News



Staff and volunteers fill drive-through orders at the 2020 School Sisters of St. Francis' Sister Water Beer Garden in a Box fundraiser. (Courtesy of the School Sisters of St. Francis)



by Dan Stockman

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Summer in Milwaukee is the season of beer gardens. And, this year, the School Sisters of St. Francis were not about to let a pandemic keep them from joining the fun.

The sisters started the beer garden in 2019, holding one each in June, July and August as a fundraiser for their efforts to bring safe, clean water to the people they serve around the world. They named the event the Sister Water Beer Garden after St. Francis' "Canticle of the Creatures," which refers to "Sister Water" and "Brother Wind."

But having hundreds of people drinking beer in the convent gardens was not an option this summer because of the coronavirus pandemic, so the sisters got creative and turned their beer garden into a drive-thru selling a beer garden in a box.

They didn't hold the June event as they worked through the planning, but the July event was a rousing success, and another is planned for Aug. 8.

"It's always more fun when you have more people there at an actual event and they're able to interact with one another," said Sr. Kathy Chuston, who helped out at the July 11 event. "But a beer garden is probably the most Milwaukee thing ever."

Attendees order their box ahead of time. For $50, they receive a 64-ounce jug (called a growler) filled with their choice of beverage, two commemorative pint glasses, two "take-and-bake" soft pretzels and a jar of gourmet mustard. The growlers can be filled with Ale Mary, an unfiltered wheat beer; Glory Be, an amber Vienna-style beer; Righteous root beer; or Half-Righteous diet root beer. All the drinks and the mustard are from Sprecher Brewing Co. in Milwaukee. Attendees can also order up to three separate growlers for $20 each.



Staff and volunteers fill drive-thru orders at the School Sisters of St. Francis' Sister Water Beer Garden in a Box fundraiser July 11. (Courtesy of the School Sisters of St. Francis)

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Organizers were going to take orders until 3 p.m. the day before the July 11 event but had to cut them off early because they sold out. Orders for the Aug. 8 event will be taken until 3 p.m. on Aug. 5 or until they are sold out. All told, said Deb Ruesch, who works in the congregation's Mission Advancement Office, they sold 400 boxes and 500 growlers for the July garden, grossing about $30,000 — more than last year's first two beer gardens combined.

"We really couldn't be more blessed," Ruesch said. "We heard a lot of people saying they'll come back for the second one."

To keep things moving, attendees were given a time to show up and move through a line where their IDs were checked and their orders delivered by masked volunteers,

all while a live band played at a safe distance. The band's performance was livestreamed so attendees could pick up their boxes then continue to enjoy the band at home with their drinks and snacks.

"We did want to keep it light and enjoyable, but not being able to have an actual beer garden takes something away from it," Ruesch said. "But so many happy customers came through. They were just delighted. ... So many churches had festivals canceled this year, so to be able to do something where people can come out and feel that sense of community is special."

Because the majority of sisters are older and more vulnerable to COVID-19, organizers used as many lay volunteers as possible and tried to limit sisters' involvement. But the sisters were present in a different way: They wrote thank-you notes that went into every box sold.

Chuston said it was wonderful to see people enjoying the event and each other, but even better that so much money was raised.

"You're enjoying a beer, but also providing clean water for people who don't have access to it," she said.



Sr. Lucy Kalapurackal of the School Sisters of St. Francis' international leadership team greets visitors to the community's July 11 Sister Water Beer Garden in a Box fundraiser. (Courtesy of the School Sisters of St. Francis)

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