



# WOMEN

OF STRENGTH, MERCY,  
AND POWER



A Special *Great Lakes Life* Pictorial

# Joan Chittister, OSB || ERIE, PENNSYLVANIA

## Benedictine Nun, Author, International Peace Activist

Joan Chittister, OSB, is the epitome of a power woman. One of the church's key visionary voices and spiritual leaders for more than 30 years, Sr. Joan is considered one of the most important and influential spiritual voices in America. Never afraid to ask the tough questions, she is committed to change, and still sees the faith and humanity in today's modern world. She is a leading activist in women's rights in the church, a noted public figure, celebrated speaker, and a renowned author of more than 30 books.

Her latest book, *God's Tender Mercy: Reflections on Forgiveness*, tackles the virtue of mercy and its connection to forgiveness, challenging the reader to stop judging, accusing, and criticizing those labeled "sinners" and to be realistic about our own actions before "throwing that first stone" at another. Joan also just finished writing her next book, *Redefining Happiness*, which she describes as a very different kind of book that will be a sort of archaeological dig of what every major discipline in the academic world says about happiness.

"I was looking at this cluttered society and how everyone is racing and the financial worries, the society worries, the privacy worries...it's all there. I remember thinking of my travels and finding very simple people in the gutters of the world looking very happy. I said to myself, 'Here we are on this carousel of conflict, is it possible to be happy in this society?' I began to work on



this and reviewed the literature of what's been written on happiness. Nobody was really exploring the concept."

Searching everywhere from sociological surveys to modern medicine practices to philosophers, Joan examined the concept of happiness in the differing principles to find any common correlation. "My hope for the book is that it will raise a lot of thinking and discussion in a most nonthreatening way. I'm hoping that young people can rethink happiness, particularly as they reach middle age. I want them to ask themselves, 'What's the purpose of my life?'"

"The most surprising thing I found was the fact that the conversation on happiness in the West ended in the 4th century and was not reopened again until the 18th century," reveals Joan. "This culture

that is now under tremendous stress, great turmoil, real turbulence, and wondering what happiness is. In the long run, what people are looking for are the resources they need to be independent, dignified, and to go on developing, and that they are not just at the level of survival. If we can sustain people's dignity and growth, we will have a happier country. People want to have a purpose in life...that's real happiness."

**For more information on Sr. Joan Chittister and her works, including the impending release of *Redefining Happiness*, visit [www.benetvision.org](http://www.benetvision.org).**

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A woman with short brown hair, wearing a white t-shirt with the number '24' on the sleeve, black roller skates, and black protective gear (wrist guards and elbow pads), is shown in profile against a dark background. She is looking upwards and to the right. The quote is positioned in the upper right corner of the image.

“The biggest **misconception** is people think it is all a show... but when I get **hurt**, I get hurt for real.”

# Dessaræ “NO Torious...” Lenz || BUFFALO, NEW YORK

## Member, Queen City Roller Girls

With a modest, sweet exterior it's hard to fathom Dessaræ Lenz – who by day is a speech pathologist for Kaledia Health, a not-for-profit healthcare provider in Buffalo – spends her evenings in fishnet stockings and skates as a member of the Queen City Roller Girls' Nickel City Knockouts team. “My patients think it's awesome,” she says of the patients she works with through Kaleida's visiting nurses program, mainly stroke victims and patients with any sort of brain injury or swallowing or voice disorders.

Founded five years ago by three “radical, free-thinking, free-wheeling women who love the smell of the rink and the feel of eight wheels under their feet,” Queen City Roller Girls is Buffalo's first all-women flat track roller derby league and a member league of the Women's Flat Track Derby Association (meaning their travel team, the Lake Erie Furies, sees national play against teams in cities including Milwaukee, Albany, and New York City). “[The roller derby] gives women an outlet – not to be violent, but to test yourself and find out what your body can and can't do. It's an interesting genre because there are not many full contact sports that women can play. The biggest misconception about the Roller Girls is people think it is all a show,” admits

Lenz. “But we train like athletes. We are in the gym and we are in skates, it's not like I'm just putting on my fishnets and going skating. It's pretty intense. When I get hurt, I get hurt for real.”



As the volunteer coordinator, Dessaræ works to ensuring the Roller Girls remain a part of the Buffalo community by reaching out to the non-profit sector. The league works with female-oriented charities including Crisis Services, Girls Incorporated, and the YWCA, among others, by making them the designated charity during scheduled bouts. The teams are also mandated volunteer hours, participating in work including serving breakfast for Ronald McDonald House Charities and working with Habitat for Humanity. “We gave about \$5,000 to various groups last year. A roller derby

league in Philadelphia was actually surprised to hear we made enough money to give to charity,” says Lenz. “But our work in the community show that we care about our hometown. This gives us a better face in the community and makes us look like more than just a bunch of fishnet-wearing, hair-pulling roller derby girl.”

