

House of Mercy: an island of warmth to the powerless

By Teresa A. Parsons

When people talk about the House of Mercy, the word "warm" keeps cropping up.

Neighbors say that coming to 105 Central Park gives them a warm feeling. Every time the door opens, shouts of laughter and conversation pour out into the street. Newcomers are welcomed with coffee and doughnuts and smiles.

When a neighbor needs help — whether with food, clothing or advice — no one at the House of Mercy demands to see their social security card or last month's food receipts. No appointments or documents are required.

Each time she visits the House of Mercy, Sister Kathleen Milliken said, she's been impressed by the same feeling of warmth.

"Even when they can't meet everyone's needs, there's a certain hospitality of presence," explained Sister Kathleen, a councilor of the Sisters of Mercy, who sponsor the center. "They're enabling the neighborhood people to see their own strength and to help each other."

Sister Grace Miller, who opened the drop-in center last fall, said she also gets a warm feeling as she watches volunteers take over and run the place without her.

That's one of the things that sets the House of Mercy apart from social service agencies: The people who do the work are not social workers or professionals — they're neighborhood residents, many of whom originally came for help themselves.

"A lot of the people who come here are people of faith," Sister Grace explained. "Some are church-goers and some are not, but they all know this place has something to do with religion."

As a rule, she believes there's too much preaching in the world and not enough spirituality. So on Monday mornings, Sister Grace and her volunteers meet for scripture study and training sessions. On Monday evenings, the House of Mercy hosts a Bible reflection meeting "for people who want to learn more about the Lord."

But the House of Mercy evangelizes most by just existing. As an island of warmth in lives that are seldom graceful or comfortable, the center is a witness to God's presence in the neighborhood.



Friends and volunteers gathered at the House of Mercy for a double birthday celebration. At the center of the crowd, Dolores, 40, and Hughie, 39, share a hug. Second from right is Sister Grace Miller, House of Mercy director.

"I always saw people hanging out in the streets when I would come through here," Sister Grace recalled. "It seemed that no one was doing anything to reach out to people in this area."

She presented the central administration of the Sisters of Mercy with a proposal for a drop-in center in March, 1985. The congregation approved her venture, but it wasn't till September that she located and rented the one-story house on Central Park. Since opening in October, the daily count of people using the center has totaled more than 600 each month and as many as 878.

She chose to call the drop-in center the House of Mercy in the spirit of Catherine

McAuley, the foundress of her congregation, who established houses of mercy in poor urban areas.

"She had a great love for the poor and a deep desire to be with them and serve them," Sister Grace wrote in her proposal. "As she chose the city, so too, this ministry is focused in the city."

"I didn't come in with any plan," she recalled. "I just thought I'd open and see what happened." But from the first day, people's physical needs were clear — food, clothing and furniture.

In the dead of winter, Sister Grace recalled, a mother began coming to the center for food. Although the ground was usually covered with snow, the woman wore pink bedroom slippers. Yet she never asked for a pair of shoes or boots. All she wanted was food for her five children.

Another young mother came to the center at Christmas, crying because she had no food or gifts to give her four-year-old. She told Sister Grace she had taken one of her daughter's old dresses and wrapped it as a new gift. But when the child opened it, she said "Mommy, I already had this dress."

"People come in who have something like \$6 of welfare left to live on for a month after they pay the rent," Sister Grace said. So she and the volunteers scour the city, looking for donations. To date, they've succeeded in arranging daily baked goods pick-ups from area grocery stores, but the supply is never great enough to meet the demand.

Meanwhile, the staff serves as counselors and advocates for people who feel helpless in the face of "the system," from the courts to social services.

"They try to intimidate people and sometimes they succeed," Sister Grace said of agency personnel. "I can't tell you how many people have come to me privately and said 'I want to change my life' ... But they get discouraged and give up on their own."

For those without income, Sister Grace gets welfare. If someone is threatened with eviction or has to appear in court, she negotiates with the judge or landlord. When someone needs treatment for drug or alcohol dependency, she finds a program. Most of all, she and the rest of the staff provide support.

"I don't send them to agencies, I take them," she said. "And I don't take no for an answer."

