

SWEM Commission To Help Maintain Elderly At Home

By Teresa A. Parsons

Martha summarizes her lifetime of independence in a few simple words — "if I can do it, I'd rather." That's been exemplified by the way she approaches the task of caring for her 89-year-old sister, Mary.

Mary retired close to 40 years ago from work in a grocery store. Since then, she has been gradually debilitated by arthritis. Last Memorial Day, she suffered a mild stroke. Now she is confined to her room almost all the time, and although Martha can get her out of bed to a chair, she simply doesn't have the strength to lift her back into bed. Despite efforts to restrain her, Mary frequently tries to get out of bed herself and falls.

Martha doesn't scare easily after 40 years teaching in the city's high schools, but she admits that some of the implications she's facing are frightening.

Right now the sisters can count on home-health aides coming in twice a day, paid for by Medicare. But Martha said they will lose their eligibility after 100 days of care since she doesn't qualify for Medicaid.

"If you're over the limit, you're on your own," she said.

During the summer, she can also count on help from another sister who comes up from Florida, but winter is looming ahead without either option.

As if the physical demands on her were not enough, Martha must also combat the loneliness and isolation of being confined to the house most of the time. Even when the aides come in, Martha is uncomfortable leaving her sister unless it's someone she knows and trusts.

Both Mary and Martha shared the burden of dealing with the illness of their older sister, who suffered from Parkinson's Disease. Even up to her death last year, neither felt overwhelmed by her needs. But now Martha confronts Mary's day-to-day demands alone. She's quick to point out that her family helps a great deal, but they also have busy lives of their own to manage. She left unspoken how hard it is for her to ask.

In Monroe County, the number of women living alone increases drastically with age — in fact it is more than twice the corresponding proportion of men according to The Monroe County Elderly Data Base Study, jointly conducted by the United Way, Monroe County Office for the Aging and the Center for Governmental Research. The study shows that almost every other woman 75 or older in Monroe County lives alone, compared to one of every five men of that age. In the city, 56 percent of women are 75+. About 80 percent of all living elderly people living alone are women. The numbers are impressive, but applying them to individuals like Mary and Martha, they become dramatic.

The study also shows that Monroe County's high proportion of older elderly — the fastest growing segment of the population is expected to increase by 23 percent by 1990. Much of that age group is housed in group settings like nursing homes and other

health-related facilities. For Martha, that's going to be a tough choice, and right now, it's one she's not ready to make.

"This has been home for 40 years," she said of her roomy, four-bedroom house on the city's west side. At one time or another throughout the years, most of their other brothers and sisters, as well as their mother and grandmother lived there. To their nieces and nephews, Mary and Martha's home is the repository of holiday, birthday, picnic and reunion memories.

On a less emotional level, the location is perfect for someone who's always hated to drive. "It's convenient to catch the bus. I can get to church, the bank, or the grocery store easily," Martha pointed out.

While she's concerned about safety in her neighborhood, Martha's not about to move for that reason. "Like anyone who lives in the city, I'm careful not to carry money or a pocketbook when I go out, or to go out much at night," she said.

It really comes down to independence. Martha says family members have encouraged her to move to a smaller place, but she hates to think of losing her garden and porch, her neighbors and friends, and especially the spacious, solid house. "It's old like us," she said.

According to the "Final Report of the Southwest Human Services Planning Group" in January, 1984, out of 3,936 adults over 65 living in the city's southwest area, 1,407 or 36 percent were living alone in their own households. Of these, 1,051 were women living alone.

Martha's concerns reflect needs the data base identifies as common to this aging population. In particular home support, including respite and support groups for caregivers like Martha, friendly visiting, errand and escort services are critical to enabling people to stay in their own homes as long as possible.

Using the data base information, the Mercy Center on Aging has joined forces with the Southwest Ecumenical Ministries (SWEM) Commission on Aging, a group dedicated to satisfying the needs of aging members of their neighborhood. Members from five participating churches — St. Augustine's, St. Monica's and Ss. Peter and Paul's Roman Catholic churches, and Westminster Presbyterian and St. Stephen's Episcopal churches — have been working for more than a year to develop a proposal they presented at a forum on aging held last month.

Their proposal has three main facets — compiling and distributing a service directory for seniors; building upon existing church visitation programs by offering training to volunteers and recruiting help; and providing low-cost transportation to people over 60.

The forum drew a small crowd, but a wide range of experience was present, from a city recreation director to Councilwoman Joan Hensler, to representatives of the Catholic Family Center's STAR Program.

The proposal marked an important milestone for the Commission, and was well



Although they asked that their real names not be used, "Mary" and "Martha" volunteered to share their experience in the hope that it will help others.

received. But at the heart of seeing their ideas come to life is the question of people. Can they find enough support to make it happen? Right now, the Commission can count less than 10 members and five churches, all with limited financial resources.

Meanwhile Martha wonders what's ahead for herself and Mary. She wants to continue challenging herself at home, whether the task is gardening or shoveling snow, but with the passing of time, her need for help and

support is assuming an air of quiet desperation.

And there are many others for whom desperation has become part of daily life. In the course of visiting elderly people in their homes for research purposes, the commission found another woman in the southwest area who suffers from glaucoma. Despite having visiting nurses and other services during the day, she sleeps in a chair every night because she can't see to climb the stairs any more.

ATTENTION

Restaurants—Grocers—Deli's—Ice Cream Stands
Nursing Homes—Schools—Colleges
Darling Ice Cream Has A Deal For You!
Call Collect Today: (315) 471-2874
Ask for Bernie Puglisi, Marketing Manager.
We specialize in home made Italian Spumoni Wedges,
Italian Tortoni, 3 Gallon Bulk Ice Cream, Half Gallons,
Pints and Novelties (Sealtest 1/2 gallons also available).

St. Bernard's Institute

Rochester Center for Theological Studies

1100 S. Goodman St. Rochester, N.Y.

+ + +

servicing the teaching and learning Church since 1893

Registration for Fall courses Aug. 27 and Aug. 28
Classes begin Sept. 5. Call (716) 271-1320 ext. 290
See our course offerings in the Education Supplement next week.

TWO-GRAVE PLOTS
NOW JUST
\$520
Including permanent maintenance

- Pre-need payment plan (\$10.00 down payment, \$15.00 per month.)
- NO INTEREST OR FINANCE CHARGE.
- Hurry - a limited number of plots at this price.

WHITE HAVEN

MEMORIAL PARK

210 Marsh Road, Pittsford, NY

586-5250

Not-for-profit Non-sectarian

A BONUS GIFT JUST FOR VISITING
This coupon entitles the bearer to one copy of the Family Portfolio Record File, free of charge or obligation, when presented at the office of White Haven, 210 Marsh Rd., Pittsford, NY 14534, 9-5 Daily, Saturday 9-12 Noon.