



## ERIE BISHOP OPENS CAUSE FOR CANONIZATION

The decree was presented by Erie Bishop Lawrence Persico, center, to, from left, Irene Smerick, a parent and close friend of Dr. Barber; Carol Reynolds Wolfe, Nancy Darker and Ray Crawford, adults served by the Barber National Institute, and John Barber, back, Institute president.

Calling her a woman who inspired so many during her lifetime, the Most Rev. Lawrence T. Persico, bishop of Erie, announced the opening of the cause of canonization of Dr. Gertrude A. Barber. A decree beginning the formal process in the Catholic Church was presented during a gathering of students, adults, families, staff and supporters at the Barber National Institute on Dec. 17.

In addressing the crowd, Bishop Persico said, "I know we all are thrilled to be part of this historic moment. But I am particularly pleased that the good work of Dr. Barber, undertaken on behalf of those in need, will now be known more fully by those throughout our region and beyond."

Saying that his "life was transformed by Dr. Barber," Erie Mayor Joe Schember recounted the birth of his daughter Jodi, who was born with Down syndrome 34 years ago. "The doctors told us we might want to put her away," said Mayor Schember. He described how their relationship with Dr. Barber and the services Jodi began receiving when she was a few weeks old made an impact on their entire family. "I'm one of the 'miracles' because I wouldn't be the person that I am today without Dr. Barber and the incredible staff here."

With the opening of her cause for canonization, Dr. Barber will now be referred to as "Servant of God." She became the first layperson on the list of other Pennsylvanians whose causes for canonization are currently underway and could become the first

layperson born in the United States to be canonized. Msgr. Tom McSweeney, a retired priest in the Diocese of Erie, has been appointed postulator for the cause, and will gather testimony from those who knew Dr. Barber to include in documentation required for the process. Anyone wishing to be interviewed can contact Msgr. McSweeney at 814-878-5953. More information about Dr. Barber's life, the process of canonization and how to support the cause is available at [DrBarber.org](http://DrBarber.org).

Watch the full announcement at [DrBarber.org/announcement](http://DrBarber.org/announcement)



Erie Mayor Joe Schember recounts how Dr. Barber "transformed" his daughter's life while Msgr. Edward Lohse, seated left, vicar general of the Diocese of Erie, and Msgr. Tom McSweeney, postulator for the cause, look on.

## BARBER SPIRIT

Barber Spirit is a quarterly publication for friends of the Dr. Gertrude A. Barber Center, Inc.  
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# BARBER SPIRIT

Special Edition

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"Faith in God,  
Hope for the future and  
Love for all mankind."

*Dr. Gertrude A. Barber*



Learn how you can support the Cause by visiting [DrBARBER.ORG](http://DrBARBER.ORG)



Merciful Father,

You guided Your servant, Gertrude Barber, to a lifetime ministry of bringing hope to children and their parents as they faced the often overwhelming challenges of living with autism and disabilities, while inspiring us to recognize all individuals as people of God.

We know You hear our prayers as we gather in Your name:

If it is in Your design that Gertrude be glorified by the Church, so as to further her extraordinary mission, show us Your will. Grant us the grace to hear Your answer and commit ourselves to take up her cause by the merits of Jesus Christ, Our Lord, Amen.

Imprimatur:  
The Most Rev. Lawrence T. Persico, J.C.L. Bishop of Erie  
11 December 2019



TEACHER | MENTOR | FOUNDER  
SERVANT OF GOD





## GERTRUDE BARBER: CAUSE FOR SAINTHOOD

Many titles were given to Gertrude Barber throughout her lifetime of service: Teacher, mentor, leader. Now, the Catholic Church has set out to determine if she will have another: Saint.

Erie Bishop Lawrence Persico announced that the Church has opened an inquiry into canonization for the renowned

educator, recognizing Gertrude Barber’s reputation for an unwavering commitment to her faith and dedication to serving others. Her story demonstrates the lasting impact that one person can make in changing both lives and society for the better.

Dr. Barber was born to an immigrant mother and a father who would die when she was just seven years old. Her mother, Kate, who came to America from her native Ireland when she was 16, became a role model for Gertrude at the family’s home in Erie’s east side neighborhood. Kate Barber made sure that her five sons and three daughters would all be well educated and raised in the spirit of service to the community. Gertrude attended St. Ann’s Church and School where the Sisters of St. Joseph who taught Gertrude recognized her love of learning. For high school, they arranged for her to board across town at Villa Maria Academy. After graduating, she went on to Edinboro Normal School (now University) to prepare to become a teacher.

In 1931, at the height of the Great Depression, Dr. Barber began her career in the Erie School District, where she would advance to positions of Home and School visitor, psychologist and assistant superintendent. In those roles, she was often responsible for telling parents that their child with a disability could not attend school and would either have to be kept at home without services or sent to an out-of-town institution.

“I thought that was strange, to allow one child to go to school, but another would not be allowed,” Dr. Barber would recall years later.

