

Priest Guides Blind Skiers Down Slope

*For Fr. Key, participation in BOLD
is way to serve community*

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KEWASKUM — Imagine zipping down a ski hill, the crunch of the snow beneath your skis, and the wind blowing into your face. Imagine being that skier, but without your eyesight. How would you safely make it down the hill?

That is the job of Fr. Bill Key, pastor at St. Joseph Parish in Waukesha. He and other guides for the Lions Club Blind Outdoor Leisure Development (BOLD) are trained to lead legally blind skiers down the hills of Sunburst Ski Hill in Kewaskum. Fr. Key has volunteered to ski with the blind for 20 years.

For six Sunday nights during winter, BOLD members and skiers take passes up and down the hills. Blind people who have never skied are taught by an instructor. When they get on the slopes, guides follow them down the hill, giving them directional commands. The voice of their instructor is the only way they can make it down the hill. Fr. Key said it's a lesson in trust — similar to the blindfolded "trust walk" done on many Confirmation retreats.

"I ski behind them and tell them to go left or right and when to stop," he said. "You need to do it in a very calm way. All the anxiety in my voice is transferred to them."

Fr. Key said the skiers express their appreciation and the guides know they've done something nice for another.

"I'm giving back by helping others enjoy the night," he said. "Without a guide they couldn't do it."

Known as "Fr. Bill" to the skiers, Fr. Key said his roles as guide and priest are intertwined.

Ken Sosalla, president of the BOLD Lions, assigns a guide to each skier.

"Sometimes I specifically ask him to guide someone if it looks like they need to talk," said Sosalla. "He brings a positive spirituality because of his background."

Fr. Key said others joke that his skiers are assigned to him because they need divine intervention.

"They laugh and say, 'You have Fr. Bill so you must need some special help,'" he said.



Fr. Bill Key rides the ski lift with Doreen Lundgren at Sunburst Ski Hill Feb. 18. The labeled vests alert other skiers to use caution near the blind skiers. (Catholic Herald photo by Allen Fredrickson)

For guides to appreciate what the blind skiers experience, their training includes a period in which they are blindfolded, asked to put on their skis, and, with the help of another guide, ski down the mountain. This includes a training session where they are completely blindfolded for one hour.

“Their only sense of safety and security is your voice, so guides need to appreciate that,” said Sosalla.

Blind skier Doreen Lundgren agrees that skiers need to have unwavering trust in their guide.

“It’s very important because if you can’t trust them you don’t want to go down the hill with them,” said Lundgren.

A skier for 27 years, Lundgren said Fr. Key has guided her often.

“He’s easy to talk to,” she said of Fr. Key. “If I need something extra, and he’s able to do it, he will. He’s very easygoing and laid back.”

Lundgren, who was raised Catholic but currently is not practicing, said she and Fr. Key talk about “all kinds of things.”

“He lets me be who I am without preaching or criticizing, but he lets me know where he stands,” she said.

Fellow blind skier Jennie Post has been skiing with the group since the mid-1980s. She said she enjoys Fr. Key’s demeanor while guiding. A member of St. Margaret Mary Parish in Milwaukee, she also appreciates having a priest guiding her down the hill.

“He does a wonderful job as a guide,” said Post. “He’s definitely dedicated to his work and to the church.

“Fr. Bill and I talk about some of the priests we know and that I knew as a kid,” she said. “He knows the grade school teacher who taught me Braille.”

Post also stressed the importance of trust between the blind skiers and guides.

“Trust is extremely important between a blind skier and a guide because if you don’t trust who is guiding you, you could get seriously injured,” said Post. “You need to listen and pay attention and have a good response time. I feel that trust is number one.”

Equipment rental and lift ticket fees are paid for by Sunburst Ski Hill. The group meets about six times each winter to ski on Sunday nights.