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TOP STORY

Letting go: Angel lover selling much of her collection

By Anna Marie Lux amarielux@gazettextra.com Aug 25, 2018



Joyce Berg, who started the Angel Museum in 1998, speaks about the museum's closing in September. The Beloit museum houses more than 14,000 angel figurines, including a collection of black angels from Oprah Winfrey.

Angela Major

BELOIT

The pain on 87-year-old Joyce Berg's face is visible when she talks about losing most of her angel family.

“I have to part with them,” she laments, letting out a sigh and glancing at dozens of haloed and winged figurines in a display case.

The figurines include some of the dearest in her angel collection, which numbers at least 14,000.

“I don’t like breaking them up,” Joyce said. “I have placed these angels in these cases with such love, and now they are to be separated? If only someone would buy them all together.”

Most of Joyce’s collection is at Beloit’s Angel Museum, which will close Sept. 29 because of “insufficient funds, insufficient membership, insufficient corporate and private sponsorship and insufficient volunteers,” Joyce said.

She did not say how or when, but her personal angels and others at the museum will be sold.

The closure and sale end a 20-year run for the heavenly museum in a historic church.

Since Joyce and her late husband, Lowell, opened the museum in 1998, more than 185,000 visitors worldwide have wandered among the displays.

“The angels have had an impact on them,” Joyce said. “Some come in and say they can see angels, not the ones in cases. But I don’t get into the religious aspect of it. I’m a collector, not an authority on angels.”

She greets visitors in a long white robe with shiny trim and buttons. White wings attach to the back of her robe, and a simple halo wraps around her neatly cropped white hair.

Wearing the outfit helps Joyce talk about the storied angels.

“I tell people I hope they leave with smiles on their faces,” Joyce said. “Just look at those little faces on the angels. They are so sweet you can’t help but smile.”

In addition to the Berg angel collection, the museum houses Oprah Winfrey’s black angel collection, angels that have been donated by collectors and memorial angels given in memory of loved ones.

But it is Joyce’s collection that has worldwide notoriety.

She and Lowell began collecting by accident in 1976.

They were on vacation in Florida and pulled into an antique shop, where they bought two angelic figurines.

The activity of looking for and buying angels took a divine hold on them.

“If my husband had not been interested, it would not have happened,” Joyce said. “But it became our passion. It was something we did together.”

The Berg collection has received much notoriety over the years, including a place in the Guinness Book of World Records in 2004 for world’s biggest angel and cherub figurines collection. At the time, it had 13,165 angels.

Their collection has received a lot of national press, including stories in Life, Smithsonian, Ripley’s Believe It or Not!, Newsweek and People magazines.

Joyce did not estimate how much the collection is worth. But she said she and her husband bought most of the angels secondhand at flea markets, estate sales and antique stores.

Before the Bergs started the not-for-profit museum, they invited people into their Beloit home to see the inspired collection.

“We had almost 10,000 in the house,” Joyce said. “It was tastefully done. We took out a couple of windows and put in shelves. We took out a door and replaced it with shelves.”

When the number of homebound angels became too large, the Bergs looked for a place to display them. One day while driving past a former Catholic church on Pleasant Street, Joyce had a light-bulb moment.

She got together with parishioners trying to save the 1914 building.

Eventually, the museum’s franchise, St. Paul on the Riverfront, rented the church from the city for \$1 a year.

Now, the city is reviewing options for the property.

“We have been approached by a number of parties who have expressed an interest,” Beloit City Manager Lori Curtis Luther said in a written statement.

Until a final decision is made about the building's future, the city will care for the property.

A small part of Joyce wishes a miracle could save the museum and keep the figurines together.

A bigger part realizes it is time. Joyce has spent many hours greeting visitors and caring for the museum. Now she wants to focus on her home and family.

"Our world is different than when we started collecting," Joyce said. "Today in our electronic world, young people don't collect like my age group once did."

She accepts the inevitable.

"It was meant to be," Joyce said. "I still have part of my angel family at home, and I will miss the others. But I know I have to let go."

Anna Marie Lux is a Sunday columnist for The Gazette. Call her with ideas or comments at 608-755-8264, or email amariehux@gazettextra.com.

About the Beloit Angel Museum

Hours: 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Thursday through Saturday until Sept. 29.

Location: 656 Pleasant St., Beloit.

Phone: 608-362-9099 or 877-412-6435.

Website: angelmuseum.org

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