*For more information on the Queen City Roller Girls, visit [www.queencityrollergirls.net](http://www.queencityrollergirls.net).*

# Miriam Fife || WARREN, OHIO

## Court Advocate, Trumbull County Victim/Witness Division

Twenty-five years ago, Miriam Fife lived every mother's worst nightmare. Her 12-year-old son, Raymond, had taken off on his bicycle through his Warren, Ohio, community to a friend's house before a Boy Scouts meeting. But just hours later, Miriam would receive a call that her son never made it to the meeting. A four-hour search ensued, ending with Raymond's father discovering the boy in a field. He had been raped, beaten, and tortured. Raymond died two days later.

Finding strength in tragedy, Miriam Fife has used her experience to become an advocate for victims and witnesses of brutal crimes in Trumbull County. "When my son was killed, people in the community started calling me and sharing stories of what tragedies their families had gone through," shares Fife. "Then

there were several murders after Raymond's and people called me to tell me they saw my strength and asked me to help them. My advocacy started almost immediately."

Today, Miriam works with thousands of people a year, offering solace in the wake of a homicide or rape, offering help in hospital or funeral home arrangements, assisting in the collection of victims' compensation benefits, and serving as a liaison between the victims and the prosecutor's office by attending court trials in place of the victims. She also is very active with the parole board and helps prepare victim impact statements. But most important, she listens to those in need. "Everyone calls

and wants to talk to Mrs. Fife because they think with all I have been through, I can help them."

Although Trumbull County had already had a somewhat-established victim/advocacy program, the presence of Miriam Fife and the public's knowledge of the murder of her son (one of the most high-profile cases of its kind in northern Ohio) helped to propel the program to becoming one of the most distinguished in the state. Fife has also testified in hearings for the passing of several pieces of state legislature, including the allowance of juvenile impact statements, which communicates the voice of the victim in a court hearing (previously not allowed for minors) and the registration of juvenile sex offenders.

"Initially it was hard being in this line of work," admits Fife,

"I had to learn to deal. I was getting too anxious, getting a case and bringing it home with me. I started talking to a psychologist and learned how to come to grips with it. Now I can get through it without all that anxiety. I'm not going to say I've gotten used to it, but I can deal with it now. I might not work in the Trumbull County Courthouse for the rest of my life, but I will always be an advocate."

**For more information on the Trumbull County Victim/Witness Division, call (330) 675-2426 or visit [www.prosecutor.co.trumbull.oh.us](http://www.prosecutor.co.trumbull.oh.us).**



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# Mabeline Howard || ERIE, PENNSYLVANIA

## Founder, Be At Your Best, Owner BAYB Fitness

Mabeline Howard's message for her Erie community is simple – Be At Your Best – and she has made it her life's mission to ensure that everyone gets that opportunity. Through BAYB Fitness – the roots of which began in 1992 with Mabeline's mother, Thelma Blanks – Mabeline and her mother offer a variety of courses for adults and children, including personal training, BAYB cardio, boot camp classes, circuit training, and Tae Kwon Do for kids, among others, as well as pilot programs at various area locations including the JFK Center, the City of Erie School District, and the Urban Erie Development Corporation.

But it's through their nonprofit, Be At Your Best, where the two women are really striving to create good while inspiring their community. A comprehensive wellness program that teaches children and families in urban communities the importance of living a healthy and active lifestyle, the nonprofit seeks to remove the financial barriers that prohibit residents below the poverty line from receiving fitness and health services. "We've always had people come to us who couldn't afford classes, but we will not turn a child away simply because they can't afford it," says Mabeline. "My mother and I never had to worry about a financial barrier

when it came to our fitness. We had the option to love it and not worry about whether we can afford to make it part of our lifestyle. Everyone deserves that option."

Mabeline furthered the goals of Be At Your Best

Recently with the addition of a woman's health and wellness educational workshops held at the BAYB headquarters. In honor of her grandmother, Mabeline Blanks, Mabeline recently worked with the American Cancer Society and Making Strides Against Breast Cancer to service at risk women by educating them on how to reduce their risks of getting breast cancer and how to receive aide and early detection. "We just want to service as many people as we can and spread the word that it is important to know your body and be educated to know if there is something wrong,"

says Howard. "Our theme at Be At Your Best is something my grandmother always told us to do and I've always had that thought in my mind. I believe there is so much power in my name, it reminds me that my work is never done. I have to encourage others to be at their best."

