

# Foster parents learn to give is to receive



By Lee Strong

The morning was a typical one at Andrew's Center.

The four older children were already at school. In the kitchen, Sister Rita Habecker, SSND, was busy feeding a two-year-old girl in a wheel chair. The girl, who suffers from brain-damage, spat up food regularly. Mealtime for her can take as long as an hour — a ritual that must be repeated several times a day.

Sister Kathleen Kolmer, RSM, sat nearby feeding a bottle of formula to a two-month old boy, who had lived with the sisters since he was just 17 days old. Any day now, a court may order the boy placed with a relative, and he will be removed from the only home and parents he has ever known.

Sisters Habecker and Kolmer have learned to live with these realities.

The two sisters are licensed foster parents. They co-direct Andrew's Center, a foster care facility located in the former convent of St. Andrew's Parish. Sister Kolmer, who has been at the center for 11 years, and Sister Habecker, who has been there six years, say that despite the work involved in caring for up to six youngsters at a time — including those with handicaps — they have been blessed by their contact with the children.

"You discover that there's more to life than having a lot of material things," Sister Habecker said. "You see the simplicity of a child that's totally counter-cultural to the society we live in. It brings out a simplicity that as

an adult you lose."

"They all have their own giftedness, especially considering where they came from," Sister Kolmer said. "They can bring out the positive from other people. They can make adults feel at ease. They bring out love from people no matter what the tension."

Both sisters say that the children have been a gift to them and to everyone else who has been involved with the Andrew's Center.

"They're so vulnerable — that's a way they give to us," Sister Kolmer said. "We have had that gift: the ability to give."

Sister Kolmer cited the example of a severely brain-damaged girl who arrived at Andrew's Center seven years ago. Doctors had predicted that she would live only two weeks. She lived nine months.

"The gift that child brought to the house (was) a whole spirit of caring," Sister Kolmer said. "There was something special she could bring out just by being."

A community of volunteers formed to help take care of the girl. "People came together to help — people just coming to sit and give you a break," Sister Kolmer said. She noted that although the child died seven years ago, her family is still in touch with the center because of the sense of community that developed at the time. "The children are community builders — that's a gift they've brought to us," she declared.

More than 100 children have passed through Andrew's Center since it opened in January, 1974. The Monroe County Department of



Julie Rizzo, a foster child at Andrew's Center, makes a winning play during a card game with a friend.

Social Services licensed the center as a foster care facility — a transitional home for a children waiting to find more permanent placements with regular foster families, to return to their own families or relatives, or to be placed in group homes. The center often takes in hard-to-place children — siblings and children with

disabilities — adding to the work of simply trying to manage a household with six children.

Children have stayed at Andrew's Center anywhere from one weekend to seven years. The average stay is two-and-one half years, and such lengthy stays naturally result in bonding between the children and the sisters.

Sister Habecker pointed to the infant Sister Kolmer was holding. "He won't know any other bonding," she said. "I think with infants, that's what happens. Even though you don't birth them, you bond with them."

"It's hard when they move on," Sister Kolmer acknowledged. She explained that the pain of the children's departure from the center is magnified by the fact that they may be returning to less-than-ideal family situations or moving on to multiple placements. Indicating the infant in her arms, who will in all likelihood be taken in by relatives at some point in the future, she asked, "Is this child going to be shoved from pillar to post and never know any other bonding?"

Although the older children who come to Andrew's Center have often had people in their lives, they too develop attachments with the sisters and the sisters with them, Sister Kolmer observed. "I feel that you do bond very strongly to them because they have lacked so much because of their family situations," she said. "They've lacked bonding. They've had people in their lives, but their needs are so strong."

Sister Kolmer observed that the children also form emotional ties with each other. "I remember when one little kid was crying when someone left," she said. "I wanted to sit and cry with him. He saw (other children leaving) again and again — friends moving on. When is he going to have a permanency of his own?"

"The group we have now consider themselves foster brothers and sisters," Sister Habecker said. "Once in a while when they fight they'll say, 'You're my foster brother, my foster sister.' We try to nurture the fact that we are a family. While we are together, we are a family," she said.

In many ways, the residents of Andrew's Center have become an extended family. Some of the children housed at the center have returned for visits. Families keep in touch with the sisters and keep them up to date on what's happening with the children. Sister Kolmer noted that as more and more children move on, the network of contacts extends, and the continued contacts have helped to ease the pain of the children's departures.

Sister Habecker pointed out that a number of families whose children the sisters have cared for live in the neighborhood, and that makes contact with the children easier. These families also stop by to help at times, and to offer donations. In many ways, Andrew's Center has built strong links with the neighborhood community.

"That's where we're different from big agencies," Sister Kolmer said. "We're a small agency. We don't draw from around the city."

At the same time, however, that smallness can lead to problems. The sisters have to contend with economic realities that larger, better-known agencies don't have to face. Andrew's Center is supported largely by foster care stipends from the Department of Social Services. The stipends vary according to the age and special needs of the child, but the amount does not cover expenses incurred at the center. "We run a whole household on what regular foster parents get for room and board," she said. For example, because the sisters' work at the center is their jobs, approximately two



Sisters Kathleen Kolmer and Rita Habecker spend some quiet time reading with children in their care at Andrew's Center. The home provides foster care for as many as six children at a time, and has aided more than 100 youths since it opened in 1974.

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