

Josie Uhlinger

Her *prayer line* is never
too busy to take another call

A book with the words “Prayer Lines” in the title would not be complete without a chapter devoted to an extraordinary woman who puts her heart and soul into the operation of a “prayer lines” group she founded at her kitchen table.

Since being inspired to establish the outreach ministry 15 years ago, Josephine “Josie” Uhlinger of St. Mary’s in Ballston Spa, NY has quietly and confidentially ministered to the spiritual needs of fellow parishioners and complete strangers alike by praying for them and asking others to do the same.

A typical day in Josie’s prayer life begins when she rises with or sometimes before the sun. (I wanted to write rises and shines, but Josie insists it takes more than one serving of Folger’s in her cup before she’s ready to don her invisible prayer shawl.)

Once the freshly brewed coffee kicks in, the great-grandmother is ready to begin offering prayers she firmly believes God hears, but sometimes answers in ways other than those requested by the petitioner.

“You’ve got to trust that Our Heavenly Father knows best,” smiles Josie, who has been given more than her own share of crosses to bear in this lifetime – though she prefers to look upon the crosses as “gifts” because they “present” opportunities to glorify God.

Raised in a devout Italian-speaking Roman Catholic family in Amsterdam, Josie (nee DeCicco) was nine before she learned to speak English. Among the first words to come out of her mouth in “American” were those that comprise The Rosary: Our Fathers and Hail Marys.

These prayers remain high on her Prayer Line list, but Josie -- who is a Third Order Franciscan -- also has a folder that contains an impressive variety of others. A good thing since she responds to about a thousand prayer petitions annually, aided by others on the prayer line chain who reside as far away as Syracuse.

A favorite prayer – which is also prominently posted next to the phone in Josie’s kitchen – humorously proclaims: *Good morning! This is God. I will be handling all of your problems today. I will not need your help. So relax and have a great day!*



Josie DeCicco was just 18 when she married her 25-year-old sweetheart John Gilbert Uhlinger. The bride wore a chantilly lace gown she had designed for the occasion. Prior to their 1959 marriage at St. Michael's Church in Amsterdam, NY, John had served as a master electrician in the US Navy. In the decades that followed, John (who passed away early in 2013) and Josie counted many blessings and bore many crosses together. An abundance of prayer cards and inspirational verses continue to fill the cozy, faith-filled home where daughters Mary Beth, Diane and Cynthia grew up. Josie's face has also long been familiar at St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church in Ballston Spa -- as per the photo taken with members of the Our Lady Queen of Peace Prayer Group in 2012. Josie also works hard behind-the-scenes on outreach projects.



Others include The Serenity Prayer which originated many decades ago in a now world-famous Twelve Step substance abuse recovery program. It goes like this: *God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.* Angels and saints inspired other prayers.

A heavenly example from St. Francis de Sales: *Make yourself familiar with the angels, and behold them frequently in spirit; for without being seen, they are present with you.*

A cherished booklet titled *Companion Prayers: A guide to prayers from the Companions of St. Anthony* is never far from reach. Ditto a brochure devoted to St. Michael The Archangel. The Prayer of St. Jude is offered for seemingly Impossible Causes while St. Peregrine is called upon to intercede for those with cancer woes. Most recently added was The Prayer for Religious Liberty.

“We pray for all intentions – sickness, marital issues, school problems, challenges selling a house. We don’t need details. We keep everything strictly confidential. All we ask is for a first name and a general idea of why the prayer is needed.”

Josie is not certain exactly which prayers are offered by those in her Prayer Lines group which began as an offshoot of the Our Lady Queen of Peace Prayer Group at St. Mary’s Church in Ballston Spa. The important thing to her is that they are sincere and glorify God in the manner outlined by Christ when He taught His apostles to humbly pray The Lord’s Prayer.

The words “Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven” have been a cornerstone of Josie’s own life and she is confident that prayer line group members from near and far such as Sylvia DeLaurie, Shirley Ebert, Diane Hrebinczak, Elise Markham, Edith Jones, Agnes Mohr, Dawn and Herb Peters, Nancy Rusilas, Helen Ross, Mary Sesselman and Doris Smith share that same deep and abiding faith. (Charter members Ruth Corning, Eileen Ebert and Ethel and George Yucker have since passed away.)

“Sometimes it’s hard not to question God’s will, but as Christians we must trust that there are reasons why bad things sometimes happen to good people,” reflects Josie, whose own faith was tested to the limit when as a young mother, she was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer and had to undergo a radical mastectomy that included not only the removal of her right breast but all of the surrounding muscles, lymph nodes and tissues.

The resulting scar she describes as “disfiguring – more like an amputation really” was nothing compared to the prognosis that she had only a short time left to live. During the eight days she was in the hospital, Josie underwent a total of four surgeries, including a tubal ligation and the removal of an ovarian cyst.

