

Melita House: A refuge for women with nowhere to turn

By Jeanne Gehret

Melita means "place of refuge." But to pregnant women with no place to go, Melita means home.

Since 1979, the former convent at 124 Evergreen St. has been home to more than 150 pregnant women, most of them under the age of 22.

They come to Melita for a variety of reasons. Some women come because their families or boyfriends reject them. Some come in order to keep their babies confidential. But regardless of socio-economic class, all come because their pregnancies have rendered them penniless, homeless and alone.

For the four young women who agreed to be interviewed for this story, the alternatives to Melita were abortion, living on the street, and hasty marriages.

Eighteen-year-old Anna recalls her boyfriend's first reaction when she told him she was pregnant. "He said, 'You don't have to tell anyone. Just get an abortion.'"

Anna, however, was determined not to let anyone pressure her into that decision. "I waited until I was five months along before I told my parents, so it would be too late for them to force me to get an abortion. I'd had a really bad relationship with my father for years, so I wasn't surprised when he blew up and booted me out of the house. I went to Melita out of necessity."

Some pregnant teens survive by moving from place to place and eating whenever they can. Beverly was 17 years old and four months pregnant when an argument with her mother made it necessary for the girl to leave. "I went to Melita because I didn't want to be forced to run to the first man who could support me in order to get away from home."

Mary was 21 years old and four months pregnant when she arrived at Melita. "I became pregnant while I was living with my boyfriend. When he found out, he took every cent I had and stuck me with the bill for the rent. I was being kicked out of my apartment when I heard about Melita. It was the only place I could go," she said.

Debra, 18, came to Melita from a small town in Pennsylvania to keep her pregnancy confidential. She planned to have the baby in Rochester and relinquish it for adoption before returning to her home town. Unlike many of the other girls, she was on fairly good terms with her parents, but the long distance allowed for only infrequent contacts.

Before moving in at Melita House, each pregnant woman meets with a staff member to review house guidelines. "Every guest agrees to get medical care and to work with a counselor to plan for her future," said Sister Jane Schur, one of the three Sisters of Mercy who staff the house. "We also ask her to either continue her education, work at a



Sister Jane Schur enjoys a break with Brenda Miller and Cindy Pratt.

Hurriyet Necdet Aydogan

paying job, or do volunteer work during her stay here.

"When all the other guests are doing something constructive with their lives, it's easier for an individual to get her life in order, too," Sister Jane said.

"We try to provide a home that's safe and quiet with a stable daily routine. This gives our guests the psychic energy they need to plan for themselves and their babies," she added.

Most guests begin by addressing physical and financial needs, and then move on to deeper questions.

Melita provides free lodging and meals until the end of pregnancy. The staff teaches good nutrition, which is critical for adolescent mothers. Each girl, regardless of her personal means, also receives prenatal care and takes natural childbirth classes. Soon after they reach Melita, many apply for welfare so they can afford a place to live after they deliver.

Last year Melita received a grant to give residents financial incentives for volunteer work. "We can't pay them minimum wage, but this program is for girls who can't get any other work. It helps them budget their spending money in preparation for being on their own," said Sister Jane.

Overall, the incentive program has been a success. "Many are eager to work so they can save. One girl earned half a security deposit for an apartment before she left us," she continued. "Others, however, are so accustomed to having everything handed to them on welfare that they don't make use of this help."

Every policy at Melita pushes the guests toward self-sufficiency. The women learn to manage a household by taking turns cooking dinner and cleaning Melita's 24 rooms. Staff members refer guests to agencies and programs, but each woman must take the actual step herself.

"Most of our girls come here because they can't live on their own yet and have already exhausted all the other possibilities among their families and friends. They know they'll

be on their own when they leave us. We want to help them make the best start they can," said Sister Jane.

When a guest has provided for her immediate physical needs, she is ready to tackle the harder choices. Should she keep her baby or give it up for adoption? What kind of a future does she want for herself and her baby?

To help residents address these questions, Melita offers an on-site, 10-week series of presentations on parenting, adoption, dating, contraception, and legal rights. Because the girls are required to attend these sessions, they often feign apathy at the beginning. Soon, however, they can't resist asking a question or volunteering an opinion. They know their futures depend on the decisions they make in a few crucial months.

