

Rags, Viv and the woman who led me to St. Francis of Assisi

Why do you go to a particular church? Maybe it's for convenience or old time's sake, but sometimes we are recruited. I was reminded of that May 25, at the funeral of Sharon Bialek at the Shrine of the Little Flower on Belair Road. I had visited the church previously, but it was my first Mass there, thanks to Fran Gast.

In April 1985, I covered high school sports for *The Evening Sun*. Then and now, I loved family stories, and jumped on the opportunity to write about the Gast brothers, who were pitching against each other, sophomore John for McDonogh and senior Joe for Calvert Hall. Before the game at Calvert Hall, I introduced myself to their mom, Fran. The Gasts lived in Mayfield and attended church there. When I informed her that my expectant wife and I were going to be relative neighbors in northeast Baltimore, as we were settling on our first home, a short walk from Little Flower, she proceeded to change my life.



"You're not going to Little Flower," Fran said. "You're going to St. Francis of Assisi." Over the next 18 years, baptisms to first Communions to funerals, whether it was from a rowhome on Herring Run Park, a Cape Cod in Hamilton or a Victorian in Mayfield, my family worshipped at St. Francis – all because one of its parishioners invited a stranger to her church.



Fran Gast and her husband, Robert, celebrating their 55th wedding anniversary. There are other layers to our continuing connection. The *Catholic Review* has written about WJZ-Ch. 13 sports anchor Mark Viviano and his brother, Tony, a priest in their native St. Louis. When "Viv" first came to Baltimore, he worked in the same newsroom with John Gast. The two became teammates in the Baltimore Baseball League and fast friends. Viv is godfather to John's son, John Robert, and has likened Fran Gast to his surrogate mom in his adopted hometown.

These days, Viv is a very serious runner, a teammate of mine and our hammer every October in the Baltimore Running Festival's marathon relay, where we race for a good cause, Mark Ragonese, everybody's buddy. On June 15, Mark, Comcast sports anchor Brent Harris and I are raising funds for "Rags" in the Baltimore 10-Miler. Near its halfway point, the course loops around Lake Montebello, across Harford Road from St. Francis of Assisi. Hope Fran Gast is there to give us a hug.



Mark Ragonese on the rehab trail