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Tauna Gulley and Sister Bernadette "Bernie" Kenny, co-authors of "Better for Being With You: A Philosophy of Care," pose for this undated photo. (CNS/Courtesy of Tauna Gulley)

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When Sr. Bernadette "Bernie" Kenny, a religious in the Medical Missionaries of Mary, brought her nursing skills to Appalachian Virginia in 1978, she was startled by the long and steep distances between towns.

But the Boston native soon found that driving those routes to provide health care changed her perception: they seemed shorter because they were familiar.

That image also fits her career of caring for the people in the southwest corner of the state, very few of whom are Catholic: first they were far apart, and now they are closer.

Kenny has written a book about her experience titled *Better for Being With You: A Philosophy of Care*, released in December by Pacem in Terris Press.

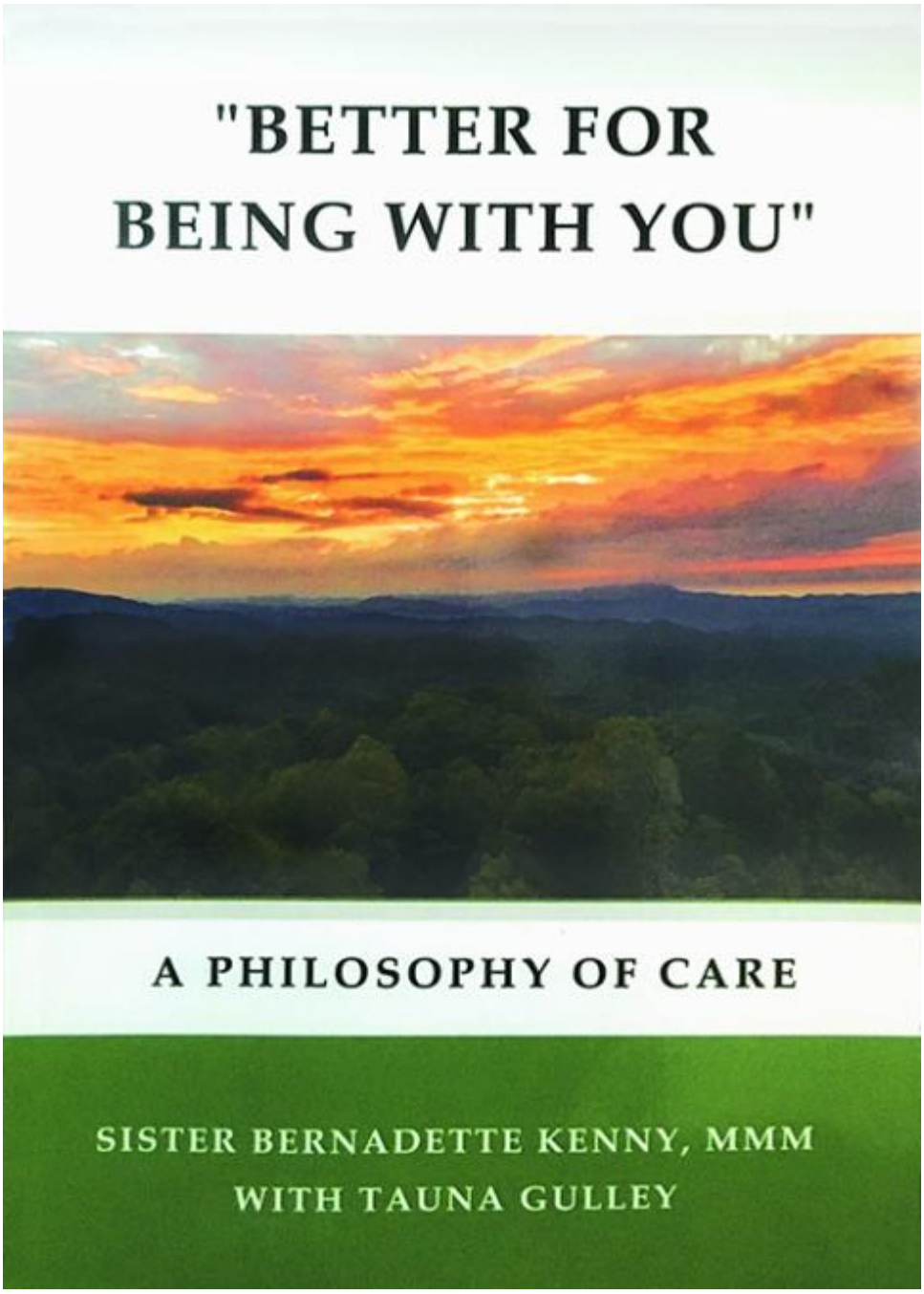
"Every day, somebody in need comes in my path, and it is a privilege to make a difference for them," said Kenny, 81, a nurse practitioner who served in Ireland and East Africa before arriving in Virginia. "I believe God calls me in that way, in the number of people I can help."

