

Family Life Demonstration Project cut short by court case

By Teresa A. Parsons

The Family Life Demonstration Project came along at just the right time for Marie MacGregor.

When she heard through her parish that volunteers were needed for the project, MacGregor recalls, her daughter was 12. Experience with her son, who was just coming out of his adolescent years, had convinced her that almost any help she could find would be worth pursuing.

MacGregor was among the first Rochester-area residents to sign up for the project, designed to reduce the rate of sexual activity and pregnancy among teenagers by offering workshops and discussion sessions for teenagers and their parents. During the two years that the MacGregors attended project sessions, Marie MacGregor's daughter encountered "some real difficulties." Some of her friends became involved with drugs; another friend got pregnant.

"It helped us through a real difficult time," MacGregor said. "It's amazing how quickly kids can get into trouble. I can't tell you how important it is for both of you to become knowledgeable about what's out there."

"The most important thing for me was that it was family-oriented," she added. "There are very few places that you can go with your teenager and do something together ... We had some fun and we could learn from one another. It was unique."

MacGregor and her daughter were looking forward to the project's next session on the topic of fighting fair, when they heard the news last month, along with 200 other families.

The Family Life Demonstration Project had been canceled.

On May 8, activity at three project sites sponsored by the Southern Tier Office of Social Ministry screeched to a halt with the news that federal funding for the project had been frozen.

The freeze was prompted by an April 15 decision in the District of Columbia. In a case known as Kendrick et al. vs. Bowen et al., or "the American Civil Liberties Union Case," a U.S. District Court judge declared the Adolescent Family Life Act unconstitutional because it provided federal funds for use by religiously affiliated organizations.

The Adolescent Family Life Act had been passed in 1984 to support and strengthen families, encourage teens to abstain from sexual activity, and promote adoption as an alternative to abortion. The Family Life Demonstration Project was an offshoot of the federal legislation.

In 1985, the Southern Tier Office of Social Ministry was chosen to administer one of the federal tri-state grants. Project coordinators established Family Life Demonstration Projects at four sites — two urban locations in Rochester and Hartford, Conn., and two rural locations in Tioga County and Bradford County, Pa.

Last month's court decision cut off funding for 23 Family Life Project sites sponsored by religiously affiliated agencies throughout the country. Included were the sites administered by the Southern Tier Office of Social Ministry.

Administrators of the Southern Tier office were left in a bind, recalled Anthony Barbaro, executive director. Lawyers for the

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Southern Tier Office of Social Ministry

Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Catholic Conference could not assure them that the verdict would be overturned, but were confident that, at the very least, they could obtain a stay of injunction to temporarily restore funding.

But in the meantime, the Southern Tier office was responsible for all program expenses, without any guarantee of reimbursement. "We had been administering a grant of \$400,000 a year. This year, 60 percent of that amount was from the Department of Health and Human Services funds," Barbaro said. "Without the federal funds, we were really strapped."

For almost a month, staff members debated their options. "Without money, without the guarantee of a future, we were trying to decide what the best and most responsible thing would be for the families as well as our employees," Barbaro said.

At a meeting in late May, the office's board of directors finally decided to terminate the project "in an orderly fashion, as soon as possible."

"The larger agencies that could take a chance on whether funding would be reinstated fared OK, but the smaller agencies couldn't continue," Barbaro said. "It's a big

can of worms. We were just trying to survive here and keep our agency out of hot water."

Just after Memorial Day, Barbaro learned that lawyers had won a stay of injunction in the case, and that existing grants would continue to be paid through September. Although he is not sure what legal measures may be planned beyond September, Barbaro decided to let the board's decision stand.

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The Family Life Demonstration Project offered parents and adolescent children between the ages of 11 and 18 a series of all-day workshops and shorter "enrichment" meetings spread over the course of two years. Each session focused around a specific topic, such as dating, teenage sexuality, self-esteem, family decision-making or communication.

"What's disappointing is that a program such as ours did a lot of outreach and had workshops for families in places like Canton, Pa., population 300, and we kept coming back," said Debra Girtman, project coordinator at the Southern Tier Office. "It's disappointing for the entire staff. We had our hearts in it and it was going so well."

With a total of 46 families involved at the project site in Rochester, coordinator Maryellen Sinicropi was close to reaching her goal of recruiting 50 families in two years.

She is still puzzled by the court's decision that the program violated church/state separation. "We served parents on a non-denominational basis," Sinicropi said. "We didn't even meet in Catholic churches all the time."

"It's very disappointing, because it was working," she added. "We had people who were involved and interested. We saw growth in families."

As of May, more than 200 families were participating in programs at the four sites. Mary Barry, who attended nearly a year's worth of sessions in Rochester with her son, said she was appalled by the news of the project's cancellation.

"I felt a personal sense of loss," she said. "You could really see some of the teenagers"

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