

Features

Tioga County Rural Ministry marks 10th year of service

By Lee Strong

A Newark Valley child with muscular dystrophy is now able to get into his house more easily thanks to a wheelchair ramp built by volunteers this spring.

A handicapped man unable to get in or out of a bathtub is enjoying a newly-installed shower.

An abused woman and her two small children moved into an apartment a few months ago with no utensils, appliances or furniture except for one bed, a portable baby's crib and just one saucepan. They now have a table, pans for cooking, dressers for their clothes, and a crib for the baby.

These people are among the hundreds of the rural poor and elderly assisted in some way by Tioga County Rural Ministry during the past year — and among the thousands aided since the program began in the summer of 1978.

On June 29, Tioga County Rural Ministry celebrated its 10th anniversary by moving from St. Patrick's Convent and rectory basement, to a new, larger office at 60 North Avenue in Owego. The move was made to consolidate services under one roof, and because office space in the convent had grown too confining for the program, according to Joan Basel, one of rural ministry's staff members.

"The front room of the convent was stretched beyond its limits to hold our three desks and the computer," Basel explained. Having the food pantry located in the same building as the office will make it easier for staff preparing food for emergencies and for Thanksgiving and Christmas baskets, she added.

The new office includes not only the main office area and a room for the pantry, but also a small room where clients can be interviewed privately. Privacy is important to maintain the self-esteem of people coming to the rural ministry for assistance, according to Sister Noreen Graney, RSM, who has been with the ministry for three years.

"For some of the people we serve, it is extremely difficult to ask for help," Sister Graney noted. "For many, it's the first time they've had to ask for help. They wait until the last minute until they have no choice. Some people have been in (bad) situations for much of their lives."

Prior to 1978, many of these people would have had a more difficult time finding assistance. In 1977, Father Neil Miller, then a regional staff member of the Office of Human Development, and Sister Judith Heberle, then superior general of the Sisters of Mercy, learned from the results of the 1970 census that more than 60 percent of Tioga County's population was unchurched. The two also recognized that the five Catholic parishes in the county didn't have staffs large enough to reach out from the towns into the rural areas.

Mercy Sisters Carol Wolfurst and Kathleen

'I had no idea there was that extent of poverty and degradation. I was aware only on a surface plane. Until you get into this kind of work, you can't realize the extent of the needs.'

Joan Basel

Flaherty volunteered to create a program to reach the rural poor. At first, the two worked with the Well Child Clinic, which operated a van bringing medical care to children in isolated sections of the county. By working with the clinic, the sisters learned where the poor were and what services they needed.

In August, 1978, the sisters established Tioga County Rural Ministry, which was — and continues to be — jointly supported by the county's parishes and the Sisters of Mercy.

Whereas the sisters at first had to seek out people who needed their help, people now seek out the program or are referred by social-service agencies, explained Sister Nancy O'Brien, the ministry's current director. The services rural ministry offers remain essentially the same as those offered 10 years ago. They include providing emergency food; transportation; no-interest loans and donations to pay for rent, auto repairs, security deposits and medical bills; locating appliances and furniture; and coordinating volunteers engaged in delivering items or repairing homes.

Staff members responding to one of a client's needs very often discover other, related needs. "The needs of the poor are compounded," Basel said. "When they have a problem, it's caused by another problem and leads to another one."

Tioga County Rural Ministry tries to break this chain by offering referrals as well as services.

"We try not to duplicate services," Sister Graney explained. "We try to get them help through established agencies which can help them with specific needs — and we try to encourage them to help themselves."

"For instance, if we sense they need some help with budgeting, we send them to the Tioga County Cooperative Extension, which offers classes in budgeting," she said. "If they are living in a place that's in poor condition or is too expensive, we encourage them to find a place that's more reasonable."

Housing — particularly for large families — is one issue that is not being adequately addressed at this time, Sister O'Brien noted. "One of the biggest problems we face with the poor is that there is not enough decent housing for the poor, and what is available is too expensive," she said. "The programs that do exist are building one- or two-bedroom, single-occupancy or elderly units, but no large family units."

Because no other agency is meeting this particular housing need, rural ministry is attempting to fill the gap. Sister O'Brien spent last fall in a housing internship with the Steuben-Livingston Agricultural Project, Inc., gaining expertise in grant writing, management skills for operating rental properties, and knowledge of construction, rehabilitation and long-term financing of housing units.

Sister O'Brien is now preparing a grant application to the New York State Housing Trust Fund Corporation to finance construction of six to eight single houses, each with three to four bedrooms. She can't submit the grant, however, until rural ministry meets two conditions: raising \$40,000 and acquiring the option to buy a site on which to build the houses. Thus far, the program has raised \$7,000 for the project, but has found no site.

As they continue to search for land and money, Basel and Sisters Graney and O'Brien continue to serve the rural poor and to make the broader community aware of the needs of the poor and elderly. They publish a newsletter which is mailed to approximately 850 people throughout the state, and regularly speak to church and community groups. "When we first began talking to other people in the coun-

ty, they were unaware of conditions in parts of the county," Sister O'Brien commented. "You can't always tell from looking up into the hills."

Basel acknowledged that she was unaware of living conditions among the rural poor until she began working for rural ministry last October. "I had no idea there was that extent of poverty and degradation," she said. "I was aware only on a surface plane. Until you get into this kind of work, you can't realize the extent of the needs."

The program relies heavily on the work of volunteers to assist the three-member staff in providing services. Volunteers do much of the transportation, delivery and repair work. Each spring, campus-ministry personnel and students from SUNY Geneseo spend their spring breaks assisting with the work visiting the elderly and making housing repairs.

"Without the help we get, we couldn't do what we do," Sister O'Brien commented.

"This has been a wonderful experience for me to see that there are needs, but that they are met through the goodness of people," Basel added. "Almost on a moment's notice they are willing to help. We even get people who get helped coming back to help."

Although helping people to get back on their feet or to find the assistance they need is satisfying, rural ministry staff members don't have time to sit back and simply enjoy what they have done. The problems facing the rural poor are too many and too great.

"It seems to be a constant," Sister Graney concluded. "You respond to the needs, and there's somebody new the next day."

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