

# Hermitages

## A labor of love for Joe Leuck

**A**fter a stay in one of our hermitages on Solitude Ridge in St. Joseph, guests often tell us that the experience was transformative. They feel renewed and rested after spending time in solitude and silence—and, having been immersed in nature, they feel a bit closer to God.

Building the hermitages was just as powerful of an experience for Joe Leuck, longtime FSC volunteer and the man who served as general contractor/lead carpenter for the endeavor nearly 30 years ago.

In looking back on the effort, Joe said, “the best part was getting to know all of these sisters.” He added that he was moved by all of the laypeople, young diocesan priests and other community volunteers who helped during the 14-month construction project.

The Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration formed a committee in 1987 to pursue the idea of building hermitages. In minutes recorded at the time, they cited the need for a balanced lifestyle, the biblical tradition of withdrawing for prayer and solitude, and how interior silence allows one to hear God’s Word, know oneself in a deeper way and renew oneself for mission. They made note of how St. Francis, himself, had been drawn to remote places.

The property the FSPAs owned in St. Joseph, about 10 miles east of La Crosse, seemed the ideal spot to build three simple buildings on the edge of woodland. Sister Celia Corcoran was tapped to direct the project.

### her·mit·age

[n] hûr´·mi·tij

A simple, secluded dwelling for prayer and solitude.



“Sister Ceci and I went driving around, looking at hermitages,” Joe recalled. “Most had a flat ceiling. It just didn’t seem right. It was like sitting in a box.” So an architect friend of

Joe’s, Karl Sjolander, drew up plans, and they opted for a pitched roof design that proved to be “one the biggest challenges.”

They broke ground in April 1989. The hermitages were completed and blessed in June 1990 and officially open for use starting that July (although Joe remembers some of the novices spending time in solitude at the hermitages even before they were completed).

All three buildings—Chiara, Sophia and Thea—were built simultaneously. At 312 square feet, they each feature a bathroom, kitchenette with refrigerator, a bed, a simple desk and chair, and an electric fireplace (the original wood stoves were replaced after a few years as it became apparent not everyone knew how to use them).

The FSPAs held their General Assembly that first summer, and Joe estimates about 40 to 50 FSPAs came out to help over a period of time. Many of the FSPAs—including Ceci, Mary Kathryn Fogarty and Marie Des Jarlais—invested quite a bit of time. “And I think Sister Mary Morrissey was out here every day,” Joe said.

Working with the sisters was a lot of fun, he added. When asked about a picture of him working side by side with Sister Praxedes Wertalka, Joe said, “Oh, yes, she knew what she was doing. She could wield a hammer.”

For the most part, though, Joe would work four to five hours during the day and then get things ready for the sisters who would head out after supper to work. “I got them started, but several sisters did most of the roof.”

## Can you help?

**Time and the elements have taken their toll, and these cozy cabins that have provided rest and renewal for so many are now in need of a little TLC themselves. We recently repaired the wooden deck by Thea, and one by one, we’ll be replacing the wooden siding with cement board siding. Our spring appeal is underway. Any extra gifts you can give to help preserve our hermitages are greatly appreciated!**





1989

& today

## Invocations for the litany of blessing at the hermitage groundbreaking:

1. As we set aside this land for prayer and solitude to respect the earth and all creatures that find their home there...
2. As we turn this earth and expose what has been hidden since creation, we do so with awe and respect ...
3. Eternal Wisdom, found in silence, carry us into a deeper union with you...
4. God of creation, whose voice is heard in silence, the song of birds, whose beauty is found in flowers, nurture our spirits...
5. For the workers, who will actualize our dream, who will be present in their labor and their craft, that this work would bless them...
6. For each of us, whether close to this place or who in prayer in other temples support their endeavor...
7. As we look to the next decade and next millennia, may this sacred earth be a source of strength and renewal for our times...

He also joked that because they were using stainless steel nails that cost 10 cents a piece, he tried to have all the materials set up so that “we wouldn’t be wasting any.”

Joe grew up in Cashton. He married his sweetheart, Mary, in 1967, and they bought the house on St. Joseph Ridge that they still live in. Joe did carpentry work and took care of the village’s water system. He also worked part time at La Crosse Footwear until 1974, when the new water main and sewer system were installed, which he also oversaw and maintained until his retirement six years ago.

A lifelong Catholic, Joe signed up in the fall of 1985 to be a lay minister through his parish. He took a class on Franciscan

spirituality with professor Tom Thibodeau at Viterbo University, which introduced him to the FSPAs. “I’ve been hanging around the sisters ever since,” Joe said.

Inspired by his experiences, Joe became a FSPA affiliate and joined the FSC’s Spiritual Direction Preparation Program in fall 1989. As part of that training, he spent a week in silence in Chiara in February 1991.

## Still a bargain

**Since the beginning, bed linens and blankets were provided, but guests brought their own food. The cost to reserve a hermitage in 1990 was \$20 a night. Today, it is \$60. Reservations can be made by calling 608-791-5295.**

“It’s very quiet,” he said. “They are really well insulated.” Over the years, he’s also enjoyed walking the trails out by the hermitages and has volunteered at the Center since 2003.

The enduring appeal of the hermitages is not lost on Joe, but he recalls not everyone understood the sisters’ vision in building them.

Subcontractors ran into another challenge when they tried to lay the foundation. “They were chipping and chiseling into the rock because there were only a couple of inches of topsoil. Plus, they thought it was a nutty idea,” he chuckled. “They weren’t into spirituality and all that. But they did think the hermitages would be good for deer hunting.”