"I had so much to think about while I was at Melita," said Beverly. "One of the things that helped me was being with other girls in my situation. It was like having new sisters of

Continued on Page 19

United Way contributions assist Catholic Family Center's STAR

Five years ago Ceil Gardner was alone and depressed. But then she was introduced to the Catholic Family Center's STAR program, supported by the United Way. STAR stands for "Sharing, Touching, Acting, and Reaching," and that's just what Ceil needed.

"It was a turning point for me. That's when Jane came along," she said.

Jane O'Brien Colucci is Ceil's STAR volunteer. Her first assignment was to help Ceil by taking her grocery shopping each week. But their relationship has grown far beyond weekly shopping.

Over the past five years, Jane and Ceil have developed a very special and lasting friendship, and are now the longest-running pair in the STAR program.

Ceil, 84, a Rochester resident, is featured in the 1986 United Way/Red Cross Campaign promotion because she represents thousands of elderly people that United Way has identified as needing increased and continued services.

The STAR program provides direct support services to the frail elderly so that they can live in their own homes for as long as possible. More than 260 STAR volunteers currently visit some 500 elderly people throughout the Rochester area.

"I'm so proud of us," said Jane. "I've learned a lot from Ceil about growing older with dependence and dignity. I love her dearly."

Before Jane came along, Ceil had lost interest in cooking for herself. With no car or access to a bus line, she had few

opportunities to get out of her apartment. She was alone.

But Ceil says Jane changed all that. With her encouragement, Ceil began attending the Monroe Senior Nutrition Center, co-sponsored by Family Service of Rochester (another United Way agency) and the Monroe County Office of the Aging. Transportation to the site is provided by the center.

Jane's volunteer work with Ceil has extended far beyond her initial assignment to help Ceil with grocery shopping. The twosome has enjoyed a variety of activities through the years, including going to the movies, taking long rides, and going out to lunch.

"My work with the STAR program and with Ceil has been one of the most rewarding experiences in my life," said Jane. "Ceil is always willing to do anything. She's a friend and a mother to me. She's given me moral support through stressful times," she said.

Jane O'Brien Colucci is a certified health consultant for marketing and consumer affairs at Blue Cross/Blue Shield. This summer, Jane married Robert G. Colucci Sr., manager of telemarketing sales programs at Xerox.

"Before I married Bob, I told him that I would never give up Ceil," Jane said. On their wedding day, the newlyweds stopped to visit Ceil.

Recently Ceil had cataract surgery and now needs extra help in reading labels while grocery shopping. But Jane and Bob are there to help. And Jane calls Ceil at least once a week, just to chat.



**GIVE THE
PERFECT GIFT
FOR HIS OR HER
FIRST
COMMUNION. A
SOLID GOLD
CROSS OR
MEDAL FROM
THE SOURCE**

We carry the largest selection of 14K and 18K gold crosses and medals in Rochester.

SAVE 60%
Now at any of our 3 locations

the SOURCE

Pittsford Pittsford Mall 586-9145	East Rochester East Rochester 381-5719	560 Ridge Rd. W. Dixie Shops 621-6280
---	--	---

Mon. Fri. 10 to 9 Saturday 10 to 5.

HEADACHE THERAPY

Frederick B. Remington, M.D.

Biofeedback with Autogenic training and stress reduction has become the treatment of choice

Certified by the Biofeedback Certification Institute of America

Call for appointment 425-7415
326 Garnsey Road • Pittsford
(Off Rte. 96, 1 mile from 490 Bushnell's Basin Exit).

**Celebrity Service...
at the snap of a finger.**

Don't miss Rochester's most entertaining luncheon event.

70 Celebrity Waiters, Dixieland Jazz, Fine Food and Drink, Prize Giveaways, an Auction, Lots of Laughs and...a few unexpected surprises.

**the 4th annual
CELEBRITY WAITERS
LUNCHEON**



Wednesday, April 23, 1986 (National Secretaries Day)
Genesee Plaza Holiday Inn—120 E. Main Street

PROCEEDS TO BENEFIT

**AMERICAN LUNG ASSOCIATION
Finger Lakes Region, Inc.**

TICKETS available at: AMERICAN LUNG ASSOCIATION 1595 ELMWOOD AVE. 142-4260 & the Genesee Plaza Holiday Inn 120 E. Main Street