

Features

Catholic Family Center honors capable, caring advocate

By Marsha Jones

Distinction, respect, admiration.

Those were just a few of the words floating through the Rochester Plaza Hotel on Friday, June 3, as friends, family and co-workers gathered to honor Catherine E. Wobus for 40 years of service to the Catholic Family Center.

Several hundred people listened to proclamations by Monroe County Executive Thomas Frey, Rochester Mayor Thomas Ryan, and New York Congresswoman Louise Slaughter highlighting Wobus' pioneering efforts, commitment and professionalism.

Wobus expressed appreciation for the sentiments, but admittedly hates the thought of retiring as Catholic Family Center's casework director, "I really hate that word *retirement*," she explained. "I just want to do what I want to do when I want to do it."

Although Wobus retired June 1, 1988, friends and co-workers don't believe her pace will slacken. "Catherine isn't the type of person to slow down and sit back. She'll be active. If there is a task to be done, she'll do it," explained Gail Blanchard, executive director of Charles Settlement House, one of the social-service agencies that, along with Catholic Family Center, shares affiliation with the Genesee Valley Office of Social Ministry.

Blanchard and Wobus first met in 1970, when both served on a networking organization sponsored by the Diocese of Rochester. "She is a very giving person," Blanchard said of Wobus. "She's committed to her work, and anything she's involved with she gives 100 percent dedication."

James M. Maloney, who recently retired as Catholic Family Center's executive director, believes Wobus' retirement will have an enormous impact on the agency, which was established in 1912 to address the emotional, physical, spiritual and economic needs of community residents.

"She is a social worker par excellence," he said. "Professionally, people look up to her for expertise. She's innovative, hardworking, energetic, intelligent."

During more than 40 years of service, Wobus redesigned Catholic Family Center's foster-care program, expanded its adoption guidelines to find homes for hard-to-place children, and guided the agency through its accreditation process, Maloney pointed out.

She also initiated some of the center's most innovative programs for the elderly, including senior nutrition centers at St. Michael's and Holy Cross churches; the Elderly Community Outreach Program, which provides seniors with advocacy, crisis intervention, assessment

and referrals; and STAR, which recruits and trains volunteers to provide the elderly with non-medical home support and transportation services. In 1983, she was chosen Social Worker of the Year by her peers.

"She wasn't just a caseworker," observed Doris Gallagher, Catholic Family Center's executive secretary. "She wrote funding proposals ... and just played a key role in the development and direction of the Catholic Family Center."

Wobus credits her success to a working philosophy that emphasizes compassion and understanding. "You have to be able to help people deal with their suffering. You have to help them turn their lives around and get them back in the right direction," she said.

The Rochester native joined Catholic Family Center as a caseworker in 1943, after graduating from Manhattanville College of the Sacred Heart in Purchase, N.Y., and earning a master's degree in social work from Smith College in Northampton, Mass. Her primary duties centered on placing foster children in suitable homes — a program with which she has remained involved throughout her career.

"I work with both parents and children to make sure that their placement within a particular situation is the best for everyone concerned," Wobus explained. "When you work with people, you have to have a compassionate attitude. Not only is it important for an agency to manage their resources, but also to properly service its clients."

Through her influence, training and certification components were added for both parents and children in the foster-care program, which now places children and youths from birth to age 21 in family settings that help strengthen personal identity and self-esteem. "In this type of work, you have to heal the wounds which foster parents and children experience," she said.

Wobus regards developing programs that meet the everchanging needs of the community as one of the most challenging and rewarding aspects of her career — and the activity she will miss most. "Keeping abreast of the times and creating programs that will really impact the community; it's time-consuming but it must be done," she said.

Betty Montgomery, a close friend and fellow social worker who preceded Wobus into retirement, believes that both Catholic Family Center and the community will miss Wobus' caring attitude. "Catherine is a well-loved person," Montgomery said. "She's tried to make the center a caring place, and that has been reflected throughout the community."



Catherine Wobus retired this month after 40 years with Catholic Family Center. Bonnie Trafelet/Courier-Journal

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