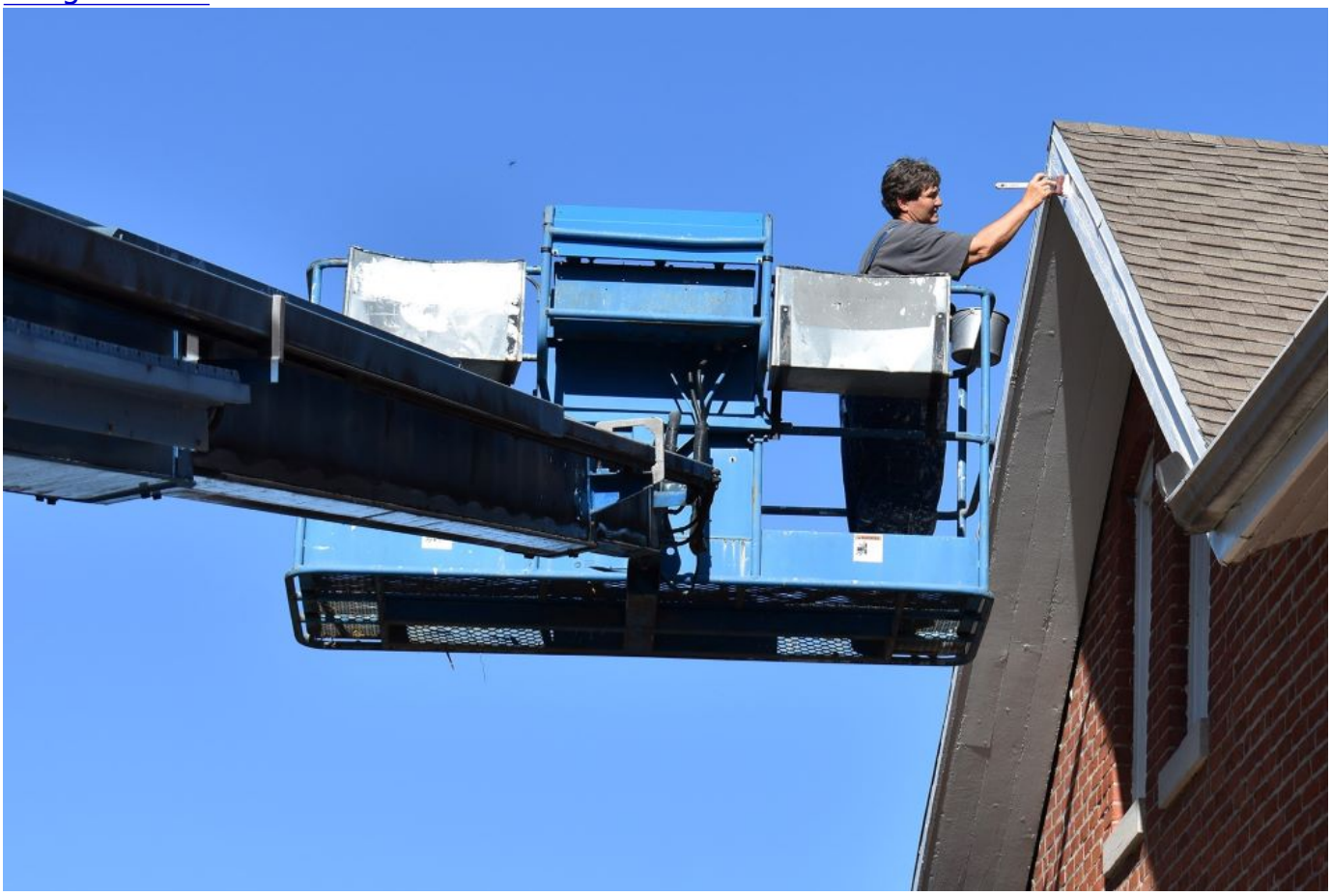
Columns
Religious Life



Benedictine Sr. Elaine Fischer is maintenance director at Mount St. Scholastica in Atchison, Kansas. She isn't afraid of heights: Here she uses the lift reach the eaves of the maintenance shed for painting. (Julie A. Ferraro)



by Julie A. Ferraro

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As a Benedictine Oblate, studying the Rule of St. Benedict is key. Commentaries on that 1,500-year-old document are numerous, including classic insights by Esther de Waal, Sister Joan Chittister and, most recently, Sr. Judith Sutera of Mount St. Scholastica in Atchison, Kansas (where I just happen to work).

My reading over the years has led me to value the wisdom and balanced approach to life St. Benedict embedded in those 73 chapters. When designing a new advertisement for the annual VISION vocation guide published by the National Religious Vocation Conference, I highlighted the word "balance" with the understanding that those discerning a vocation to religious life are seeking such balance between prayer and ministry in their lives — especially in this world rocked by the COVID-19 pandemic (and all its variants), political and religious division, ongoing poverty and the aftermath of increasing natural disasters caused by climate change.

Since June, I've been fortunate enough — toting around my Nikon camera at Mount St. Scholastica to snap photos of the sisters' daily lives and sharing them on social media — to be inspired by this community's efforts to live the balance St. Benedict entrusted to his Rule. I've also gained an understanding how time management and organization — along with an abiding and healthy humility — can be vital to accomplishing that feat.

Thanks to Sr. Elaine Fischer.

