

Social day care offers seniors an alternative to loneliness

By Teresa A. Parsons

For all of their working lives, Sister Mary Rose and Sister Mary Howard have cared for elderly people. During the past 26 years, they've worked as a team in the Sisters of Mercy motherhouse infirmary.

But last year, both sisters decided it was time for a change.

Realizing that families everywhere face some very difficult choices in caring for elderly parents or relatives, they looked for an opportunity to put their expertise to work in the community. Their search led them to St. Cecilia's in Elmira, where last summer they opened the Mercy Care Center, a social daycare center for senior citizens.

Studies show that in Chemung County and elsewhere, advances in medical care are enabling people to enjoy longer and healthier lives. But programs to maintain the quality of their lives have not kept pace. Several Elmira-area agencies address the primary medical and physical needs of older people — from housing to nutrition. Social programs, however, are viewed as secondary and expendable.

As a result, older people who are physically able to remain at home but need the stimulation and companionship of others may be forced to consider moving to nursing homes or institutions.

Social day care is for such relatively healthy elderly people. The Mercy Care Center provides a friendly atmosphere and activities for its guests while allowing their regular care-givers — whether children or spouses — to have the occasional respite they need.

Because several such programs had already been established in Rochester, the sisters,



Sister Mary Rose (left) and Sister Mary Howard aren't averse to working in the craft room of the Mercy Care Center themselves from time to time.

sponsored by their congregation, sought a facility in an area with a greater need.

The need and the right place came together for them at St. Cecilia's in Elmira, where half of the rectory was vacant and the parish was willing to host the center.

After a winter spent scraping walls, painting and gathering furniture from donations and thrift shops, the sisters opened the center this summer.

To date, their guests have varied from a woman who stayed for an afternoon while her husband had tests done at a nearby hospital to a 78-year-old woman who lives in a nursing home, but visits twice a week.

In the latter case, the woman began coming to the center while still living with her daughter. The daughter, who has a family and was also working full time and attending night school, finally decided she could no longer care for her mother adequately at home. So she placed her mother in a nursing home down the street from St. Cecilia's.

The elderly woman has continued to visit the Mercy Care Center out of pure enjoyment; she loves to paint and listen to music. Already she has finished gifts for her entire family and filled a spare room at the center with small, painted Christmas ornaments, candle holders and other wooden items, which Sister Mary Rose cuts with a table saw in the basement.

Besides arts and crafts, the sisters organize games and exercises, and provide cultural enrichment with movies, slides, music, poetry and television. A small chapel on the second floor provides guests with a chance for quiet prayer. Meals and snacks are also provided for the guests.

Judging by the statistics, the Mercy Care Center should be a raging success. But although they can handle as many as seven guests at once, depending on the level of care necessary for each, Sister Mary Howard and Sister Mary Rose have generally had only one or two guests per day.

"It's been slow taking off," Sister Mary Rose admitted. One reason, she believes, is because the idea is new to the area. "Word just hasn't gotten out yet," she said.

Another reason is that it's just as hard to leave a parent with strangers as to leave a child, Sister Mary Howard explained. She described one woman who cried at leaving her 95-year-old mother with them even though she was only going to be gone for an hour.

"Her mother made her feel guilty," Sister Mary Rose explained, noting that it's equally difficult for the elderly person to accept being left with strangers. Some of the center's guests are afraid the first time they visit that no one will return to get them. "They wonder if they're really going to a nursing home," she said.

The center's elderly guests also tend to be very family-oriented people who may have cared for their own parents at home. They can't understand why their children work — especially their daughters. And they resist letting go of their own independence.

Thanks to more than half a century of combined experience in geriatrics, Sister Mary Rose and Sister Mary Howard are experts at handling such sensitivities gently. "The people who come here are very loved," Sister Mary Howard said. "We like to say 'they come from a home to a home.'"

For the sisters, any difficulties encountered are outweighed by the joy they find in their ministry to older people. "It's a beautiful time of life," Sister Mary Rose said. "These people have a lot of spirit and a lot of wisdom to give. You wonder sometimes who's really doing the giving here."

During the hectic holiday season, the Mercy Care Center could be a life saver for Elmira-area residents who care for elderly persons. For information, call (607)734-3451.

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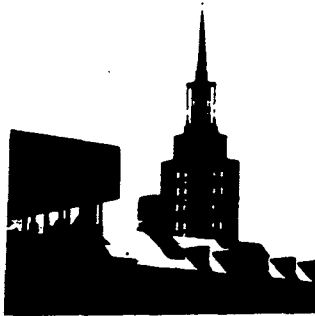
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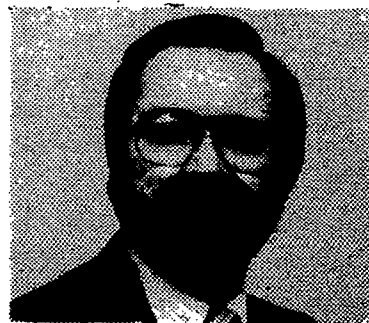
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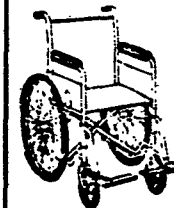
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