

g touch to Skilled Nursing Facility in sickness and in health

By Teresa A. Parsons

To Mary Lou O'Brien, the 125 residents of the Skilled Nursing Facility in Geneseo aren't "cases." They are her friends — people with stories she knows by heart and loves to tell.

"Now that lady over there used to be a seamstress. She did some work for me now and then," O'Brien will point out in the course of her rounds.

"See that one there? That's a woman whose son died in World War II. She just never recovered, and after a few years they brought her here.

"That man there is the father of a girl I went to school with.

"That lady's husband used to work for the railroad and so did my dad."

Livingston County is a small world to O'Brien, who was born in Groveland and has lived all her 61 years in the Geneseo area.

But even those residents who used to be strangers have become familiar after O'Brien's four years of weekly visits to the nursing home. Many residents, meanwhile, have come to rely on her presence. "For some of them, I think it's the high point of their week," O'Brien said without pride.

It's their dependence that keeps her coming back week after week, despite how the trips exhaust her. Mary Lou suffers from myasthenia gravis, a disease in which faulty nerve conduction causes a loss of muscle strength and control. With the help of medication and a careful rationing of her strength, O'Brien can make her Sunday outings without too much trouble. But on a bad day, she can be nearly as incapacitated as those she comes to visit.

She moves slowly from room to room on her rounds, supported on one side by her son Michael and on the other by a walker. As their greetings echo through the halls,

wheelchairs up ahead turn to reveal faces alight with anticipation. Should they pass by a room even temporarily, a cry of protest erupts from inside.

To some residents, O'Brien and son bring the Eucharist, pausing to pray the "Our Father" and to trace the sign of the cross on each person's forehead. For everyone they have a cheerful word as well as a parish bulletin Mary Lou produces from a bag slung over her arm.

One tiny, wasted woman — whom Mary Lou described as 106 years old — lay motionless in her bed with her eyes closed as they entered her room. "Jessie," Mary Lou said gently, "would you like to receive Communion?" The woman's eyes fluttered open and for a moment she seemed not to know where she was. Then her raspy voice filled the room.

"Go to hell!" she yelled.

"OK, we'll just pray with you then," Mary Lou responded and unperturbed, she and Michael launched into an "Our Father."

"She has good days and bad days," Mary Lou explained. "Last week she was sharp as a tack.

"You know, they may be out in left field sometimes, but when you pray with them, they know what's going on," she added. "And you can't just walk in and out ... They desperately need to be touched."

The sound of another woman's voice chanting the rosary filtered down the hall. Pausing as the pair approached her door, the woman's face crinkled into a smile and she stretched out her hands in greeting. "Have you brought me Jesus?" she asked tremulously.

One of Mary Lou's favorite stops came later at Lou Meyers' room. Meyers, a 95-year-old poet dressed in a bright orange, red and yellow caftan with strings of

Shortly after she began visiting the home, her son Michael began to accompany her each week because of the difficulty she was having just getting in and out of the car. Two years later, another son, 30-year-old John, joined them. Both Michael and John are members of a band called the "Forecasters," and before long they began bringing their guitars along each week.

The O'Briens then started to gather those residents who were mobile for a brief Communion service and a few hymns. These days as many as 30 residents in wheelchairs collect in the auditorium most Sundays. The harmony of the music seems to cast a spell over them — many sit motionless while others beam and nod at one another. During an obvious favorite, "How Great Thou Art," several began to cry. "Oh, it's so beautiful," one woman exclaimed.

As Mary Lou became a regular visitor to the facility, the staff began to call on her to fulfill more and more of the duties a chaplain would normally undertake: Whether a resident was seriously ill or a family needed a comforting presence, Mary Lou would get a call.

Being where she's needed is nothing new for her — in fact, she's made it a habit. For more than 10 years, she has run a lending library for shut-ins from her garage. In past years, she and her husband, John, also opened their home to Latin American students studying at SUNY Geneseo. Since her husband is a ham radio operator, the students began dropping in to contact their families back home. "We've had the from Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Colombia," she recalled. "Then we got a Spanish-speaking priest down from Buffalo to say Mass for them once a week."

Back in 1980, she responded to an advertisement seeking volunteers for Lay

'Priests can't do it all, you know. They're too busy running these big parishes. It's time for lay people to step forward and give a little bit of themselves.'

Mary Lou O'Brien

matching beads around her neck, prefaced their conversation by stuffing each of her visitors' pockets with candy. Then she produced her books of poetry, which she's written and saved since childhood.

As she and Mary Lou exchanged notes on their health during the past week, one of Meyers' verses revealed a clue to their particular friendship.

"Think not each smiling face along life's way has felt no pain within his heart," Meyers wrote. "For God mixed the bitter with the sweet, and all in life must take of each a part." In other words, while most of the other residents are content to bask in Mary Lou's cheerful concern, Meyers realizes that in many ways, she and Mary Lou share the same struggle against sickness and weakness.

Mary Lou first came to the Skilled Nursing Facility with her mother in 1981 to visit an old family friend. Learning that Mass is only celebrated there one Thursday a month, Mary Lou began to bring Holy Communion each week. As word of her visits spread, more and more people asked her to bring the Eucharist.

Advocates, an organization which advises and supports people seeking legal rights they have been denied. From her easy chair, specially equipped with a lift to help her stand and sit, Mary Lou now intervenes with branches of county social services and social security on behalf of poor and disabled people seeking anything from welfare to disability payments to reimbursement for medical equipment — like her chair.

Last December, the O'Brien household found space to take in the food pantry from St. Mary's Parish in Geneseo, and Mary Lou began volunteering as a bookkeeper for Chances and Changes, a Livingston County shelter for battered women.

She brings to these efforts a long history of legal experience and advocacy, having served as secretary to a family court judge in Livingston County during the early 1940s. Beginning in 1945, she worked for the New York State Division of Veterans' Affairs for more than 20 years, helping area veterans collect their entitlements.

"I got used to listening and counseling people," she said.

Continued on Page 16



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Rosemary Miller, who helps Mary Lou from time to time, escorts Erma Hills back to her room after services.



and comforting words from Mary Lou O'Brien.



Agnes Crist, who was being visited by relatives Judy and Louis Nicolosi, pauses a moment to receive the Eucharist from Mary Lou O'Brien.