

Hospital parish seeks new leaders in wake of activist legacy

By Teresa A. Parsons

Patients at Monroe Community Hospital are wondering whether they'll have to choose between visiting relatives and buying gifts this coming holiday season.

In past years, a transportation fund established with foundation grants and donations from the hospital auxiliary has subsidized more than half of the \$42 cost to patients for an ambulance ride to and from a local destination. But this year, the fund is running short of money.

Meanwhile, patients only receive \$40 per month in spending money, according to Elmer DeBuck, president of the patients' Neighborhood Association. "What do you do for the rest of the month?" he asked. "It's got you coming and going."

Problems with the transportation fund are one of the symptoms of a larger struggle patients — and in particular the hospital parish's council — have encountered since the death of a singular patient leader and organizer, Gertrude Webb.

Monroe Community Hospital is an easy place to despair. On every floor are sick and disabled people, young and old, many of whom are never going to get better. The lucky ones hold their own.

But Webb didn't view her arrival at the hospital 26 years ago as the end of her active life. Instead, it became a training ground for her life as an activist.

"She lived for a good cause and she fought like the dickens to get it through," said Father Winfried Kellner, the hospital's Catholic chaplain. "There isn't another person in the hospital who went as far as she did. She was a dynamo."

The transportation fund was only one of the projects Webb initiated. Her 1975 victory in a class-action lawsuit in state Supreme Court allowed residents of long-term-care facilities throughout the state to use the facilities as their voting addresses rather than voting by absentee ballot from their former homes.

Webb also helped to found the Neighborhood Association and a parish council. For several decades, she served the hospital chaplains as full-time secretary.

Voter registration, fund drives, access for the handicapped — none was beyond her grasp.

Only since her death last July have fellow parishioners and patients begun to realize how much they relied on her.

"There were things I didn't even know she was into," said DeBuck, who worked closely with her from 1969 until her death. "She had more irons in the fire. I don't know how she did it."

"We're trying to figure out how to get it together without her," added Frances DeJarlar, another active parishioner. "She did everything, and she never gave up."

Of the more than 600 patients at Monroe Community Hospital, nearly 250 are estimated to be Catholic. Between 75 and 90 patients regularly attend weekend liturgies, and about 15 parishioners are active on the parish council.

Currently, council members are updating their parish constitution with the help of Deacon Claude Lester, diocesan director of parish services. But for months after Webb's death, parishioners couldn't even locate a copy of the constitution.

Recruiting parish leaders at the hospital is difficult, DeJarlar explained, because "We have people at all levels. Some have diseases that take their minds away," she said. Others are mentally alert, but have difficulty speaking.

Still others, according to DeBuck, are simply selfish. "I would like to see more people turn to their faith and try to keep the parish going," he said. "But there's a lot of selfishness in the world, and it's the same here as anywhere else."

Even those who are willing and able may lack the confidence to take on new responsibilities.

Since she learned that she had multiple sclerosis 16 years ago, DeJarlar, 58, has fought fiercely to maintain her independence.

"First I went to a cane, then to a walker, until one day I was walking across the parking lot and I couldn't move my legs," she said.

So she learned to drive a car using just her hands. But three years later, she lost that ability, too.

DeJarlar still recalls the trauma of selling her home to move to the hospital.

"It's hard to let go when you come here. You try to find some way you've gained from it," she said.

As her independence has slipped away bit by bit, so has her confidence. As much as she'd

like to ensure the parish council's survival, DeJarlar doesn't believe she could do what Webb did.

"Since I came here, my self-esteem has gone down a lot," she said. "I just don't feel very good about myself."

Patients deal with the kind of emotions DeJarlar describes in various ways. Some react with frustration to their diminishing capabilities. Others withdraw from life in the hospital's sheltered environment or become angry with relatives by whom they may feel abandoned.

As pastor, Father Kellner has tried to support his able parishioners' sagging self-esteem and help them realize their identity and potential as a community.

"You try to see that they remain individuals, that they continue to see themselves as important," he said. "You help people deal with the disposition of their lives where it really counts, dealing with their fear of dying or, for those who are conscious and aware, their anger at not getting better."

The parish also offers a point of contact with the outside world. Volunteers from surrounding churches serve at weekend Masses and often stay to visit with patients.

Although outsiders might view them as candidates for charity, hospital parishioners have long supported charitable causes beyond their immediate world. Between them, the 15-20 active parish council members contribute \$2 of their income each month to parish dues. In the past, they have helped purchase Christmas food baskets as well as coffee for guests at Blessed Sacrament Church's overnight shelter.

"We may be what you call handicapped, but there are always people worse off than you are," DeBuck explained.

Parishioners like DeBuck and Gertrude Webb, who seem to disregard their disabilities and constantly seek new challenges, are exceptional.

DeBuck, 62, worked as a gardener and florist before crippling arthritis brought him to the hospital in 1969. "I grew up on a farm," he said. "I always loved to see things grow and I loved the soil. It shows you the power of the Lord to see something big grow from seeds as fine as face powder."

Along with Webb, he helped to found the hospital Neighborhood Association in the 1970s. Over the years, the two alternated as officers of the association as well as the parish council.

Continued on Page 12



No matter how debilitated they become, patients still need to be touched, both physically and spiritually. Here Father Kellner and volunteer Helen Murphy of Avon offer Holy Communion to Arthur McGuinness.



Parish council members (from left) Eleanor Koesterer, Elmer DeBuck, Father Winfried Kellner, and Margaret Tierney are revising the hospital parish's constitution.

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