

Sonia Willbrand

Sonia was born in 1935 in Colorado Springs. She is 100% Lebanese. (She has passed down Lebanese/Syrian cooking to her children.) Her dad was born in Syria (now Lebanon) and came to the United States via Ellis Island to sell linens. Amazingly, he was Roman Catholic.

Sonia has a saint in her family. His name is Sharbel Makhlef and he was the first saint from Lebanon. Sonia didn't realize there was a saint in the family until another relative researched it. Sonia told Deacon Tom, her husband, about the saint in her family. It was the exact moment Deacon Tom was reading about Saint Makhl on his Feast Day, which is on July 24.

Unfortunately, Sonia's dad passed away at age 49 while Sonia's mom was nursing an infant. Money was tight so Sonia worked to support the family (six girls and one boy). She worked at Fort Carson Army Base in Colorado.

Deacon Tom was drafted into the Army and was stationed at Colorado Springs. She met Deacon Tom via a priest and married him on April 7, 1956 in Colorado Springs. Deacon Tom was born in Saint Charles and attended Saint Peter High School. He attended the seminary in his sophomore year but discerned out of being a priest. After being discharged from the Army, Deacon Tom and Sonia settled in Saint Charles. (By then, her next oldest sister could work to support the family.) Father Peet was the pastor.

Sonia took care of their ten children. All ten children received the children's sacraments at Saint Peter. Sonia could barely take a break from the children, even to wash her hair. Deacon Tom worked at McDonnell Douglas and worked at night cleaning schools. Eventually when the children were older, Sonia worked nights.

Deacon Tom was one of the first deacons in the archdiocese and he was the first deacon at Saint Peter. The diaconate program was started again because of a shortage of priests. Both Deacon Tom and Sonia were interviewed separately to ensure that they were both comfortable with Deacon Tom becoming a deacon. Deacons are very busy, not home much, and miss family events. Deacon Tom waited 1 ½ years to begin the diaconate program until their youngest son was in school. He retired on Friday and was ordained as a deacon the next day in 1991.

Deacon Tom was worried about becoming a deacon. We hadn't had deacons for hundreds of years. Would the people accept him? Everything went well and he got super busy. He baptized 500 babies and celebrated 200 weddings. He gave marriage prep also. At some point, he did annulments and took Communion to the prisoners at the local jail. He took everything to heart, almost as much as if they were family.

Deacon Tom made a big impression on his son one day. While driving with his son, Deacon Tom saw a man without shoes on the street and gave him the shoes right off his feet. His son never forgot that moment.

Deacon Tom became very good friends with Father Don Carey. (At one time, there was a Father Don, Father Ron, Deacon Tom, and Deacon Don. It got very confusing.) They used to go bike riding. At Christmas, Father Don would go to Sonia and Deacon Tom's house and play Santa Claus for the younger children and some grandchildren. He would walk in the front door with Father Don and stay in his Santa Claus outfit, even while eating. He let the children sit on his lap.

Deacon Tom passed away in 2024. He and Sonia were married almost 68 years.

The church has changed throughout the years. The nuns' habits were shortened to knee length, showing their shins. One of the Willbrand sons astonishingly claimed to Sonia "Sister Linda has legs." Some changes took a while to get used to. Sonia liked the change whereby people didn't have to fast from midnight until receiving Communion. Fasting even applied to marriages, so people had early weddings.

Both Sonia's and Deacon Tom's favorite memories at Saint Peter were the weddings of their children and the baptisms of the family. They also enjoyed how the priests and people were so warm at Saint Peter. It was and is a community.