**For more information on Be At Your Best, visit [www.beatyoubesterie.com](http://www.beatyoubesterie.com).**



# Krista Van Wagner || LACKAWANNA, NEW YORK

## Owner, Curly's Grill & Banquet Center

"We took a long while to get to where we are now," admits Krista Van Wagner, owner of Curly's Grill & Banquet Center from inside the restaurant's large banquet room. A downtown Lackawanna institution, Curly's was founded by Krista's grandfather in the 1930s and was a popular destination for local steelworkers. "This place had a great customer base because my grandfather knew everyone in town." But Krista saw a bigger opportunity for Curly's and when she took over the long-standing restaurant, she began a massive revamp and expansion, which was met with much detest. "I was told not to ruin my grandfather's place and that I should just leave town because the union will never die...well then it died," laughs Krista. "We cleaned everything up and renovated the bar. Everyone was laughing at us when we first took over. We actually had people walking in to see if we had actually changed the place, and then promptly walk out. We entered the Taste of Buffalo that year with our Jamaican Jerk Chicken and ended up winning!"

But successfully reimagining her grandfather's legacy while indirectly challenging a steelworkers union isn't even the accomplishment Krista is most proud of. For the past 12 years Van Wagner has taken part in special trips with a ministry group, Jesse's Children, to the Dominican Republic, where she performs missionary work, including assisting in teeth extraction procedures. "I had lived in Jamaica for years, so I knew the need for health services was big. Each year I go down with a different group of

people and work four days in the field, servicing 800 people with teeth cleanings, flossing, and extractions. We also started doing restorative work five years ago. I love watching the dentists work. We were using tools

like corkscrews, mallets, and chisels to extract these teeth and peanuts to soak up the blood. I became like a cheerleader, holding the patients hand and speaking phrases like 'be strong' to them in Spanish."

Founded in 1988, Jesse's Children has grown to include a broad ecumenical base of health care and educational professionals who travel at their own expense to contribute their time and talent to heal, build, and educate Third World communities. In their time in the Dominican Republic, Jesse's Children

has worked to design and furnish a dental treatment facility, created a nutrition center for preschool age children, and established small micro-lending programs for area women to help spur a local business economy.

"When you give, you receive ten-fold," says Krista of her accomplishments. "You work so hard on these trips, but when you return you feel so good about the work you've done. There's nothing like it. It just humbles me. It's changed me forever."

**To learn more about Jesse's Children, call (716) 627-4388. For more information on Curly's Grill & Banquet Center, visit [www.curlysgrill.com](http://www.curlysgrill.com).**





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# Kate “Killer” Rawlings || NORTH RIDGEVILLE, OHIO

## Owner, Coca CrossFit

“You’d think there would be some big story,” says Kate Rawlings of her distinctive nickname – Killer. “I had my initials, KLR, on a water bottle and someone thought ‘Killer’ was a suitable name for me because of how I killed the workouts-of-the-day. It took some getting used to because no girl wants to be called killer. But now it’s formed my identity in the CrossFit world.”

One look at Kate and you can see the killer determination and passion she has for CrossFit – a strength and conditioning fitness methodology that has been swiftly growing in popularity in the past decade. This past year Kate, who has been training under the method for three-and-a-half years, attended the CrossFit Games (considered the Olympics of the sport). To qualify for the games Kate had to first attend a sectional competition (where she competed against more than 100 women from four states), followed by a 12-state regional (where 60 women vied for just three spots), then the main games. Kate was one of just 45 women from across the globe competing for top honors. “I now have the right to say I am one of the 45 fittest women in the world, which is pretty cool,” she remarks. “To even make it to the games was huge, then to be there and not finish last [Kate finished 29th] was overwhelming. It’s still sinking in. The funny part is within the CrossFit world, this is huge, but the rest of the world has no idea what this even is.”

For now, at least. In just the past several years the number of CrossFit gyms in the world has grown from

500 to 2,500. Kate reveals that 31 women attended the regionals (which then encompassed 14 states) for the CrossFit Games compared to the 125 at this year’s four-state sectional. And three CrossFit gyms are scheduled to open this fall in the greater Cleveland area – including Kate’s new venture, Coca CrossFit.



“This is all happening 8,000 times faster than I thought it would,” says Kate, of the less than three months it has taken her to get to nearly completing the gym. “My mom asked me if I was really ready to be doing this and I said, ‘No, you can never truly be ready for anything. You just have to jump in and do it.’” Kate reveals she wants to work closely with young girls, promoting physical fitness. She has already forged a relationship with Girls With Sole, a nonprofit group out

of Rocky River, Ohio, that benefits fitness and wellness to empower the minds, bodies, and souls of girls who have faced abuse. “I really want my niche to be women, both adult and children. They are just not given enough opportunities while growing up. Right now I’m building the programs I want to build. I eventually also want to get into working with athletes and helping them with their conditioning and getting into school programs and talking to kids about fitness. The best part is being your own boss makes your opportunities limitless.”

**For more information on Kate Rawlings and Coca CrossFit, visit [www.katerawlings.com](http://www.katerawlings.com) and [www.cocacrossfit.com](http://www.cocacrossfit.com).**