

# Teacher turns foster parent to care for special-needs kids

By Teresa A. Parsons

She has always loved children. But as a teacher, Sister Jeanne Morreall, SSJ, has seldom become intimately acquainted with them before they reached the age of three or after 3 p.m.

She has never contended with their mid-night feedings, dirty diapers, doctor's visits, or the hefty prices charged for deceptively tiny items of clothes.

All that is about to change. This fall, Sister Jeanne, 38, will be signing the permission slips — on the parents' line. A certified foster parent, she has turned homemaker, and so far she's enjoying every minute.

Throughout the summer, Sister Jeanne has divided her time between teaching at Blessed Sacrament's summer school and transforming the western half of St. Stanislaus Parish Center in Rochester into a foster home she calls "Morningstar."

Later this fall, when the paint dries and all the carpet is laid, she hopes to welcome the home's first residents. So far, all she knows for certain is that they will be children somewhere between infancy and eight years old. They may require foster care because they have been abused or because they have physical or emotional disabilities too severe for their parents to handle.

In addition to serving the children as a full-time but temporary "mother," Sister Jeanne will also deal with their real parents on occasion. "Some parents will have visiting privileges," she said. "Since our goal is generally to get the child back with its parents, I plan to offer them some kind of outreach — just talk to them and do what I can."

Children will be referred to Morningstar by the Monroe County Department of Social Services, which will pay for room and board as well as clothing and medical care. Money for rent and other expenses will come from a special ministry fund of the Sisters of St. Joseph and from private donations.

Since Sister Jeanne has only one part-time assistant, she plans to start with two children. Eventually, she could accept as many as six under county regulations.

Monroe County faces a drastic shortage of foster homes. More than 100 have closed within the past year, leaving about 400 homes to serve almost 750 children, according to Mary Lou Miller, a homefinding supervisor.

"It's not just Monroe County. Everybody's having trouble recruiting for foster homes at the present time," Miller said.

Some parents have quit in favor of paying jobs, she explained. Others have retired because of age or because the children are too difficult. In recent years, social service agencies have adopted new programs, saving foster care as a last resort.

"Our whole emphasis has been on preventing it as much as possible," Miller said. "That has resulted in fewer children in foster care than a few years ago, but those children who still need foster care are the ones with the more serious problems." Most difficult to place are adolescents and young sibling groups, she said.

Morningstar will be the second Monroe County-area foster home operated by religious women. A few blocks east on Barberry Terrace, the Sisters of Mercy staff the Andrew Center, which opened in 1974. "The sisters there have been very supportive of me," Sister Jeanne said.

Besides doing her part to meet the need for foster homes, Sister Jeanne believes that Morningstar will meet her own need for greater involvement with children.

Last year, she taught at Trinity Montessori School, located at the SSJ motherhouse in Rochester. Prior to that job, she established a kindergarten at St. Lawrence School in Greece and taught there for two years. From 1973-83, she taught primary grades at Our Lady Queen of Peace, taking on administrative duties during her last several years there.

But something was always missing. "I felt frustrated as a teacher not dealing with the whole child," she explained. "The classroom is a very formal, structured situation ... I feel like I'll be more in touch with the whole child



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal  
Sisters Jeanne Morreall and Jacqueline Stephens take a breather while painting the newly renovated foster home, which is scheduled to open early this fall.

doing this as opposed to being in the classroom."

She has also realized that she enjoys the work required to turn a dusty, unoccupied building into a home. "I love sewing curtains and bedspreads — all of that kind of thing," she said.

In caring for two "special-needs" children, Sister Jeanne is taking on more than the average parent with little parenting experience. Nevertheless, she is confident that her years of teaching experience — combined with foster parent training and assistance from the Andrew Center and other

area resource persons — will see her through.

"That's how parents learn — by doing," she said.

"Foster parents and adoptive parents have told me stories of what wonderful experiences they've had despite the difficulties," she added. "I would like to make a big difference in the lives of these children."

Sister Jeanne still needs playpens, cribs, highchairs, clothing, toys, food (she has a big freezer), and money. For more information, call her at (716)467-1767.

## DPC meeting

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other members of a bishops' committee writing a pastoral letter on women expect to produce a first draft by June or July, 1987.

The DPC's agenda also included presentations on the permanent diaconate, vocations, and the diocesan Development Office.

### Deacon formation

Deacon Albro C. Wilson, director of the permanent diaconate, described the four-year formation process required for ordination as a deacon.

Candidates, who must be at least 30 years old, take classes once a week at St. Bernard's Institute during fall and spring semesters and participate in weekend workshops once a month. During the summer months, they gain practical experience from 10-week field

assignments. This year, a summer internship program was introduced for candidates between their third and fourth years. Fifty-five permanent deacons have been ordained in the Diocese of Rochester since the program was introduced in 1978.

Last spring, in its report on the diocesan budget, the Ministerial Review Committee (MRC) suggested that the DPC request information on the status and function of the diocesan Development Office. The MRC is a DPC subcommittee that reviews the goals, objectives and budgets of diocesan divisions.

In response, David Scholl, director of the diocesan Development Office, outlined for the council his efforts to increase awareness among Catholics of the need to write wills and of opportunities for deferred giving.

Scholl said he also works with people who offer financial and estate-planning services to inform them of current considerations in framing bequests to the Church. He illustrated the need for better information among planners by citing the example of a recent \$400,000 bequest to diocesan semi-

naries. The will was written in 1985, but the last diocesan seminary closed in 1981.

### Emphasis on discernment

The awareness that all Christians, not only priests and religious, are called to vocations is gradually changing the way diocesan vocations programs operate, according to Father Thomas J. Valenti, diocesan director of both the Office of Vocations and the Office of Seminarians.

One illustration of the greater emphasis being given to discernment is the transition of Becket Hall, once a college seminary, to a residential discernment program.

"It is important that we as a diocesan body represent the future of the Church in the call to ministry," Father Valenti told DPC members.

Currently, he reported, the diocese has 16 seminarians studying for priesthood and more than 200 diocesan men in some stage of active discernment.

Asked how his office responds to women who experience the call to priesthood, Father Valenti said he tries to assist them with support and understanding to find ways they can share in the life of the Church.

"As a diocese we also keep asking ourselves 'What are we doing to keep raising the issue that many women are experiencing the call to priesthood?'" he added.

### Attendance problems

Last year, the DPC was hindered by low attendance at its meetings, scheduled semi-monthly from September to June. With only 25 of nearly 40 appointed members present at this year's initial meeting, the council's executive committee remains concerned about attendance.

Members were asked to suggest alternative formats for the monthly meetings last spring. Chairman Ronald Jodoin said the executive committee explored the options throughout the summer. "We decided to leave the format as it is, but to make it more flexible depending on the content of the meeting," he said. "We won't pack the agenda just for the sake of filling the time."

At the DPC's last meeting in May members planned a September joint gathering of the DPC, the Diocesan Sisters' Council and Priests' Council. That gathering has been rescheduled for November 22, when the DPC will meet in Geneva.

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