

Parish overcomes formidable odds to strike at roots of poverty

By Teresa A. Parsons

A spiritual renewal at Ss. Peter and Paul Parish in Rochester is once again producing physical results.

At last, after nearly five years of dreams, hard work and occasional setbacks, Sister Janet Mary Coseo, SSJ, will have a parish day care center to direct this fall.

Beginning in October, the center, located at 720 West Main St., will serve 20 to 25 children between the ages of three and four. Applicants from the surrounding neighborhood will be accepted on a first-come, first-served basis.

Although she has yet to receive final city approval of the site, Sister Janet believes it will be forthcoming soon. However, one final obstacle remains to be surmounted. The center needs start-up funds to hire staff members.

"At this point, one of our biggest needs is financial backing to start hiring people," Sister Janet explained. "Salary money is hard to find. But the ministry has always managed to survive on the generosity of the people."

That's despite the fact that five years ago, Ss. Peter and Paul Parish was a dying community, according to parish council president Lucille Isaac. "We were stagnating ... going absolutely nowhere. All of a sudden we saw what could be," she said.

Parishioners point to the arrival in 1980 of a new pastor, Father William Heffron, SS.CC., as the beginning of a renewal of parish life.

"Father Heffron was the starting force," explained Jack Cargill, a member of the Bread of Life Community, a fellowship group that has served at the parish's soup kitchen. "Ever since then the parish staff has followed suit. They are more interested in the spiritual life than rules and regulations."

"When you saw their lifestyle, it spurred on everyone else," said Isaac, who has been an "almost lifelong" parishioner.

Since then, the whole idea of church and its meaning to parishioners has changed, according to Mike Yarger, the parish's former youth minister. "We were having real problems, like the trouble with the roof and

the boiler, but the parish council decided the money had to go to meet the needs of the neighborhood," he said.

"It's not easy when you have a beautiful church that is crumbling before your eyes. But you see the people and they're crumbling too, and you wonder where we're going to get the money to do everything that needs to be done," he added.

Father Heffron not only believed it could be done — he demonstrated it. In 1982, he established St. Peter's Kitchen, which has served noon meals to steadily growing numbers of west-side residents. Moreover, he acted on his dream of founding a day care center by initiating an evangelization survey of the surrounding area.

"He visited all the homes in the neighborhood. With his own eyes he was able to identify what needs there were. What he saw was children without any program — whose main caretakers were the TV, or in rare cases a grandmother," said Sister Janet.

Immediately, Father Heffron started investigating the possibility of opening a day care center. By 1982, when Sister Janet arrived on the scene, Father Heffron had the necessary information, from fire regulations to licensing requirements, ready and waiting.

Previously, Sister Janet had taught first grade at St. Monica's School. But out of conviction that children's performance in school is often determined by the way their preschool years are spent, Sister Janet sought a chance to work with younger children. By April, 1982, she was virtually certain she'd be working at Corpus Christi Child Care Center the following year.

From another sister who lived at St. Monica's, Sister Janet learned of Father Heffron's plans for a day care center at Ss. Peter and Paul and asked for an interview.

"From the first moment, our visions just clicked into gear," she recalled. "It (the center) is not like St. Peter's Kitchen, which meets immediate needs. The day care center would be a long-range type of effort to somehow try and erase the need for places like the kitchen and the clothes closet — to help children grow up to be self-sufficient adults," she said. "We believe education is



Sister Janet Mary Coseo, SSJ, director of Ss. Peter and Paul's new day care center, is pictured with some of the volunteers that helped with transforming the old rectory into the new Parish Ministry Center.

the key to change, and three or four is probably the best time to make a change in a child's life."

During Sister Janet's first year as director, it appeared that the day care center would be located in the school building, which had closed in 1972. She spent countless hours there, preparing rooms for the program.

Meanwhile, a task force studying the parish buildings determined that there was too much property for too little parish population. The convent was sold and the school put up for sale or lease.

Later that year, the city school district rented the building for a tutorial program.

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St. Peter's Soup Kitchen climbs out of the frying pan, but falls into the fire

After the boiler that heats St. Peter's Kitchen was repaired last winter, the meal program's director, Brother Walter de Cremieux, SS.CC., thought his troubles were over.



Brother Walter de Cremieux, SS.CC., poses beside the offending boiler.

Instead, they were only beginning. Heat was assured last fall, thanks to generous support for the soup kitchen, which is located in the basement of Ss. Peter and Paul Parish's former school building at 697 Brown Street. Donations from supporters helped to meet nearly \$9,000 in repair costs. But throughout the winter, the boiler did its job too well, keeping not only the kitchen but the entire building comfortably warm.

As a result, the parish paid nearly \$7,000 a month in utility bills last winter. Although Brother Walter does not pay for utilities directly, he fears that rent he pays to the parish will this year reflect the increased costs — rising anywhere from 50 to 100 percent.

"I barely get by now," he said. While the whole building must be kept

above freezing, the heat in the unused upper stories could be kept to a minimum if there was a mechanism for controlling it.

"Now I've been told we need to install a separate heating system downstairs," Brother Walter said. "Winter's going to be here before you know it. I am just beside myself as to how to raise the money."

Although he is still seeking estimates on how to make the basement energy-efficient,

one contractor has told him the necessary changes could total as much as \$12,000. "If we don't get it fixed, I don't know how I'll manage to meet the rent, frankly," Brother Walter said.

Meanwhile, the number of people served at St. Peter's Kitchen has continued to rise since the facility was established in 1982. Since January, the program has served 31,000 noon-time meals, compared to 27,000 meals at the same time last year. Also located in the basement are a clothes closet and storage area.

"There are a lot more young people coming in — especially high school- and college-aged guys," Brother Walter observed. "Young people are really hurting. You see them all over, out on the street-

corners shooting dice.

"I suppose we should just take pride in the fact that at least there's a place for them to come and have a decent meal," he said.

Currently, Brother Walter is seeking both estimates on what needs to be done and donations to cover the cost of doing it. He's not sure where to turn, and time is growing short.

"Contractors can't just come out tomorrow. There's some lead time involved," he explained. "But I believe God will provide."

If you can help, either with expertise or donations, contact Brother Walter at (716)235-6511. Checks may be made to St. Peter's Kitchen and sent to 720 West Main Street, Rochester, N.Y. 14611.

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