

## Bridget Brennan

*Making College Church  
Family Friendly*



So to the 10:30 Mass at St. Francis Xavier College Church on Sunday and you will see all kinds of people — college kids, people in religious life, single people, couples, old people, families with children. It is a non-territorial parish that serves Saint Louis University and draws parishioners from over sixty different zip codes.

In the morning before Sunday Mass, the parish center meeting rooms fill up with activities — child care for children up to four years; the Montessori-based Catechesis of the Good Shepherd for kids three to six; parent-run religious education classes for kids up to eighth grade; a youth group for high school students; even parents might be listening to a talk or taking part in a discussion. And later, at Mass, children scramble to the altar and then go off to their own liturgy of the word.

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by Robert Burns

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Bridget Brennan and  
husband Jerome Shen.

Thirty years ago none of this was going on when Bridget Brennan was sitting in the pews with her baby in her arms. Since that time, she has been the spark behind the conception and development of nearly all the family life ministries in the parish, and in recent years its marriage ministries. Her work and that of other laypeople are examples of how the spirit of Vatican II sprung to life in College Church.

Brennan joined the parish in her undergraduate days, and met her husband, Jerry Shen, in 1972. They married at the church in 1976 on the feast of the Immaculate Conception. Their first child, Francis Xavier, was born in 1977, and John Paul, their second, two years later. In the seventies many couples moved to other parishes as their children got older, “but we were being formed in this parish and we made the decision that we wanted our sons formed in this parish,” Brennan said.

When she was pregnant with Francis, she started a baptismal preparation program. And when she noticed at Sunday Mass that a fair number of couples had children about the same age as theirs, she started talking informally with them about starting a religious education program.

“Many of our parents were not sending their kids to Catholic schools,” she said, “and we decided to do something ourselves here in the parish. Jim Costello, the pastor at the time, agreed to have parents run the program. We based our approach on the premise that parents are the first teachers of their children in the ways of faith, which is right out of the baptismal ritual. We used existing religious education materials, but our program is unique in that it is the parents who are the teachers.”

As people began to stay and raise their children, a need for more family life and religious education programs developed. Children now have a place in the parish to grow in their faith. “Most parents I meet are committed and genuine,” Brennan said. “If you’re going to drive that car great distances and drag your kids to class, you have made a decision. And that is what I think drives the family ministry.”

Brennan had experience as an elementary teacher before her children were born, and she volunteered to take on the job as the parish's first Director of Religious Education and Family Life in 1986. The job became a part-time paid position in 1989, and then, as its ministries and the people it served grew, she became full-time director in 1994.

A great spotter of needs and talent, Brennan was given the added job of parish life ministries. A good part of her work in this area was identifying and recruiting volunteers for projects, coffees, social events, and gatherings. "There are incredibly talented people in our parish, and we continually tap into the resources that our parishioners bring," she said.

## The Call to Marriage Ministry

As we talk in her office, Brennan is by turns quietly reflective and ready to laugh as she makes a point or tells a story. A theme in her life, Brennan says, is that she likes to start new things, and after they are up and humming she likes to move on. "You then can hand it over to someone else and they can add their talents."

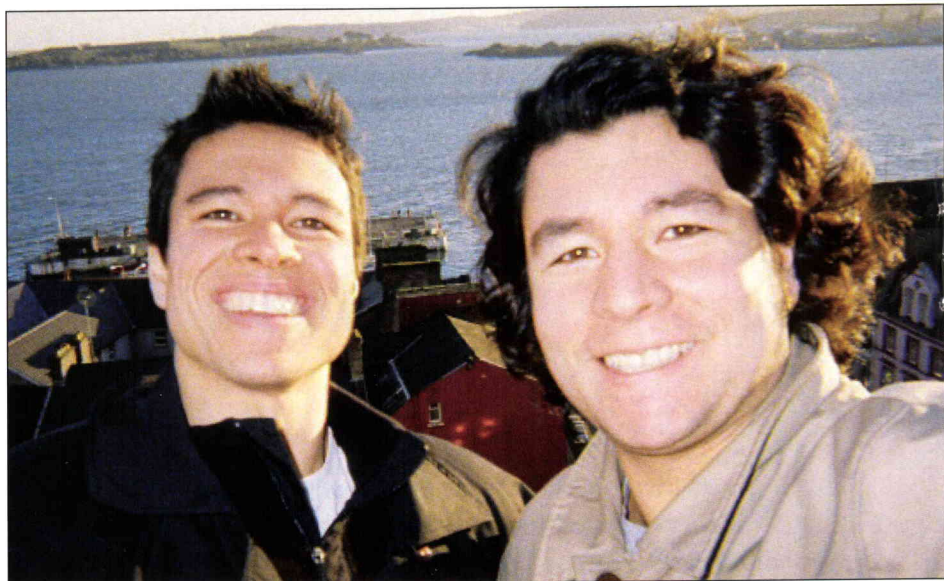
Brennan has had an ongoing interest in marriage ministry — in 1991 she earned a master's degree, her second, in religious studies at Saint Louis University, and as part of her degree work she developed a marriage ministry program which she hoped would be useful to the parish.

