



Miracles on 32nd Street

2023: Volume I

Meet our New Executive Director

In January 2023, the West Side Catholic Center officially hired Michael Bernot, former Director of Advancement at the organization, as the new Executive Director. After the previous Executive Director, John Litten, left WSCC in September, Michael served as the Interim Executive Director for the last few months of 2022 until being confirmed by the Board of Directors as the perfect fit for the ED position.

Although Michael Bernot is a fixture in the WSCC community and is known by many, he was gracious enough to answer some questions so that everyone can get to know him and his vision for the future of WSCC.

When did you first learn about WSCC?

My first exposure to WSCC was in May of 2001. At that time, I was a part of an immersion retreat that had a group of us staying overnight at St. Pat's (nearby on Bridge Ave.) and volunteering at various nonprofit organizations during the day. Until I recently reconnected with a former classmate who was a part of that trip I had forgotten everywhere we had visited with the exception of the West Side Catholic Center because I was completely enamored with this place, and all the people, as soon as I walked through the doors.



What gets you out of bed in the morning?

In one word: People. I look forward to the opportunities each day brings, and feel that I am fortunate to have so much joy in my life. I love the work I do, and have done, at WSCC and enjoy coming to this environment nearly every day. I also feel fortunate to have a great family and group of friends that I get to see with some frequency, and the community of people I see almost daily at my gym. I find there's always plenty to look forward to, but that happiness is rooted in social connections.

Do you have any fun traditions in your family?

I come from a fairly large family where I'm one of the oldest of about 20 cousins, and the oldest of my parents' three children. My upbringing involved a lot of large family gatherings and those are memories I hold dear. As an extended family we still get together regularly, especially for Thanksgiving, Easter, and Christmas. Many of our traditions center around food/meals and I believe they've been such a strong influence on my belief that sharing meals and food is a great way to express love and build connection. Our Christmas Eve meal includes pierogis which I make with my grandmother and a few other family members each year, and our Easter breakfast is rooted in Slovak tradition and includes traditional foods like Cirak and Paska.

Favorite books you've read or movies you've seen lately?

A book I keep handy and often re-read because of its bite-sized aphorisms, broken down by topic, is *Striking Thoughts: Bruce Lee's Wisdom for Daily Living*. I refer back to it often as I find it to be an amazing tool in recalibrating perspective, particularly on challenging days.

I love movies, and have a wide range

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of interest when it comes to them; from ridiculous comedies to fast-paced action to heart-wrenching dramas. I hesitate to name any specifically, but will say that I'm very eager for the next Indiana Jones movie.

What is your personal philosophy/what are your guiding principles?

I have a favorite shirt that says: Lift Heavy. Be Kind.

I've adopted that as a simple, personal philosophy to apply to my daily living. Lifting heavy is metaphorical to me and doesn't equate to physical weight, but can be likened to anything difficult or challenging. Being kind, on the other hand, is a literality.

I operate under the notion that all people are worthy of love, dignity, and respect and that food, clothing, shelter, and the opportunity for a better tomorrow are fundamental human rights.

What keeps you grounded in your work at WSCC?

I think, for me, it's the seeing humanity in us all each day and carrying that with me when I am outside of WSCC. In this environment I see the full spectrum from people who have fallen on hard times, faced adversity as a result of both circumstances and choices, and have overcome personal challenges. Regardless of where they are on that path I am reminded that so many of us are one incident away from a major upheaval, but also that there is redemption and joy evident in us all. At any given moment that is something inspiring occurring here, and I get to carry that with me.

Do you have any favorite moments from your time here?

There have been so many! They range from the big, institutional, moments like cutting ribbons when the Resource Center renovations were completed during my first year as Advancement Director and the opening of Ohio City Pizzeria under the

ownership of WSCC in 2019. And though 2020 was an exceptionally challenging year, taking part in our Drive-By Donations to collect items on Lorain Ave and seeing the willingness of people to adjust and assist in the ways they were able is something that has stuck with me.

How will your former position as Advancement Director shape your time as Executive Director?

