

# Becoming a Sponsor

reflections by our parishioner Jim Scharf



During the time I grieved over the death of my wife Joanie, my counselor suggested that I enlarge my social network. So I joined the Wednesday Bible Study group that discusses the Sunday readings. I also tried to establish or broaden friendships and I found a new friend.

This friend read and liked some Lenten reflections I had written and suggested that I attend the RCIA sessions on Monday nights to see if I was interested in becoming a sponsor.

One Monday night, when we came early to the RCIA, Alec Mansfield was sitting in the classroom, all alone. I didn't know who he was, so I introduced myself. When I heard his name, I realized that I had heard Father John talk about his wife a couple times at Mass, saying she was seriously ill and finally had died. I gave Alec my condolences and shared that I had recently lost Joanie. Then I let him tell his story. We hit it off okay. This conversation was possible only because we were alone together. My friend heard about this and suggested that I offer to be Alec's sponsor and the match was approved.



Along all these steps, I had been asking God for a new life after Joanie's death.

After the assignments were announced Alec and I talked and exchanged e-mails and phone calls before we came together to the Rite of Welcoming on Sunday, October 26. (Alec now serves in the parish Transportation Ministry and I was his customer, since I cannot drive.)

## Rite of Welcoming New Candidates for Full Communion

Prior to the Rite of Welcoming, we sponsors practiced our roles in the worship space. Although this is serious business, it was also hilarious at times. It's a good thing that we practiced, as in the crossing gestures, I nearly put my fingers up Tom Ross's nose and it wasn't that easy to cross a foot! Jeanne constantly reminded us that there was no such thing as a mistake. The Inquirers were told separately what to do.

Alec and I came very early. I had tried to allay his concerns about the rite while we were coming to church as well as by e-mail earlier. As we rose to go to our place at the center in front of the altar, he called me a rascal. I laughed!

Joanie and I had jointly sponsored two women in early years of the RCIA. This Welcoming Rite experience was so much more than anything we did back then. Even the introductions were better - varied, suited to the inquirer, and somewhat emotional. I had debated saying that Alec had just lost his wife and decided on only saying he was my new friend. I did not want to draw attention to my own loss. Later on, Father noted Alec's loss. Alec and I both knew our wives were with us at this rite.

All of the inquirers gave good responses to the questions put to them. As I solemnly signed each sense, hand and foot I found it to be a very peaceful, Spirit-filled moment with deep meaning for me. God had chosen me to help Alec join our community.

The congregation was invited to welcome the inquirers, now officially known as candidates (those already baptized in another church) and catechumens (those who had never been baptized). I stood behind Alec and watched as each person welcomed him in their own way: simple handshakes, intense feelings, hugs, happy smiles, all mirroring the makeup of our parish. After the Mass we shared a reception and lunch, an opportunity for a long talk with Alec.

We sponsors then gathered in the chapel to share our experiences during the rite. I remarked about how different this was from my earlier experiences. All said how great the welcoming line was at the conclusion of the Rite.

My feelings? I have found a friend in Alec Mansfield. We are deepening our relationship now. I pray to God that I can continue to help him. He feels as if he is already a Catholic!

Joanie's death gave me time, while grieving, to find a new prayer life. In this prayer I asked God to help me find a new life. He has answered my prayer and has led me to new friendships and a new ministry as I have become a sponsor in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.