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Stingl: Anyone want to buy 12,000 angels? Beloit's Angel Museum is closing after 20 years

Jim Stingl, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Published 4:01 p.m. CT Aug. 3, 2018 | Updated 6:44 p.m. CT Aug. 3, 2018



(Photo: Chris Kohley/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)

Beloit's Angel Museum is folding its wings and closing for good after a 20-year run.

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The only museum of its kind started strong but has struggled to survive in recent years as attendance dwindled. Its final day will be Sept. 29.

Beloit angel museum closes its doors

"We have insufficient funds, insufficient memberships, insufficient volunteers and insufficient corporate sponsors," said Joyce Berg, who greeted me in an angel costume at the museum's front door when I stopped to visit.

The closing is especially sad for her. She and her husband, Lowell, bought their first angel figure at an antique store in Florida in 1976 on a vacation after their two kids had grown. In the years that followed, they purchased 14,000 more.

Joyce is 87 and aware of the irony that her angels cannot follow her into the great hereafter when her time comes. Some 12,000 supernatural winged figures will soon be sold.

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"In a way, I'm ready," she said. "But the thing that makes me so sad is that this is my angel family. They have been placed in these cases with love. And they're going to be separated? If they could all go together, that would be so much better."

The Bergs displayed the growing collection at their Beloit ranch home for two decades, and in 1998 they moved the angels into a closed Catholic church on Beloit's riverfront that became the museum.



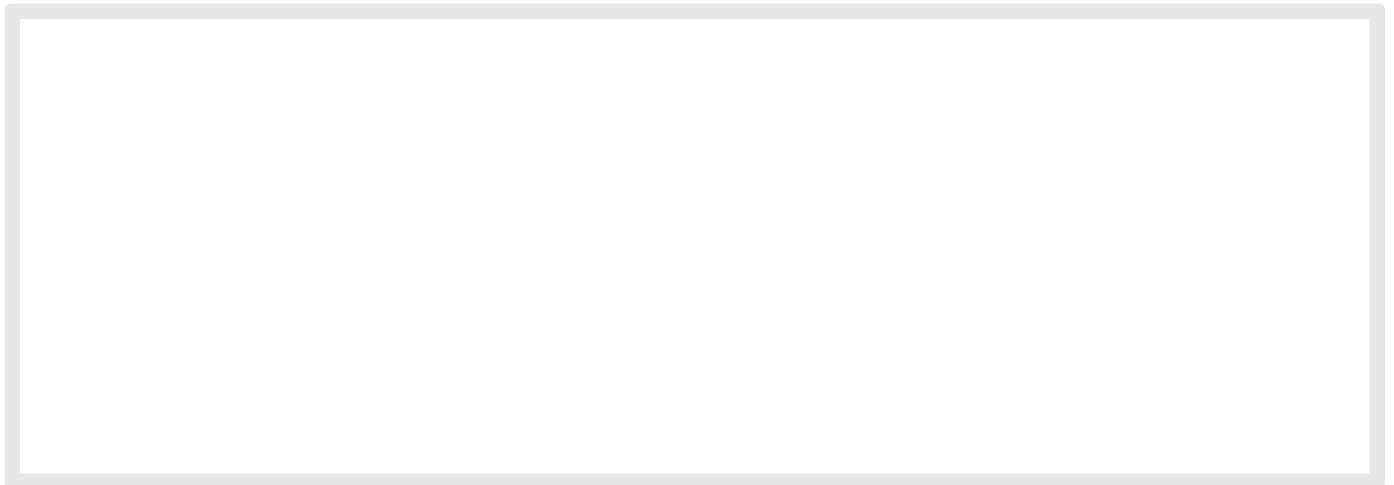
The Angel Museum in Beloit is closing after 20 years of business. The museum, housed in an early 1900s church, holds approximately 12,000 angel figures collected by Joyce and Lowell Berg. The museum is one of a kind in the world. (Photo: Chris Kohley/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)

With their wings and halos, angels are "symbols for what is joyful, noble and good in this life," the [museum's website \(http://www.angelmuseum.org/\)](http://www.angelmuseum.org/) says. More than 185,000 people from around the world have visited the museum.

As Joyce gave me a tour, she pointed into one of many display cases dense with angels of all kinds. "The little faces speak to you," she said.

No two angels are alike. She has angels playing musical instruments, holding lambs, protecting children, playing baseball, and kissing, to name a few. Angels as Miss Piggy, Smurfs, Wisconsin cheeseheads, music boxes, salt shakers, liquor decanters, a cigarette lighter, bobbleheads, even a smoke alarm. Angels for each month, each day of the week, each sign of the zodiac. An angel one-eighth-inch tall, and one life-sized.

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Joyce and Lowell collected angels from all over the world, even though they never went abroad. Somehow each angel found its way to them at thrift stores, flea markets, gift and antique shops, auctions and estate sales.

Lowell, who ran grain elevators in the Beloit area, died in 2003, and there's an angel in his likeness in the museum collection. It's near a display of publicity the museum received over the years, including a 1994 story in the National Enquirer tabloid under the headline, "Heavens above! Grandma's living with 10,455 angels." Guinness World Records declared her collection to be the largest.



After Lowell's death in 2003, Joyce placed an angel figure of her husband in a backlit case in his memory. (Photo: Chris Kohley/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)

Joyce believes angels are real, along with about seven in 10 other Americans. Visitors have told her they see angels, and one said they were flying all around Joyce as they talked. She has hugged people moved to tears by her angels.

"I know we have touched lives here. I know people have come in here and left feeling peace and love and kindness," she said.

Unfortunately, others interviewed in focus groups about how to improve the museum's appeal were not similarly moved.

"A lot of people said we were outdated because we don't have interactive displays and it wasn't children friendly. It was one and done. You've been there and you're never going to go back type of thing," said Dee Ward, a retired bank auditor and treasurer of the board of trustees of St. Paul on the Riverfront Inc., which runs the museum and leases space in the city-owned former church for \$1 a year.

The museum is down to just three days a week when it's open — Thursday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. — and still it's tough finding enough volunteers to sell tickets (the top price is \$7), lead tours, run the gift shop and keep the place clean. Most of the volunteers they do have are near 80 years old.

Over the years, rummage sales, dinners and other events were held to raise money. Attendance at these has been poor more recently. The museum can no longer afford paid staff and is run totally by volunteers.



People's fascination with angels has waned, and younger generations are less interested in collecting things, let alone looking at stuff someone else amassed, Dee said.

Angels given to the museum in memory of people who have died will be returned to everyone who wants them back. Several hundred black angels donated by TV star Oprah Winfrey will go on the sale block along with the Berg collection. Joyce plans to take her favorite few angels home, where she has a couple of thousand more not displayed at the museum.

She gave me a pretty little porcelain angel from the gift shop as I left the museum. We hugged.

"It's something you'll never see again, an angel collection like this," she told me. "Their little faces, oh."

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