

Sisters of St. Joseph forge foster family in former convent

By Teresa A. Parsons

Walking into the house known as Morningstar, one hardly recognizes it as half of St. Stanislaus Convent. For one thing, a six-year-old named John is twirling a Hula Hoop on the sun porch amid scattered toys that have obviously enjoyed recent use.

Nor would you suspect that Morningstar is a foster home. John and the other children who wander in and out of the red-curtained kitchen couldn't act more like siblings — unless perhaps they started bickering.

Those elements of attitude and environment attest to the success two Sisters of St. Joseph, Jeanne Morreall and Jacqueline Stephens, have had in reaching the primary goal of their brand-new foster care ministry — to take a group of unrelated children from troubled situations and somehow make them feel at home in an unfamiliar house.

"This is so different from raising your own children," Sister Morreall said. "If they were your own, you might do things differently, but you know they'll be here for a limited time . . . You don't know much about their backgrounds, and you're trying to get to know the whole person all at once. It has been rewarding to see the growth and change in each one of them. I was hoping there'd be some of that."

When Sisters Morreall and Stephens opened Morningstar last fall, they had every intention

of expanding gradually to the home's capacity of six children. But the children's needs dictated otherwise.

In less than a year, six youngsters have already passed through Morningstar. Currently, the four who are living there — John and Amy, both 4; Jessica, 8; and Charlie, 12 — are preparing for the arrival of a new three-year-old companion, David. Caring for David is likely to be the most demanding challenge the foster family has yet faced, since he will require regular dialysis treatments at Strong Memorial Hospital.

Caring for one another is what Sister Morreall credits for the familial bonds the children have forged. "They have really meshed together very well," she said. "Charlie (who has cerebral palsy) has called forth the best in all the other children. They are 'teaching' him to speak and correcting his table manners. He gets them thinking of someone other than themselves."

Like other foster parents, Sister Morreall is learning to balance each child's immediate

need for a home-like environment against the reality that most of her foster children will someday return to their own families. "Most will be here 18 months," she said. "This is their family in lots of ways for awhile . . . (but) they're still part of other families, and you want them to keep those connections."

No matter how pleasant the foster home may be, Sister Morreall has found that children naturally cling to their family ties. One child told her that he wanted to be adopted, but only if his father was adopted along with him. "No matter how ugly their (home) situations, they are wanting to go back," she said.

Only about 10 percent of all foster children are ever released for adoption. Some are in foster care because their parents died, or because they abandoned or abused the children. Others require custodial care while their parents undergo treatment for alcohol or drug dependency. Still other parents simply cannot cope with their children because of financial or emotional difficulties.

Especially difficult to place, either on a tem-

porary or a long-term basis, are siblings like Jessica and Amy, and disabled children like Charlie. For that reason, the sisters at Morningstar are trying to decide whether they can handle a sixth youngster who happens to be John's brother.

The foster home has not lacked for willing volunteers. Members of the Sisters of St. Joseph have been eager to participate in what is a new ministry for their congregation. Other people from across Monroe County have offered donations of furniture, clothing, toys, money and recreational services.

One gap that has yet to be filled is the home's need for a van. Like most families, the people who call Morningstar home prefer activities they can enjoy together. But the foster family's expanding size may make planned trips to Wanita Lake, the movies and the Toronto Zoo impractical. As they accept more disabled youngsters, the sisters' need for another vehicle is likely to become acute. Anyone who might be able to help is asked to call Sister Morreall or Sister Stephens at (716) 467-1767.

'This is their family in lots of ways for awhile ... (but) they're still part of other families, and you want them to keep those connections.'

Sister Jeanne-Morreall



John and Charlie have become like brothers in the Morningstar program.



John peeks out around a puzzle clock he has just completed.

Michael N. Aydogan



While looking through a storybook, John asks Sister Morreall what the words on a certain page mean.

Northtown Auto
 1700 Manitou Road
 Rochester, NY
 716-352-0007

Manitou Road
 Just North
 Ridge Road West

Select From Our
 Low Mileage Cars
 Hard To Find Quality

Ray Sanna Sam Ciulla

GERMAN OCTOBER-FEST SALE
 HAPPENING AT LONG RIDGE MALL AUG. 21-29 AND ALL 3 STORE LOCATIONS

GOLD SALE
 14K Italian Gold-60% to 70% off

The SOURCE • EAST ROCHESTER MALL
 • 3300 MONROE AVE. (Lauer's Bldg.)
 • 560 RIDGE RD. WEST

Store Hours: Mon.-Fri. 10-9, Sat. 10-5