeek in Wisconsin Dells, helping to provide a camp experience to orthopedically challenged children and adults. These experiences informed her future personal and professional life. She met Terry, another staff member at Camp Wawbeek, and married him in 1972.

Barb majored in Behavioral Disabilities at UW Madison with special training in Orton Gillingham methods for teaching children with dyslexia. She graduated in 1972 with teaching certifications to work with children with cognitive disabilities, emotional disabilities and learning disabilities (LD). Districts across the country were seeking specialists in LD, which had just emerged as a new field in education, so administrators were recruiting on college campuses. Barb was offered jobs in many communities. Terry had attended UWSP and therefore knew that Marshfield would be a nice community in which to live.

Barb accepted the job offer at Grant School and became the first LD teacher in Marshfield. Her caseload was determined by the Neuropsychology Department at Marshfield Clinic. Drs. Phil Zerfus and Fred Theye, Neuropsychologists, had been identifying students with special learning needs, but needed people to then work with the children to meet those challenges. They began referring to Barb. Eventually, multi-disciplinary teams were formed in the school district to identify students with learning disabilities and additional staff were added throughout the local school system.

Barb taught at Grant School, the middle school, and the high school, and then settled at Washington School where she remained for 30 years (33 years total). While teaching full-time and raising two children, she earned a master's degree from UWSP and completed additional coursework/training to instruct children on the autism spectrum.

She retired in 2005 and stayed in education as Christian Education Coordinator at her church. In 2009, she was called back to job share a position in the school district for three years as an instructional interventionist, helping students who had learning challenges but did not qualify for special education services. Like any great teacher, Barb continues to educate through all of her activities and in her daily life.



Barb Gillespie

Environmental concerns comprised an important part of Barb's work in the community. She started an annual church rummage sale, open to the whole community, in 2006, to reduce contents in the landfill and to help people find affordable, reusable items. This has been a success for 17 years. Barb initiated the Green Team at her church in 2007, to model and educate the congregation and community in sustainable living practices. Community members became involved in learning about and supporting Citizens' Climate Lobby. After attending the Midwest Renewable Energy Expo, she planned a community-wide event at Wildwood Station for 350.org on 10/10/10 to educate community members on reducing carbon usage and to promote the global climate movement. Vendors from all over Central Wisconsin participated. She brought in Michael Dowd in 2017, TEDx lecturer and American author and advocate of ecotheology, for an educational event which drew participants from Central Wisconsin.

Barb and sustainable friends established a native prairie in 2021 on church property along the bike path on Adler Road to increase pollinator habitat and model for the community how to reduce lawn mowing and return to natural, drought-resistant plants that benefit numerous forms of life. Working in 2008 with community members and the Healthy Lifestyles Coalition at Marshfield Clinic, Barb established a Community Garden Program that involved installing 80 square foot garden beds at several local churches. The Marshfield Area Community Foundation serves as the fiscal agent. Furthermore, Barb presented a program on establishing a community garden at the Garden Expo in Madison.

When Afghan refugees were housed at Fort

McCoy, Barb joined several other community members in nearly a year of training through a refugee resettlement office in Wausau. She then helped to form three teams of volunteers in Marshfield willing to accept refugee families. She organized and led one amazing team of over 30 volunteers which welcomed a large family from Tanzania to our community. Her team assisted this non-English speaking family with housing and furnishings, finances, cultural adjustment, medical care, educational opportunities, learning English, enrolling the older children in age-appropriate schools, and transportation. She says, “It was the most intensive and challenging experience of my life.” The family has resettled in a Wisconsin community with other Swahili-speaking neighbors. Her group continues to help families immigrating to Marshfield through Know Your Rights workshops, clothing drives, and whatever needs are shared.

Although she is retired from teaching, Barb Gillespie has enjoyed continuing to work with students through private tutoring over the years. In person and remotely, she considers teaching emerging readers to decode the mysteries of reading and spelling a highly satisfying pastime. Other local organizations which she supports include FOMPL (Friends of Marshfield Public Library), Immigration Action Team at her church, P.E.O. Chapter CY which supports women’s educational scholarships and loans, and Everyone Needs a Community.

Common threads throughout Barb Gillespie’s life are her devotion to teaching, to helping people in need, and to protecting the earth; she is truly an inspiration.