

\$112.8 million Mega Miracle



Bernadette Gietka stands outside her home parish of Holy Rosary in Fells Point. She won \$112.8 million in the Mega Millions lottery. (Owen Sweeney III/CR Staff)

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For much of her life, Bernadette Gietka had dreamed of writing and producing a musical that would celebrate the sanctity of life. But the 54-year-old parishioner of Holy Rosary, Fells Point, had never been able to scrape together enough money to get the project off the ground.

Frustrated by constant roadblocks, Ms. Gietka recently decided to let God know in no uncertain terms that she needed major help. She paid a visit to the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen, Homeland, where she reverently knelt after receiving Holy Communion at Mass.

Then, for the first time ever, she prayed to God while she was angry with him.

Ms. Gietka, known to her family and friends in East Baltimore as Bernie, laughed heartily recalling the boldness of her plea.

“I just said, ‘I’m so disgusted.’ I told God, ‘I know what you want me to do with my life but I don’t have the means to do it and I’m never going to have the means to do it.

“I said, ‘It’s up to you. It would benefit you to make me rich,’ Ms. Gietka continued.

“And I said, ‘Not just rich but really, really rich!’”

Three weeks later, on June 19 at Geresbeck’s supermarket in Middle River, Ms. Gietka bought the winning \$183 million ticket in the Mega Millions inter-state lottery game. The winning numbers were: 1, 2, 3, 12, 37 and the gold Mega Ball number, 35.

Choosing to take the cash option, the part-time letter carrier for the U.S. Postal Service who works three other jobs walked away with \$112.8 million. It’s the second-largest payout to an individual winner in U.S. lottery history and the biggest ever in Maryland. After taxes, Ms. Gietka received \$76 million.

There’s absolutely no doubt in the new multi-millionaire’s mind that God was behind her good fortune.

“Oh, sure!” said Ms. Gietka, beaming a bright smile. “I mean, the odds of winning were 135 million to one. There’s no way! It couldn’t have happened to me any other way.”

A single woman who graduated from Holy Rosary Elementary School and who had once considered becoming a School Sister of Notre Dame while she attended high school at the Villa Regina Academy in Baltimore, Ms. Gietka said one of her top priorities now is to get to work on her musical.

She prays that the “very touching production” will help women choose life over abortion. The musical, which will feature dancing and singing, is already finished in her mind, she said.

“I think I better not mess up,” said Ms. Gietka, an accomplished pianist who once taught music at Holy Rosary while also working in the rectory. “If it’s not finished in two years, I’ll be in trouble with you know who!”

The playwright said she also has four other screenplays in the works that deal with family themes. She is trying to sell them to Disney and get them to the silver screen, she said.

‘Always a good girl’

Ms. Gietka plans to tithe 10 percent of her winnings to the church and charitable causes. She is paying for her home parish to add air conditioning “as soon as possible” to battle Baltimore’s notoriously humid summers. Ms. Gietka said she also hopes to help pay for a new roof at Our Lady Queen of Peace, Middle River, and to donate funds to promote religious vocations. She is setting up a foundation to handle her charitable causes.

The Catholic Church has always been an important part of her life, Ms. Gietka said, noting that she is particularly grateful to Sister Claudia Rostek, C.S.S.F., who led a RENEW group at Holy Rosary which helped parishioners develop their relationships with God.

“She’s a very dedicated Catholic,” said Father Ronald Pytel, the pastor of Holy Rosary who attended the parish school with Ms. Gietka.

“I don’t think her life is going to change,” said the pastor. “I know Bernie and she’s just going to be Bernie. She’s a very caring, giving person. I couldn’t think of a nicer or more deserving person.”

Catherine Gietka, mother of the winner, said she is very proud of her daughter for having always been a “good girl” and a “hard worker.” In addition to helping her church, Mrs. Gietka noted that “Bernie” takes care of elderly people in their homes and has always been a generous person.

Mrs. Gietka said she is grateful to God that her daughter has been graced with some wonderful luck after going through some difficult times. This year, Mrs. Gietka noted that her daughter was involved in two car wrecks. She almost lost her life in February after she slipped on ice along her mail route in Hydes/Baldwin and hit her head.

“She’s a very lucky girl,” said Mrs. Gietka.

The new millionaire said she enjoys parish bingo games at Holy Rosary, Our Lady of Fatima, Baltimore, and a few other churches. Her mother organizes parish trips to Atlantic City.

Asked if she has any moral qualms about gambling, Ms. Gietka said she sees nothing wrong with it as long as individuals avoid extremes and spending money they don't have. She will continue buying lottery tickets on occasion, she said.

"You shouldn't overdo anything," she warned.

The winner said she plans to build nine houses for her family members in the Baldwin or Towson areas. To be erected in a large circle, the Gietka development will include a tennis court, a swimming pool and a bowling alley in Ms. Gietka's basement.

As for herself, Ms. Gietka has already picked out a brand-new Chevy Corvette.

As she has ever since she won, Ms. Gietka has continued delivering mail along her route. She waited a week to reveal the winning ticket because she had just asked for more hours and felt obligated to take the additional routes she was given to help pay off the \$62,000 mortgage that had just been approved a month earlier for her "dream house" in Dundalk.

"It's the best post office in the world," Ms. Gietka raved, saying she'll stay on the job for at least one more year. "I want to continue working because it's just something you like to do. I'd miss it."

Ms. Gietka said no one should ever doubt the power of prayer. This Christmas, she said, she prayed for a personal request that was granted. She won't reveal what it was, only pointing out that it was "spectacular."

"It was just as extraordinary as this (winning the lottery)," she said. "So I always say never doubt, especially the Holy Spirit, because he'll never let you down. Anytime I need help, the Holy Spirit never lets me down - never."

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