Nor does Mary Neal, a volunteer. After years of dealing with the bureaucracy of social services herself, she has become expert at cutting through red tape. "We keep the forms right here for when people come in," she said. "And when you go, you go right for the top and you don't give up," she added, echoing Sister Grace.

Inevitably, some people take advantage of such unqualified openness and others take it for granted. "But our purpose is to help people, even if they ask in a way you don't like and make you mad," said Hughie Caldwell, another volunteer.

Helping people in the long term is what Father Ed Dillon aims to do. Since he returned to Rochester in 1980, Father Dillon had been searching for a small neighborhood center like the one he worked out of for 14 years in Philadelphia. "That's how you can really find out what the people's needs are,"

he explained. "You have to collaborate with them on their own turf and on their terms."

Since December, he has found his niche at the House of Mercy, where he volunteers several days a week. When he's not running around picking up people or scavenging supplies, he's organizing a self-study reading and math program in a tiny back room that's mostly shelves.

He hopes to help people become more employable by encouraging them to study for and pass the high school equivalency exam. They would then be eligible to enroll in job training programs already run by the city.

Father Dillon credits Sister Grace's track record in urban ministry with her success at the House of Mercy. When she was assigned to St. Bridget's Parish in 1978 as part of a pastoral team, the church had only 14 members. Within two years, she and Father John Forni had boosted attendance to more than 100 and had established a host of outreach programs to the black community.

But after Father Forni left in 1980, she and two other staff members at the parish were fired by the new pastor, Father Dozia Wilson. Father Wilson resigned shortly afterward, but the incident left Sister Grace "floundering" for the next five years.

She traveled to Kentucky and Texas and held a string of short-term jobs. "But I kept coming back to Rochester," she said. "I thought 'We have all these problems in Rochester so why go someplace else.'"

It was during a two-year stint as a tutor for the City School District that she submitted the proposal for the House of Mercy to her congregation.

"This place helped bring me back," she said. "My real joy in this is seeing that when people meet up with obstacles they couldn't have overcome on their own, I can help them."

Although Sister Grace termed her reception in the neighborhood as positive, the House of Mercy is not without its detractors. Members of a nearby neighborhood association have charged that the House of Mercy is duplicating services already offered and that it is bringing the wrong kind of people into the area.

"The people who come in here are from the neighborhood," she protested, adding that one resident told her the House of Mercy "brings life to a dead neighborhood."

Whatever outside opposition the House of Mercy faces, Sister Grace and Father Dillon are confident about what's going on inside.

"You have to keep reminding yourself that to be successful you need to keep close to the people with no power at all," Father Dillon explained. "People feel at home here. They say they come to see some smiling faces. What they see is each other at their best."

THE WOMB

ONCE THE SAFEST PLACE IN THE WORLD FOR A BABY NOW THE MOST DEADLY

One of every three children conceived in the United States is killed in the womb through abortion. That is nearly one million five hundred thousand unborn children killed every year. The womb has literally become a death chamber for babies.

There are alternatives to abortion. There have to be.

Those sending a donation in any amount will receive the 32 page color booklet, "When You Were Formed In Secret/Abortion in America" by Gary Bergel with remarks by C. Everet Koop M.D.

Please make checks payable to: **Rochester Area RTL Education Fund.** All contributions are tax deductible.

Call or write us for more information or a speaker for your group.

Rochester Area Right to Life Committee, Inc. 7
Education Fund
 3910 Dewey Avenue
 Rochester, N.Y. 14616
 (716) 621-4690

Enclosed is my tax-deductible contribution to the Rochester Area RTL Education Fund. Please send me the 32 page color booklet, "When You Were Formed In Secret/Abortion in America."

Name _____
 Address _____
 City _____
 State/Zip _____

Dream Awareness Weekend

"Self Awareness through Dream Exploration" is the title of a weekend workshop at the Cenacle Center for Spiritual Renewal, Friday through Sunday, March 7-9. Mary T. Dombeck, R.N., M.S., will lead the group in a cognitive, experiential and guided exploration of dreams with an emphasis on spiritual growth through dreams. For information or reservations, call (716) 271-8755.