

Saint sales good business

By BETH KALET
Staff Writer

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He created the St. Joseph Home Sale Kit in 1993 and that year sold about 1,100 by going door to door to local gift shops. This year, he expects to sell about 85,000 kits and, frankly, he can't keep track of where they're selling. He uses distributors to do that work for him.

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He packages the little statues along with a flier about St. Joseph's power and the ages-old lore about it. He also includes a prayer. So successful has his \$6 item been, that one of the firms distributing his product has created its own. But he's outselling them, Micklewright said. His simple and inexpensive kit sells for about half the price of that competitor.

Others have jumped into the market, too. But he's not worried. He's been asked to create a Spanish version of his brochure for buyers here and abroad.

Micklewright said the business came at a good time. "I needed something to sustain myself," he said. Although he'd been a success in the corporate world most of his life, Micklewright said he had fallen into a financial slump at just about the time he discovered St. Joseph.

He had been living well. Perhaps too well. He'd sold off his ownership in a business and tried to go his own way. He rehabilitated houses, and later became a real estate agent. When Micklewright put his own house on the market, it sat for 12 months.

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Cathy Diccianni holds a St. Joseph Home Sale Kit.

On a wing and a prayer

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Armed with a 3½-inch plastic statue of St. Joseph, a shovel and some old-fashioned faith, home sellers are swearing by the silent assistance of the patron saint. They maintain he helps sell houses. Fast.

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But scratch the surface of the home sale market, and it's surprising just how many people know about St. Joseph's power. Most insist the statue must be buried backward or upside down facing your house or facing the direction you plan to move. It's a bit confusing. But Jerry Micklewright, who created the kit, says the truth is you can put it any way you want. You can keep it inside. But, you've got to believe.

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Marilyn Baringer sold her house in Scotchtown within three weeks to the first person who looked at it. The St. Joseph statue was buried in her front yard, as lore and legend direct.

"For \$6, it was the best investment I ever made," she said.

Call it folklore, call it spiritualism. Thousands of people have bought a little product called The St. Joseph Home Sale Kit. It includes a small statue of the saint, a printed prayer and some comments about the myths surrounding what St. Joseph does.

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The literature Micklewright puts in the box with the statue tells people that none of the picayune lore on where to bury the statue means anything.

What does mean everything is that: "the seller ... asks St. Joseph for his help ... believes that he will intercede, and thanks him ... " according to the brochures.

Sister Annette, at The Kingdom Gift

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Well, one thing led to another and that's how Micklewright can say that "this kind of fell into my lap. It was a beautiful situation."

From his proceeds, Micklewright said he tries to pay a tithe to his church. He also has plans to help out a religious group in Michigan that wants to build a shrine to St. Joseph. Once he meets with them, he would like to print a solicitation with their

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Prayer

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Shop in Hyde Park, sold a statuette to someone on a Friday and the house was sold by Monday. "I have stories like that all the time," she said.

"It's like an old fashioned custom," said Baringer, who bought her kit at Body & Soul gift shop in Goshen for about \$6.

"I guess you just have to believe in it." She does, and in keeping with the custom, she dug up the statue once she sold her home, took it to her new house in the Town of Wawayanda "for good luck" and eventually passed it on to a Jewish friend who was selling her house. Guess what? It worked. That house sold in three months, Baringer said.

Cathy Diccianni owns the Body & Soul shop. She says at times she can't keep enough of the kits in stock. She sells them to skeptics and believers, to real estate agents and others who buy them as gifts.

"It comes with faith," Diccianni said. "St. Joseph was a carpenter. He is the patron of the family, of home. I don't know how it came about, but I just accepted it." And she hasn't had reason to doubt it, she said. Especially when she has had so many repeat customers.

"You have to believe that it works, and it does," said a satisfied Baringer. She's just bought one to send her sister-in-law in Rochester, but someone else had already given her one.

Sister Annette said she was stunned when she first heard about the practice. Although her faith is nondenominational, she said, "I was raised a Catholic. I was mortified. I said this was absurd." Afraid the custom was sacrilegious, she said she "checked with the chancery office" and learned that the church approved.

The Catholic church doesn't disapprove of the custom, but it also doesn't encourage it. "It's not a church devotion," said the Rev. Msgr. George Valastro of St. Joseph's in Middletown. But it is a private devotion, and "it is in keeping with the Catholic tradition of praying to the saints."

Father Valastro said that since St. Joseph is the patron of the universal church, he can understand why people might want to pray to him for help in any matter. "It's not that there's some miraculous power attributed to Joseph," he said. But "nobody, certainly, is going to stop the faith of somebody who believes so strongly in the intercession of Joseph ... but it's not because you bury a statue upside down."

You never know, though. That's why Baringer helped her Jewish friends plant the Joseph statue in their yard. And Realtor Marilyn Eigen at Coldwell Banker Currier & Lazier in Middletown said she had a client whose condo at Whispering Hills in the Village of Chester sold after they buried a St. Joseph statue.

Her colleague Fran Kolbe told a story: A couple tried the statue, but didn't sell their home. So they dug it up and tossed it into their trash, which was hauled off to a landfill. The next day, the landfill was sold for \$5 million.

A good joke, but Kolbe said she has it on good authority that the story is true.

Michael Gulotta runs a ministry and gift store at Promise Bible & Book Shop in Middletown. He discredits the lore of the St. Joseph Home Sale kit, comparing it to a chain letter. "I think they're just wasting their time," he said of people who buy and believe in the statue's effect. "It's not biblical. It's superstition."

Still, some people don't care to argue with what they call success. Goshen shopkeeper Diccianni said she and her partners have had customers who believe their houses sold thanks to a St. Joseph statue. So they come back and buy another to send to friends and relatives around the country. "You just have to take it on faith."

Realtors say that houses are selling exceptionally well - and quickly - this year, though some argue that's because sellers are pricing their houses fairly from the start. Statistics do show that there are more sales than last year.

In Orange County, the most recent stats show 631 houses sold in January through April; a year ago, 550 were sold during those same months. Ulster County's numbers are close to last year's: 240 houses have been sold January through April; the year before, 247 were sold those same months. Comparative statistics weren't available for Sullivan County.

Statewide, 20,711 homes have been sold January through April this year; only 18,968 were sold those months last year.

Might St. Joseph be responsible for the current boom in the real estate market? "I'm sure that he's giving his blessing," said Sister Annette.

this will be the sidebar to the st. joseph story:

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Read. Believe. Trust. Those are the watchwords on the latest of his kits. "It works," Micklewright said. And in the process thousands of people are finding out about St. Joseph, he pointed out. "It's really becoming quite a phenomenon."