There was a need. College Church is a popular place to get married. Catholic couples are required to go through marriage preparation, and Father Len Kraus, the pastor, and his staff couldn't handle all the marriage preparation work — they often had to send couples elsewhere for this. Kraus encouraged Brennan to start a program, and she enlisted her husband as a collaborator. In 1996 they offered their first marriage preparation weekend to twelve couples.

Soon the diocese began to make referrals. Now, every year, they lead workshops for three hundred couples — thirty couples over ten separate weekends — which gather in adjacent campus facilities. Their work

includes weekends for couples entering second marriages and mixed marriages.

The premise of their workshops is that marriage is a call to holiness and to mission. "We begin our seminars by talking about the spirituality of marriage and the call to intimacy," Brennan said. It's the vision that each of us brings to our marriage that motivates our dealing with the everyday stuff. So it's important to wed the spiritual and the practical. We discuss communication skills, conflict resolution, finances, issues involving our families of origin, and sexual intimacy. Throughout the weekend we encourage couples to share their stories, and Jerry and I share our own experiences of thirty years of married life. I can count on Jerry to lighten things up with a good dose of humor, too."



Sons Francis Xavier and John Paul Shen in the land of their Irish ancestors.

## Journeys of Discernment

Bridget Brennan and Jerry Shen came from very different backgrounds, but they shared a common faith, and discovered as they grew to know each other that they could share much more.

One of six children, Brennan grew up in an Irish Catholic family in north St. Louis. With her five siblings deceased, she serves as the family matriarch. She is known fondly as "Aunt Bridge" to her thirty nieces and nephews, sixty-nine grand nieces and nephews, and seven great grand nieces and nephews.

Shen and one of his three sisters were born and spent their early childhood in Shanghai. In 1949, when he was nine, China fell to the

Communists, and his father, a pediatrician, who was in residency training at the SLU medical center, returned to Shanghai and brought his family to St. Louis. "Under different circumstances I could easily have been a member of the Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution," he said.

After he received his doctorate in chemistry, Shen went to work for Ralston Purina, where, through its many corporate permutations, he served as director of its fundamental research division. With a specialty in protein enzymes, his research focused on putting soy protein into food products. If you have eaten a Crispy Creme doughnut or a Three Musketeers, you have benefited from his work. Since his retirement three years ago, he has been teaching chemistry at Southern Illinois University in Edwardsville.

Brennan and Shen met at a university CLC Christmas party in 1973. "I was thirty-two, I was terribly shy, I had almost reconciled myself to a life of a bachelor," he said. "I told a friend that I was afraid to ask Bridget for a date, and he challenged me with the perpetual question posed to every introvert in social situations, 'What do you have to lose?' Well, I asked her out, and took her to Tony's restaurant, which is still one of the best restaurants in the city."

After seeing each other for three years, they felt that they were ready for a deeper commitment. They arranged to spend a weekend of prayer and discernment under the guidance of their friend the Jesuit Father Tom Curry. "When we decided to get married, Father Tom told us something that seemed rather strange at the time," Shen said. "He told us, 'I know you two are being called to marriage, and I believe you are also being called to something that is going to have an impact on marriage.'"

Brennan and Shen have never moved from their house in south St. Louis. She enjoys long walks and reading, and recently began taking tai chi lessons. He loves to garden and is an avid bridge player — he claims that playing bridge is the main reason it took so long for him to get his doctorate. They like to travel, and plan weekends in New York periodically to see opera productions at the Met and take in



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a few plays. They also go on treks with their bird-watching group.

Their sons are both still in school. Francis has a law degree and is a member of the Missouri bar. He is working on his doctorate in government and social policy from Harvard University. John Paul is in his fourth year at the Washington University Medical School in St. Louis, and expects to continue his years of training to become an oncologist.

## Beyond the Parish

In order to expand her marriage ministry, Brennan left her position at College Church in 1998 to form the Cana Institute. "I gave up a paying job just as my second son was going off the MIT," she said. "It was a hard decision to make." She continues to serve as director of marriage ministry for the parish as a volunteer, and she and Jerry lead marriage preparation seminars in collaboration with the parish.

With the Institute, however, she is able to offer relationship coaching for individual couples, and work with other organizations throughout the country to offer retreats, marriage preparation, and other seminars.

Three years ago Brennan received a marriage education grant from the U.S. Bishops' Conference to serve the refugee community in St. Louis, mostly Bosnians. Last year she formed the St. Louis Healthy Marriage Coalition to implement a 1.1 million dollar grant from the federal government to carry out marriage education programs. She forged partnerships with fourteen local organizations to reach as many people as possible.

In 2004 Liturgical Press published *Claiming our Deepest Desires: The Power of an Intimate Marriage*, which Brennan and Shen wrote to sum up their work. They are now working on a book about the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius and married life.

Bridget Brennan, in her quiet, caring way, blossomed from the seeds of her early parish activities. Her vision and work have added life and richness to the parish, and today her ministry has a far larger reach. **J**