

2018 Woman of Faith found her voice and inspired others

Michelle “Shelly” Runte has inspired a community to embrace her vision for persons of all abilities to share in the joy of play. The gift of her vision is a 12,000-square-foot, accessible playground in Franklin, Wis. for children and adults of all abilities.

You might think Shelly’s vision would have easily won support, but Franklin’s Mayor Steve Olson says, “In fact, none of it came easy.

“Shelly maintained her faith in God and humanity through many heartbreaking setbacks and challenges,” says Steve. “Her ability to see good in everything remains an inspiration to those of us who worked closely with her.”

Salvatorian Sister Mary Frost, SDS nominated Shelly for this year’s *Woman of Faith* Award. She came to know Shelly while leading a bible study class at St. Mary’s Parish in Hales Corners, Wis. Soon, Sr. Mary came to know Shelly’s daughter Kayla too.

“Kayla was a non-verbal child,” says Sr. Mary. “Shelly and her husband John took special care of her for eight years until Kayla’s death in 2012. Those years were a journey of faith, that God wanted them to care for Kayla and had not made a mistake.”

Father Matthew Widder had the privilege of coming into the Runte family’s life the night that Kayla died. He recalls, “The house was full of people – neighbors, teachers, friends and family. What moved me was the diversity of people, and then in the midst of sorrow, they sang songs praising God.

“Shelly dedicated her life to caring for Kayla, who carried beautifully the cross of cerebral palsy,” Fr. Matthew says.

After Kayla died, Shelly took all she had learned from her young daughter and transformed an idea into reality. She wanted children with severe disabilities and special needs to know they are loved and deserve a rightful place in our communities and our world.

Fr. Matthew says, “Shelly used Kayla’s life story to inspire others to advocate for those

“I witnessed Kayla’s soul connecting with others without ever speaking a word. It was only after her death, when her voice resonated in my soul, that I felt a calling to build a playground — a place for able-bodied children and adults to learn life lessons of compassion, patience and acceptance through play.”

— Shelly Runte

with disabilities. She’s a community builder and an advocate for the forgotten.” He recalls that Shelly refused to be daunted by many roadblocks along the way, and says, “Over 1,500 people helped in building Kayla’s Playground, a sign that indeed, God was working in this process.”

Father Brian Mason, now St. Mary’s pastor, says Shelly focuses, not on what she did for Kayla, but on what Kayla taught her. He didn’t meet Shelly until 2016, when he arrived at the home of a family who lost their husband and father at age 48 to ALS. Shelly was already there comforting them.

“She told me she received so much support from our parish community when Kayla died that she wanted to help someone going through a similar tragedy. Shelly continued to walk with that family for quite some time after his funeral,” Fr. Brian says.



After a couple years of fundraising and advocating with Franklin’s local government, Kayla’s Playground opened on October 9, 2015. Mayor Olson says, “Shelly used her faith to inspire others. Shelly inspires by attitude and action. She’s humble, joyful, thoughtful and full of grace.”

Visit Kayla’s Playground at kaylaskrew.org

Read about our *Woman of Faith* Award at sistersofthedivinesavior.org/2018wof



WOMAN OF Faith AWARD

Please join us to honor
Michelle Runte

Advocate for people with disabilities

Thursday, September 27, 2018 • 7:00 p.m.

SDS Community House • 4311 N. 100th Street, Milwaukee

Please register for this free event by September 21

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