WSCC may be most known as a social service agency, but to me it's much more. It is a community, and that's why it thrives after 45 years. Working in Advancement throughout my career has taught me that fundraising is a byproduct of those roles, and at its heart community building is the goal. It's the single, most-important asset to WSCC – remembering that we are simply a conduit for the wishes of our greater community, here to steward their support into the resources to better the days and lives of others.

What is your vision for WSCC over the next few years?

In a broad sense, I hope to see continued refinement of our programs to best serve those who come to WSCC for our services. I'm excited that the Family Success Network, which is a new initiative currently in its implementation phase, will begin serving families in July of this year. The potential for this program and the model they are developing in partnership with the Ohio Children's Trust Fund and many other organizations has such impactful implications.

I'm also looking forward to strengthening our pathway between our Culinary Academy and Ohio City Pizzeria to provide our culinarians with more opportunities on their journey, and establish more recognition for Ohio City Pizzeria as a component of the West Side Catholic Center.

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What challenges is WSCC facing right now?

To a degree, I feel that the largest challenge we are facing is a common one to many, and that is navigating the landscape in the aftermath of COVID. There's many prongs to addressing this, as it changed the way we do things, and for many, the way we view things. I'm grateful for John Litten's leadership as our previous Executive Director throughout his five years here, but especially through the year 2020, and I have the utmost respect for the incredible staff we have here who really picked up the ball and ran to help us continue providing for our clients and fulfilling our mission. I'm very proud that I was a part of that team that pulled us through such a challenging time. Now, we face the future where we are being warned of economic uncertainty, increasing income disparity, and lack of affordable housing to name a few. These issues directly impact the clientele at WSCC and contribute to growing need. Cleveland is such a caring, compassionate community and there are so many great organizations helping to address the various needs, but we all compete for a limited pool of resources. Ensuring that we are providing programs and services to address the needs of our people and being the best stewards of the resources we receive as possible will be our ongoing challenge and one that I'm confident we will continue to meet with success, as we have for 45 years.

We are blessed to have a strong community around us at the West Side Catholic Center. We have people with family ties connected to our founding and thousands who support us in some way each year. The beautiful thing about community is it's a system much like body, and the stronger it is the more it is able to endure. And I have a lot of faith in the strength of this community no matter what challenges are to come.

Have you had any hard moments during your time at WSCC?

Well yeah, we see tales of triumph and tragedy here often. When one of our folks has been making such great progress on their journey suddenly backslides with severe consequences it breaks your heart to see. But hard is relative, and in the context of my roles here I've had quite a few challenging situations come up. Some I look back on and they seem small now that they're in hindsight, and others I think were essential to my own growth and learning. This work and environment is challenging, and beautiful, and frustrating, and amazing. And, above all, it's necessary. So, regardless of the hard moments, I lean on the understanding that there's work to be done and people counting on us.

What is your typical pizza order from the Ohio City Pizzeria?

I'm about to start my first major controversy as Executive Director...bacon and pineapple. I'm a fairly recent convert to the pineapple on pizza bandwagon, but the salty and sweet combo has become impossible to resist! My secondary option when sharing with those who are less enthusiastic about that sweet, delicious pineapple is The Mazzella.

Is there anything else you'd like us to know?

It's still very surreal to me to see my name listed among those who came before me like Sr. Kathleen Kilbane, Aggie Hoskin, Jerry Skoch, Anita Cook, and John Litten. The impact of their leadership resonates through WSCC each day, and I'm so very honored by the very notion that I get to build off the legacy they've left for us.

Also, we talk about the important work we do here, and I must re-emphasize the amazing collection of people who compose our staff at WSCC. Not only the

DONOR GRATITUDE

You can make donations to WSCC to celebrate a special occasion, to ask "in lieu of gifts" or to honor someone special. WSCC expresses gratitude for the recent donations made in memory of the following individuals.

