



Diminished sight no obstacle

Octogenarian laughs at life

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

IRONDEQUOIT — Self-pitying senior citizens, beware! Jean Piccolo, 83, has no time to listen to complaints about the gloom and doom of old age.

Not that she wouldn't sit down with some of her peers and converse about arthritic ailments and the like. But the conversation probably wouldn't last long before Piccolo would get bored and say "Let's do something!"

Doing things and smiling seem to be the favorite activities of this Christ the King parishioner. The tiny lady's sparkling personality seems all the more remarkable given that — due to a degenerative eye disease — she has been burdened with worsening blindness for several years.

Yet, except for her occasional requests for guidance while she navigates through the home of her daughter, Joyce Szatkowski, Piccolo seems to walk through the world as if she were a sighted person.

Indeed, Piccolo can sometimes make out shapes of objects that are in front of her, but the details of her surroundings are mostly invisible. Nonetheless, the sociable, fun-loving woman simply trusts that the average person will help her out whenever she needs assistance.

"I've fallen down ... last year, and people just came along and helped me," Piccolo said, recalling one of her frequent jaunts into downtown Rochester. She has become best friends with the city's mounted policemen, who help her cross busy streets. "The police ... know me, and ask me 'What are you doing out in this cold?'"

Neither rain, nor sleet, nor a mounted policeman's concern can keep the octogenarian — who uses a cane — from taking strolls through the Flower City. She's not shy about requesting directions. "I ask people, 'Is this the

drugstore?'" she said.

Piccolo's favorite spot of all is the Garson Meyer Senior Center on North Clinton Avenue, where she is driven four times a week by Lift Line — a transportation service in Rochester. On Tuesdays, the center's transport service takes her to the center.

Piccolo began going to the center after her husband, Peter, passed away eight years ago. "I figured it got me out," she said. About two years later, with her blindness worsening, Piccolo moved in with her daughter, Szatkowski and her husband, Ted, who now help Piccolo with such things as meal preparation.

"My daughter doesn't want me to touch the stove," Piccolo said with a laugh. "I might put the wrong burner on."

Except for such help with cooking, Piccolo is fairly independent, dressing and bathing herself and generally participating in as many activities as she can during the week. For example, she sings alto and soprano parts in the center's choir, which performs concerts at area hospitals and senior citizen's homes.

Piccolo also fancies herself a good dancer. Such activities keep her interested in life, she said, adding that she disdains TV. "First of all, I can't see it," she said. "I like to go out and be with real people. I don't care for imitation stuff."

The feisty senior pities her homebound counterparts. "My sister ... won't go no place, and her eyes aren't as bad as mine," she said.

When strangers ask Piccolo why she always seems to be laughing during what most people perceive to be one's declining years, she has a standard response.

"I'm laughing because I'm still alive!" Piccolo responds.



Although Jean Piccolo is legally blind, she manages to sew by feel (at top). Dr. Donald Tucker regularly examines Piccolo's eyes (center), but holds little hope for improvement. At Garson Meyer Senior Center, Rochester, Piccolo enjoys a whirl with friend of 60 years, Charlie DiMartino.

Courier photos by
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