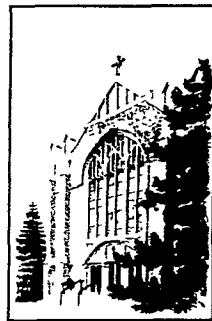
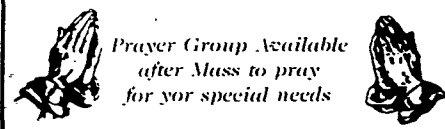


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**Features**

# Tides of change challenge Charles House

By Teresa A. Parsons

Among residents of northwest Rochester, Charles Settlement House is known as a good place to go with a problem.

When you arrive, you aren't greeted by a brick wall of busy receptionists. You don't need an appointment to talk to someone who can help straighten out a welfare mix-up, mediate a family dispute, or negotiate with a troublesome landlord.

But you don't need a problem to drop in at the old-fashioned brown building on the corner of Jay and Saxton streets. Some people stop to pay their respects to Prince Charles, the resident rabbit. Others come to find help with their homework, make a Christmas gift for a relative or meet some friends for a game of basketball.

In short, a visit to the settlement house doesn't have to be a painful necessity, like taking medicine when you're sick or applying for welfare when you're broke. "Kids come here, not because this is what their doctor says they need or what their mother says they need — to have some fun," explained Martha Yatteau, a Charles House staff member. "They can come here and not be judged or labeled for having something not right in their lives, whether they're doing poorly in school or having a discipline problem."

The same is true for adults, for whom Charles House offers social as well as counseling programs for seniors, women and parents.

In fact, Charles House is among the few remaining refuges for a vanishing brand of social work that placed social interaction on a par with clinical diagnosis and referral — where staff members, more often known as group workers, would be just as likely to teach a child to swim or tie his shoes as to refer him for treatment of a learning disability or a behavior problem.

"Charles House is a place where compassion and concern go along with your referrals," Yatteau said. "The services and the structure are still here to provide what they need, but they are not primary."

Settlement houses were established near the turn of the century by reformers who "settled" among the poor to bring them services in an intimate, friendly environment. Today, such neighborhood institutions stand in contrast to a welfare system that has become increasingly clinical and impersonal.

Not even Charles House, the smallest of Rochester's six settlement houses, can resist the tide toward change. When Yatteau came to Charles House as a secretary 19 years ago, she knew virtually everyone in the neighborhood by name. Nowadays, she's a program consultant with a college degree, and there are lots of faces she doesn't recognize.

The waves of European immigrants for whom Charles House was established in 1917 have given way to a new influx of black and Hispanic neighbors who face a new array of problems — among them the breakdown of families, drug and alcohol abuse, transiency and teenage pregnancy. The increasing frequency and urgency of such problems challenge the personalism of the settlement house.

In response to changing needs, Charles House plans within the next three years to expand its Jay Street site with a 6,000-square-foot addition. The settlement house also intends to establish a new 10,000-12,000-foot facility to serve residents of the Edgerton, Lyell-Otis, Emerson-Mt. Read and Maplewood neighborhoods to the north. The addition of those areas will increase Charles House's overall service population from 11,000 to 53,000, according to Gail Blanchard, executive director.

Several studies conducted since 1980 have



Bonnie Trafelet/Courier-Journal  
Charles Settlement House has remained a refuge for a vanishing brand of social work in which concern goes beyond the clinical. Staff members above are wrapping gifts for Charles House neighbors.

identified a major increase in social-service needs in the city's northwest region. A 1986 United Way study by the Center for Governmental Research designated the region as being among the three least-served areas of Rochester. The study pointed to gaps in services to seniors, unemployed young adults, Hispanic people, single parent families and youth.

Between 1970 and 1980, the United Way study noted, the number of northwest-area residents living in poverty increased by 41 percent, as compared to a 14-percent average increase throughout the City of Rochester. Of the area's estimated 2,300 single parents, the study showed that only 45 were directly served by programs. Only 200 of the 2,000 elderly people believed to be living alone in the northwest participated in existing programs.

Charles House's new facility will represent more than a simple expansion of services. Instead of depending primarily on in-house staff as the Jay Street site does, Blanchard explained, administrators at the new location will contract with other social-service agencies to provide a range of legal, medical and counseling services.

"We can't get (new) funding for what we do here," Blanchard said of staff salaries for group workers at Charles House.

She also believes the new model may prove more efficient for clients. "A person can come here with four or five needs. Right now, we might be able to handle two or three and would have to refer them elsewhere for the rest," she explained. "We'd like to address as many of their problems here as we can."

Blanchard acknowledged that the planned expansion makes her nervous. "There's the fear that we might lose the personalism and the personal touch with staff," she said.

Administrators of the new facility will also face the challenge of contracting with agencies whose policies are consistent with Charles House's Catholic-based principles.

"I think we would be very careful in who we invite in. We would not invite any abortion-related services, for instance," Blanchard explained. "Since we're the lead agency, we are going to have some power in determining that."

Board of Directors President Frederick Heier agreed that with careful planning,

Charles House can expand without compromising its principles or losing its comfortable atmosphere. He pointed out, for instance, that board members are seeking an existing building to renovate for the new facility rather than constructing a new one.

"We want to keep (the expansion) simple — nothing fancy," he explained. "People in the inner city are easily cowed by big shiny buildings. Charles House is homey. It's got a kitchen and small rooms. It's been there a long time, and the people are low-key."

Charles House opened November 30, 1917, to serve the German and Italian immigrants who arrived to work in northwest Rochester's clothing industry. Funded by donations raised by a Catholic women's group, and incorporated under the auspices of diocesan Catholic Charities in 1919, Charles House began as an almost exclusively Catholic institution. In fact, nearby St. Francis of Assisi Parish was founded on the building's second floor.

In recent years, however, Catholics have accounted for only about 2 percent of the population served at Charles House, according to Heier. Nevertheless, the settlement house remains incorporated under diocesan auspices. While attempting to address new and expanding needs in its neighborhoods, Charles House last month renewed its commitment to such Christian values as respect for life, the dignity and sacramental nature of marriage and family life, and protection of the poorest, weakest and most marginal of people.

During a ceremony November 30, Charles House administrators affirmed their affiliation with the Genesee Valley Office for a period of 10 years. Diocesan officials, in turn, formally signed over the property at 445 Jay Street to Charles House.

"This was initiated because we wanted to reaffirm our belief in and support of the Christian presence of Charles Settlement House and its outreach to all segments of society in the northwest quadrant of the city," said Jann Armantrout, a member of the Catholic Charities subcommittee of the Genesee Valley Office of Social Ministry's Board of Directors.

The Genesee Valley office offers Charles House the advantages of networking with such other affiliates as the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) and Catholic Family Center, as well as such financial benefits as reduced insurance rates and assistance in obtaining grants, Blanchard pointed out.

On the other hand, the settlement house must maintain a careful distinction between its Christian-based principles and a religious orientation that could deny it public funding.

"That may have blocked funding under some circumstances, but it's never been given as the reason for our being turned down for a grant," Blanchard said.

To finance its planned expansion, Charles House is undertaking a major fund-raising campaign in conjunction with the city's other five settlement houses. Although a goal has yet to be set for the campaign, Charles House alone is likely to seek several million dollars.

"Rochester is a fantastic city for raising money for good causes," Heier observed. "But very little has been spent on inner-city people . . . If they don't prosper and learn to solve their own problems, we're all going to feel that."

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