IN MEMORIAM:

Grace Bostwick

Gloria Costanzo

Patricia Harknett

David Herman

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program staff who are on the front lines and doing the direct service work along with the volunteers (who are truly angels who walk among us), but the lesser mentioned departments like Advancement and Finance who keep us moving forward in the business sense and do so in such an efficient and lean way. (*Fun side note: per our 2022 audited financials, \$0.90 of every dollar received by WSCC was spent on program expenses.*) And there's our Facilities Manager, his volunteers, HR and Admin staff who bring their respective knowledge and gifts to us and do so to be a part of something bigger and more meaningful. I really admire the people I'm surrounded by at WSCC each day.

FOOD IS LOVE AT WSCC

Marquis Cameron, WSCC's new Nutrition Coordinator, has always had a deep passion for food and helping others. As Nutrition Coordinator, she is responsible for planning, organizing, and leading the meals program as WSCC in both the Resource Center and Moriah House's kitchen. While this is her first time working at a nonprofit, her love for the work we do here is evident. "Honestly, every day has been rewarding working here at WSCC. I love working with such a caring staff and that we're all here with the same mission of helping those in need to the best of our abilities...I get so much joy and satisfaction out of doing my part of helping others by sharing my love and experience as a chef and foodie." Marquis understands the importance of food and nutrition for WSCC clients, and notes that proper nutrition can make a significant difference in a person's overall health and wellness.

Of course, working at WSCC doesn't come without its challenges. In 2022, WSCC served over 70,000 meals between the Resource Center and Moriah House. Marquis notes that the most challenging part of her work is: "coming up with meals for such a diverse clientele while also staying under a budget and utilizing donations and food pantry items." Inflation and rising food costs continue to stretch WSCC's budget. Marquis has had to become even more creative with the kinds of recipes and dishes she can prepare for the clientele. Luckily, WSCC's partnership with the Greater Cleveland Food Bank and our generous donors are helping to offset these rising costs.



Data from the Greater Cleveland Food Bank shows that food insecurity in Northeast Ohio has increased, and rising food costs are contributing to that increase. Marquis notes that food insecurity is not limited to those in poverty or people who don't have consistent employment. It affects us all. "For many, the meals we provide here at WSCC are the only meals they have that day...some don't know when their next meal is coming so they consume as much as they can while they are here." As more people face food insecurity, the work we do at WSCC has

become all that more important.

We are so grateful for Marquis's presence and expertise here at WSCC, and we look forward to all the delicious and nutritious meals she will serve to our clients in the future!

What is it about WSCC that made you want to bring your talent and expertise here?

I've always had a deep passion for food and helping others. This position allows me to fuse the two together.

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Why are you passionate about nutrition?

I believe nutrition is a very vital part of our health and way of life. What we put in our body plays a big role in how we function in our day to day. Proper nutrition can be the difference of lowering risks of diseases and just overall how we feel and look inside and out.

What has been the most challenging moment you've had working at WSCC so far?

First off I have to say I love a challenge and I thrive in it. I can appreciate no day is the same as the one before or the next. Most challenging part of my job is coming up with meals for such a diverse clientele while also staying under a budget and utilizing donations and food pantry items. I try to use each day as a learning curve, seeing what they loved and probably wouldn't care to see again.

What do you wish more people understood about food insecurity or hunger?

I wish many people understood is that with food insecurity you lack consistent access to food that's enough for a person or household. It's not only defined to those in poverty. The recent changes in our economy has affected everyone. With rising prices especially with food it's hard for many to have proper nutrition.

What has been your favorite meal you've coordinated or served at WSCC so far?

I would have to say my favorite meal I've done so far here has been chicken risotto. Although a more tedious and time consuming dish, it was fun putting this together utilizing ingredients we already had on hand. It was also very well received by the clients and staff.

What are some of your favorite snacks or meals?

I love trail mix or anything I can eat on the go. With my type of job I'm constantly moving so I don't often have time to sit and eat.

I'm a big fan of Italian food, and I love cooking it at home. I can appreciate the passion and love of their culture they put into the many dishes and recipes.

What is your vision for the future of meals here at WSCC?

I would love to bring more regional meals to WSCC. Not everyone has had the opportunity to travel or experience different cultures and I want the food we're serving to create that experience right here in that moment.



How has inflation and increasing food prices impacted your work here?