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As a caveat to my tale, I acknowledge that — as religious communities continue to shrink in size — most sisters wear multiple hats, fulfilling many duties and engaging in diverse ministries. Were I to stack the incredible number of hats worn by Sister Elaine on top her head, they would reach quite a height.

For starters, Sister Elaine is head of maintenance for Mount St. Scholastica. She’s not the first of the community to hold this position, but she brings some unique talents to the task. In the building called the "maintenance shed" at the monastery, woodworking tools abound. She has created many pieces of furniture, among them nightstands, dressers, vanities and wardrobes for more than 40 patient rooms in Dooley Center, where the sisters live when they need daily care after medical

procedures or as they age. There is a grandfather clock in the main hallway, chiming the quarter-hour, that she built, as well.

When one of the sisters passes to her eternal reward, the cremated ashes are placed in a wooden urn, handmade with love by Sister Elaine. One Saturday I happened to find her working on those seemingly simple pieces with a skill reminiscent of my own father, whose workshop smelled delightfully of sawdust when I was young.



Sr. Elaine Fischer pulls Sr. Helen Mueting along a makeshift slip and slide for a bit of summer fun. (Julie A. Ferraro)

Sister Elaine is adept with power tools used in other endeavors, too. One morning, I heard an odd noise through my office window and, with a journalist's curiosity, went to investigate. Sister Elaine was prepping a machine to stripe the monastery parking lot, with the help of Sr. Rosann Eckart, who made sure the surface was clean before the yellow paint was applied.

Snapping photos of Sister Elaine is both challenging and fun. When a crew from Newsy visited the monastery to interview sisters about the connection between faith and environmental concerns, I rode one of the John Deere Gators out to where the beehives allow the swarms to do their business mostly undisturbed. There, Sister Elaine explained — on camera — how the bees inspire her own spirituality.

Other days, Sisters Elaine and Rosann can be seen hauling a ladder along the corridors to change light bulbs. Sister Elaine supervises the team that mows the lawns, hires crews to trim the trees (when necessary), and plows the massive garden where rows of corn, tomatoes, cucumbers, potatoes, grapes and other crops grow (then joins in harvesting the bounty as the season progresses).

Sometimes just watching her makes me tired.

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  Sr. Elaine Fisher, with passenger Sr. Rosann Eckart, drives a load of trash to the Mount St. Scholastica dumpster. (Julie A. Ferraro)

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Sr. Elaine Fischer gives a group of Benedictine sisters a ride around the monastery grounds on a pleasant summer day. (Julie A. Ferraro)

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Sr. Elaine Fischer, center, explains the Mount St. Scholastica beehive project to a television crew. (Julie A. Ferraro)

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Sr. Elaine Fischer pours sugar into a mixing bowl as Sr. Irene Nowell prepares her father's eggnog recipe. (Julie A. Ferraro)

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When Joey, one of Mount St. Scholastica's cats, gets caught in a tree, Sr. Elaine Fischer comes to the rescue. (Julie A. Ferraro)

Sister Elaine's day may start before sunrise — as it does for many of the sisters — tending to overnight emergencies or spending a bit of time petting the black Labrador, Sophie, or the cat, Joey. She built a special house for a pair of stray kittens — Cleo and Tigger — who took up residence beneath some pallets of mulch this summer and have made themselves part of the monastery family.

She joins the community in the choir chapel, where the magnificent wooden stalls placed against north and south walls face each other as the sisters chant the Liturgy of the Hours. She sings in the monastic schola, adding her voice to sweet harmonies during Mass.

Sister Elaine serves on the monastic council, as well as the council for the Federation of St. Scholastica, a group of Benedictine monasteries that collaborate and support each other.

Sometimes Sister Elaine can be found riding the John Deere tractor, pulling a specially made trailer and giving rides to some of the sisters around the monastery grounds. Her genuine caring spirit includes helping sisters who've shared her life for decades make eggnog for the Christmas holidays, or devise a makeshift slip and slide for the sisters to enjoy a bit of fun on a warm summer afternoon.

Then, shifting gears like a well-maintained transmission, she'll climb into the lift, scraping and painting window frames.

What impresses me even more about Sister Elaine’s balanced approach: She consistently wears an oversized T-shirt and baggy trousers. When the occasion calls for dressier attire, she pulls a plaid shirt over the T-shirt. She understands that God really doesn't care what clothes we wear. The important thing is how a person's heart reaches out to others in love and kindness.

Sister Elaine delves into her ministry — and it is definitely a ministry — with gusto. Years ago, she served as an emergency medical technician and firefighter. I would have loved to see her in action back then. As it is, one of my favorite photos happened while she and Sister Rosann, along with the maintenance team, were removing recyclable materials from a pair of buildings in preparation for demolition. With the second-floor window open, Sister Elaine pitched a heavy cast-iron sink she had just freed with a metal saw onto a trailer. My camera caught an image of the sink in midair.

Even cooler: Some of those recycled materials went into constructing a utility shed for a sister who needed a place to store bird feed and gardening tools. The rustic planks of wood from the floors, tin panels from the ceilings, a closet door and light fixtures from buildings with pleasant memories brought tears to Sister Delores Dolezal’s eyes when the surprise was presented to her.

Sister Elaine just thinks that way — thinks about others in the midst of plumbing leaks or hauling trash to the dumpster. Her smile, regardless of the task at hand, confirms she is, in the truest sense, a balanced Benedictine.