



Deacon adds  
**MINOR LEAGUE USHER**  
to résumé

Deacon Ray Sobina has a bird's-eye view of the Erie SeaWolves diamond at UPMC Park in downtown Erie, where he serves as an usher.

If you're a devoted baseball fan, you might remember that Vernon Law, a pitcher for the Pittsburgh Pirates, was known as "The Deacon."

Story by Liz Allen  
Photos by Mary Solberg

Or maybe you know that Yankee Stadium is sometimes referred to reverentially as "The Cathedral."

But did you know that there's a deacon at St. Peter Cathedral in Erie who plays a role in baseball?

Ray Sobina enjoyed a long career in Pennsylvania's criminal justice system and teaching at the college level before embracing another vocation as a permanent deacon in the Diocese of Erie.

Three years ago, he added a new job to his résumé: usher for the Erie SeaWolves, the city's Minor League baseball team.

Working as an usher ranks low in the hierarchy of Minor League Baseball, but Deacon Ray enjoys the service aspect of his job, from wiping down seats before the game to making sure fans leave with happy memories.

For him, finding a link between a deacon's and an usher's job isn't a stretch.

"A deacon is a servant," Deacon Ray says, adding that ushering "allows me to try my best to set a good Christian example to those I encounter at the ballpark."

Once, a couple from Ashtabula, Ohio, decided to leave a

game early because of rowdy adolescents seated near them.

"I asked if I could do something for them," Deacon Ray recalls.

He decided to give the couple some game and meal vouchers. They left happy and, fortunately, have returned to the ballpark many times.

It's easy to see that Deacon Ray loves the game of baseball. Typically, he can be found monitoring the busy Party Deck during home games at UPMC Park in downtown Erie. But when he takes a minute to look out over the perfectly manicured diamond, there's a twinkle in his eye.

He played organized baseball when he was young and rooted for the Pittsburgh Pirates. Now that he works for the SeaWolves, he has switched his loyalty to the Detroit Tigers, the Erie team's Major League Baseball parent organization.

This season, his wife, Deb Sobina, became an usher, too. The parents of two adult children, they always have approached life as a team, juggling work, family and community commitments.

"I thought, 'I'll try that this year,'" says Deb Sobina about her decision to become a SeaWolves usher.

Retired from her job as a construction manager, she now works part-time at a nursing home, volunteers at the Erie Zoo and is active in various ministries with her husband at St. Peter Cathedral.

**"USHERING ALLOWS ME TO TRY MY BEST TO SET A GOOD CHRISTIAN EXAMPLE TO THOSE I ENCOUNTER AT THE BALLPARK."**

Ushering for the SeaWolves is one more activity "we can do together," Deacon Ray says of his collaboration with his wife. They have worked side by side throughout their married life, including the five years he spent in religious formation before being ordained in 2015.

In his ministry with the diocese, Deacon Ray serves as one of Bishop Lawrence Persico's masters of ceremony, assisting the bishop at Mass at St. Peter Cathedral or at other parishes as needed. He coordinates St. Peter's Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and brings the Eucharist to the sick and shut-ins, among other duties. Additionally, he is an instructor of criminal justice and sociology at Mercyhurst University in Erie.

Deacon Ray's work in the state prison system took the Sobina family on many journeys since he landed his first job as a corrections counselor at the State Correctional Institution Mercer. He worked there for eight years, winning promotions and commuting to Youngstown State University to earn his master's degree in corrections administration and treatment.

Advancements in his career then required moves to state correctional institutions at Huntingdon, Camp Hill, back to Huntingdon, then to Somerset. In 2004, he went to SCI Forest, not far from where he grew up in Oil City.

In 2007, he was asked to reorganize SCI Albion, where he served as superintendent. Three years later, he retired from the state prison system and accepted the position at Mercyhurst.



Serving as a ballpark usher is fun for Deacon Ray Sobina. Here, he assists Erie fan Seth Nelson.

Over the years, deacons in Somerset and Marienville had urged Ray Sobina to think about becoming a deacon, but the timing and logistics were never right. Once he was settled in Erie, though, the idea cropped up again, this time during Mass at St. Peter's. His son, an eighth-grader at the time, asked why there were two priests on the altar at Mass.

Deacon Ray explained that one was a deacon.

"My son said, 'That's what you ought to do,'" he recalls. "That kind of sealed it. I've been told that the Holy Spirit often speaks to us through others."

And now that spirit is alive on any given summer night at a baseball diamond in Erie. †



Ray and Deb Sobina

**ANOTHER DEACON IN BASEBALL LORE**

Vernon Law, 89, was raised in a Mormon household in Meridian, Idaho, and attracted the attention of several baseball teams vying to sign him in 1948.

"While many of the suitors entered the Law home brazenly puffing cigars — a glaring breach of etiquette in a Mormon household — the respectful representative of the Pittsburgh Pirates showed up with a dozen roses, a box of chocolates and a special recruiter in reserve," wrote Richard Deitsch for "Vault," a *Sports Illustrated* feature.

The "special recruiter" was singer Bing Crosby, part-owner of the Pirates. "I remember the phone rang halfway through the meeting," Law told *Sports Illustrated*. "You can only imagine the impact getting a call from Bing Crosby had on my mother."

Law signed with the Bucs and spent his entire Major League career in Pittsburgh. His teammates called him "The Deacon" because he had become a Mormon deacon at age 12 and was known for living out his religious beliefs as a church elder and ballplayer.

—Liz Allen

Freelance writer Liz Allen is a longtime Bucs fan who also works as an usher for the Erie SeaWolves. You can reach her at [lizallenerie@gmail.com](mailto:lizallenerie@gmail.com).