Better for Being With You, which is Kenny's reply when people ask how she is, is a blend of autobiography, medical handbook, cultural chronicle and journal of spiritual reflection.

It describes Kenny's longtime work with Remote Area Medical services as founder of the Health Wagon, a Wise County-based nonprofit organization with a mobile medical unit that, since 1980, has traveled mountain roads in all kinds of weather to provide health services to the medically underserved in southwest Virginia.

The Health Wagon, the first mobile health clinic in the nation, serves areas with poverty rates 70% to 140% higher than the rest of Virginia, an area where chronic unemployment, heart disease, diabetes, COPD, injuries and suicide are higher than elsewhere in the state. Struggles with substance abuse, addiction and depression

are significant. Infant mortality rates have been high but are improving, through education and access to care.



The book cover of "Better for Being With You: A Philosophy of Care" (CNS photo/Courtesy of Tauna Gulley)

The book also describes how Kenny's work has blessed her own life and how so many area people, Catholics and non-Catholics, work together to help others.

One of those colleagues is Tauna Gulley, who holds a doctorate in education and is a nurse practitioner, educator and Kenny's co-worker for more than 30 years — and a Southern Baptist minister's wife — and co-author of the book.

The two friends spoke by phone to The Catholic Virginian, newspaper of the Richmond Diocese. They were in the kitchen of Kenny's "log cabin on the side of a mountain, in a coal camp," as the religious sister described it, in Clinchco.

Even though Gulley lives in Clintwood, a winding 10 miles away, she calls herself a neighbor.

"We wrote most of the book sitting right here at Sister Kenny's kitchen table," she said with a laugh.

The two began writing in September 2017; the book has been well received by the community.

"It holds so many truths about our area, the challenges and how we can offer solutions," Gulley said. "People are excited to be part of it and tell their stories and share what the care has meant to them, to know that someone cares about them."

Another goal of writing the book is to have it read among the nursing, medical and social work communities, including students in those fields. The emphasis on respect and dignity runs throughout.

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The foreword was written by author and former Big Stone Gap resident Adriana Trigiani, who writes: "Sister Kenny has served the beautiful Appalachian people with grace. This special servant of God, this humble and funny nun, is a dazzling light on the mountain."

Kenny's work takes a holistic approach to care, noting how all health is connected — physical, mental, emotional, financial, spiritual — and how one problem can create other problems but how one success can create other successes. She offers reflections and emphasizes the importance of nutrition, rest, exercise and stress relief in daily life in addition to overall health.

Kenny's work has earned her many awards, including Catholic Extension's Lumen Christi ("Light of Christ") Award in 1998.

"That tells me to be the light of Christ, be the joy of Christ, be of service to people," she said.

"Very often I hear people call upon Jesus to give them strength, and that strengthens my own faith," she said. "But it doesn't matter which church people attend, or if they go at all. We all have the same God."

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With recent health challenges of her own, she has retired from the Health Wagon but still works part time to maintain her nurse practitioner's license. Several days a week she is at Appalachian Family Care, a low-cost health clinic at the Food City grocery store in nearby Vansant, run by a nurse, Frannie Minton, and her family, who also are Catholic.

Kenny and the clinic staff treat minor injuries and illnesses, prescribe and refill medications, provide exams, check blood pressure and blood sugar, administer flu shots and advice, refer people to other resources, and more. She sometimes even walks the grocery aisles with clients to help them choose affordable and healthful food.

A recent Medicaid expansion is helping many more people in the area, she said. A clinic in Clintwood named after Kenny is being built this year.

"We're working to break the cycle of fatalism," she said. "People see their neighbors improving, and they want to learn how their lives can improve, too."

After so many years of building friendships, growing trust, offering service and education, Kenny said the area feels like home now.

Through it all, she said, God has been with her.

"There are 'aha' moments when I know that's God, it's not me," she said. "I see supplies and medications show up in our cupboard after I was sure we didn't have what we needed. I see people getting better after I thought they were going to die. That's God at work."

[Adams writes for The Catholic Virginian, newspaper of the Diocese of Richmond.]