“There I was just 30 years old with a wonderful, handsome young husband and three beautiful daughters. At the time Mary Beth was 10, Diane was 8, and Cynthia, was not yet six. I was told I had only six months,” remembers Josie.

“It was tempting to have a Pity Party and I did, but I only allowed it to last a few hours. Sure I could have gone on and on about *Why me?* and *This isn’t fair*, but I knew deep down inside that there would be no peace in my heart or soul until I



The family that prays together stays together

Cynthia (above left) and Diane were very young when their mother was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer. Both grew up to be strong women as did older sister Mary Beth, photographed (inset image) on her wedding day. Their father John was a pillar of strength through the toughest of times. In addition to being there for his wife and daughters, John always found time to help neighbors in need, often donating his snow blowing skills during the winter. The same can be said of Steve Hrebinczak -- even while courageously battling cancer.

could say *Why NOT me?* and *‘I don’t understand why this is happening to me now, but I will accept it as Your will and try to carry the cross that’s been placed on my shoulders with dignity and grace.’*

In what her doctors would ultimately describe as an unexplained healing bordering on the miraculous, Josie – who had refused to take strong painkillers or debilitating cobalt or chemotherapy treatments because she wanted “to be there” in every way for her young daughters right up until the end – was diagnosed as cancer-free. But God was not finished with her yet in terms of giving her opportunities to glorify His name through her personal suffering for Josie would face numerous surgeries in the weeks, months and years to follow.

By the time she was interviewed for this chapter in 2012, Josie had undergone no fewer than a dozen operations and was virtually homebound as a result of a life-threatening auto-immune disease she had acquired.

Around 2010 she learned that John, her beloved husband and Rock of Gibraltar for more than half a century had Parkinson’s and was in the early stages of Alzheimer’s Disease. Her response: To pray and ask others to pray as well . . . not for a miraculous cure, but for the strength to carry on come what may. The most Josie would ask of neighbors was that they would pray and guide John safely home should the time come when the disease caused him to wander.

His passing early in 2013 was a peaceful and blessed one, in a bed in his home. A home filled with loving caregivers and prayers. Josie is grateful that daughter Diane, a nurse, had opted to return to the nest to help her parents and that Mary Elizabeth, a therapist in South Carolina, and Cynthia, a caterer in Indiana, have remained close in thought and prayer via frequent phone calls and letters.

The sisters often reminisce with their mother about the years when the family’s kitchen was a beehive of activity with dozens of apple pies and other mouth-watering dishes being prepared for donation to church fundraisers – especially those supporting Birthright and orphans in Third World countries. Victims of tsunamis and earthquakes have also benefited.

Despite her infirmities, Josie continues to spearhead an outreach ministry that involves filling enough Baby Boxes and shoeboxes with school supplies for orphans to fill a couple of SUVs and pick-up trucks annually. “We send 200 to 300 shoe boxes a year. We also send seeds to plant squash, beans and cucumbers and flower seeds so they’ll have some pretty stuff.”

Helping with this project are Mary Beth Flatly and her mother, Joan Flatly and Josie’s daughter Diane. “An anonymous donor gives us \$500 and another gives us \$1,000. They are our special angels. Assisting with deliveries are Dawn and Herb Peters, Father Belanosh and Jake Stomieroski as well as Father Atherton.

Josie also enjoys cooking and sharing her generations-old Italian-American recipes with others. “I teach anybody who wants to learn, but I don’t measure. It’s a pinch of this, a handful of that. I use the old ways. And no small portions. If I’m gonna make a mess, I’m gonna make a mess,” laughs Josie as she recalls the times when her kitchen had flour and apple juice spread from one end to the other as she was helping to bake hundreds of pies that helped raise about \$3,000 for orphans in Haiti and Medjagorie.



Above group portrait was taken when Josie Uhlinger spearheaded a committee to raise funds and plan a farewell party for longtime St. Mary's pastor, The Rev. Paul Bondi, in 1996. Happily serving alongside Josie were Marianne Pompa LaRoche (far left) and the now late Mary Bogue. Standing behind the three ladies were Jim O'Brien and Al DeFilippo. Photograph at right was taken of the now late Father Bondi shortly before his retirement.

While far too modest to toot her own horn, others are quick to sing Josie's praises for the contributions she has made to the parish since settling in Ballston Spa in 1978.

By far the most monumental was her success in raising more than \$60,000 to present to the Rev. Paul Bondi when he retired from his post as Pastor of St. Mary's in 1996. The photo on this page of a radiant Josie with fellow Father Bondi Farewell Committee members speaks volumes.

Some have gone so far as to say the committee wouldn't have had a prayer without Josie Uhlinger. Heaven only knows for sure!