Inflation and food costs definitely requires you to get creative on meals you can prepare for crowds. There's times I want to make certain dishes and I will either have to substitute ingredients or come up with another idea because it's too costly to make. I do feel we are very fortunate for the Greater Cleveland Food Bank and also donations that help offset these rising costs.

Is there anything else you'd like to share about your job, nutrition, food, etc.?

I just want to say again how fortunate I am to be working for this company and helping push the mission of being of service to those in need. This is my first real non profit I've worked for and it's like nothing I've ever experienced.

If you're interested in volunteering in our kitchen contact Veronica Favela at vfavela@wsccenter.org



FROM THE CULINARY ACADEMY: APPLE PUFF PASTRY

Full of fiber and antioxidants, apples are a popular option for a quick and delicious snack. But did you know they are fun to cook with as well? One of the West Side Catholic Center Culinary Academy's favorite recipes is the Apple Puff Pastry. A fluffy puff pastry dough topped with a gooey delicious jam and crisp apples is the perfect sweet treat. The students absolutely love being able to change the flavors up with added seasonings and flavors of jam.

Use this simple recipe the next time you need a dessert or breakfast in a pinch!



SERVES: 4

PREP.: 15 mins | **COOK:** 15 mins

INGREDIENTS:

- 1/2 puff pastry sheet
- 1 apple
- 1 tsp cinnamon powder
- 4 tsp jam of choice
- Pinch of salt
- Pinch of all-purpose flour
- Pinch Sugar
- 2 tbsp milk or egg wash for brushing



INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Preheat oven to 350
2. Halve the apple, remove the core and cut it into 2-3mm slices with the skin still on.
3. Add a pinch of salt into a large bowl of water, mix well. Soak the apple slices in salted water for 5-10 minutes.
4. Meanwhile, sprinkle your worktop with the flour. Lay out 1/2 puff pastry sheet and then cut in half and half again to make 4 equally squares.
5. Transfer the sheets onto a large baking tray lined with parchment paper. Spoon 1 tsp of jam into the center of each sheet and spread out leaving a 5-10mm border on all sides.
6. Sprinkle half of the cinnamon powder on top.
7. Pour the apple slices into a sieve and shake all the water out or rinse apples of excess water. Dry them on towel or kitchen paper, making sure the slices are completely dry.
8. Place 5-7 slices of apple on each sheet with each slice slightly overlapping the one before and sprinkling the rest of cinnamon powder on top.
9. Bake for 8 minutes, then brush with milk and bake for another 5-8 minutes, or until golden brown.
10. Cool for 10 minutes and sprinkle with sugar serving, enjoy!

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Since 1977, the West Side Catholic Center has offered hot meals, hospitality, clothing and household goods, emergency services, advocacy, a family shelter, rapid rehousing solutions, and workforce development and culinary training to those in need. The West Side Catholic Center was established by several area churches that saw a critical need within the community due to extreme poverty. We are a unique, private, nonprofit agency with Catholic roots, governed by a Board of Directors, and operating independent of the Catholic Diocese and Catholic Charities.

Through our five main programs we respond to the needs of men, women, and children in the Greater Cleveland area and provide services, resources, and supports. All services are provided to clients free of charge.

Want to know more about the extensive program offerings at the West Side Catholic Center?

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Hosted by the WSCC Associate Board, Sips & Swigs brings together Midwest craft breweries and distilleries, food, music and an atmosphere of excitement and goodwill. All proceeds benefit West Side Catholic Center programs.

wsccenter.org/sipsandswigs

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Warm Hearts Winter Nights is WSCC's premier social event and fundraiser in support of our mission. This annual gala benefit brings together members of the community for a night of fun and goodwill in celebration of our mission and those who have helped us in our work to fulfill it.

wsccenter.org/warmhearts

The programs and services provided at the West Side Catholic Center are free of charge to all clients. We are able to operate under this model due to the incredible dedication of our staff and volunteers, and the generosity of our support community. Your gift is 100% tax deductible, and ensures our mission continues.

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ADVOCACY AND A PATH TO
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