The dilemma nagged at her until, in 1950, she began organizing groups of parents who wanted their child educated in their home community. Two years later, Dr. Barber opened the first class for children with intellectual disabilities in a room borrowed from the YWCA.

At various locations around town, she would start other classes for children who had hearing impairments, and training programs for adults with disabilities. Then, in 1958, after a vaccine for polio was discovered, the City of Erie leased its former communicable disease hospital to Dr. Barber, who said, “at last we have a home. We have a building with enough space to accommodate all of our



1943 Dr. Barber appointed Home & School Visitor in the Erie School District

needs.” But she was wrong. With the added space, programs continued to expand to meet emerging needs. In 1962, the Exceptional Children’s Center, later to be renamed the Dr. Gertrude A. Barber Center, earned state accreditation for its school programs.

Word of Dr. Barber’s work spread throughout the state and the nation, and in 1962 she was appointed to President John F. Kennedy’s White House Task Force on the Education and Rehabilitation of the Mentally Retarded. Together with members such as Ethel Kennedy, she assisted in bringing national attention to the needs of persons with intellectual disabilities.

Locally and nationally, the needs – and the potential – of persons with disabilities came into sharper focus. At the same time, the Barber Center continued to flourish and in 1966, when Congress passed landmark legislation establishing services for children and adults with disabilities, Gertrude’s center in Erie started many new programs to meet the needs of individuals and their families. Construction began for a new complex next to the former Lakeview Hospital in 1968, and a year later the Barber Center opened a satellite facility in Corry, PA.

In the early 1970s, legislation in Pennsylvania sought to return to their home communities hundreds of individuals who had been living in institutions. The Barber Center soon opened the first community group homes in Erie for adults who had resided at Polk State Center.



1981 Hosts First Lady Rosalynn Carter for International Year of Disabled Persons

An often-heard expression of joy from the people who moved to these facilities was: “Dr. Barber brought me home.”

Indeed, leading the charge at every level for every advancement in the treatment of persons with disabilities was Dr. Gertrude Barber. She met with governors, scientists, university presidents, social workers, celebrities – anyone who could further the cause for greater acceptance of individuals with disabilities. She was personally invited to the ceremony at the White House when President George H.W. Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act.

With an influx of individuals returning to Erie’s community, many new day services were established at the Barber Center to teach the adults vocational and everyday living skills.

Under Gertrude’s direction, the number of group residences in Erie County grew and there are currently more than 50 homes. The Barber Center opened a satellite facility in Girard in 1973, and in 1990 expanded to the Philadelphia area. Today, the Barber National Institute operates 36 residential group homes in Southeastern Pennsylvania. In 1999, the Barber Center began providing Allegheny County with group homes and adult day programs.

As the 20th century began to draw to a close, Gertrude launched Project 2000 to create a national institute in Erie for research, education and state-of-the-art services in the field of disabilities. Through all of the advances and growth that the Barber National Institute has experienced, the mission remained the same one that Gertrude established 60 years earlier: to provide children and adults with hope and opportunity as they strive toward more fulfilling and productive lives.

Most remarkable was the level of personal attention and hands-on care provided by Dr. Gertrude Barber herself. Until her death in 2000 at the age of 88, she was leading the fight to improve the lives of society’s most vulnerable persons. Fortunately, her dedication and vision continue to inspire others to carry out her mission of hope for the children and adults she dedicated her life to serving.



### A LEGACY OF SERVICE



**1911**  
Gertrude Barber, right, is born on Sept. 16 in Erie, PA

**1933**  
Dr. Barber becomes a teacher in the Erie School District



**1945**  
Master’s degree in Psychology from Penn State University; appointed coordinator of special education programs in Erie School District

**1950**  
Dr. Barber organizes first parent group meeting

**1952**  
First classes for children with intellectual disabilities begin at the Y.W.C.A.



**1956**  
Doctorate from Penn State University

**1958**  
City of Erie leases former communicable disease hospital for first school and adult workshop

**1962**  
Appointed by President John F. Kennedy to the national Task Force on Mental Retardation

**1963**  
Barber Family chosen as Catholic Family of the year in Erie Diocese



**1973**  
First residential programs open for adults returning from Polk State Hospital

**1990**  
Eight residences open in Philadelphia

**1990**  
Dr. Barber attends signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act at the White House

**1991**  
Dr. Barber greets John Cardinal O’Conner, after she was named a “Lady of the Holy Sepulchre” at St. Patrick’s Church in New York City.

**1996**  
Olympic Relay Torchbearer – XXVI Olympiad

**2000**  
Five residential group homes open in Pittsburgh



**2000**  
Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Ridge presents \$2 million state grant for funding national center

**2000**  
Dr. Barber passes away on April 29



**2003**  
Grand opening of the new school and training complex

**2007**  
Dr. Barber’s home becomes a residential group home for women with intellectual disabilities.