

Ministry marks decade of service to women

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

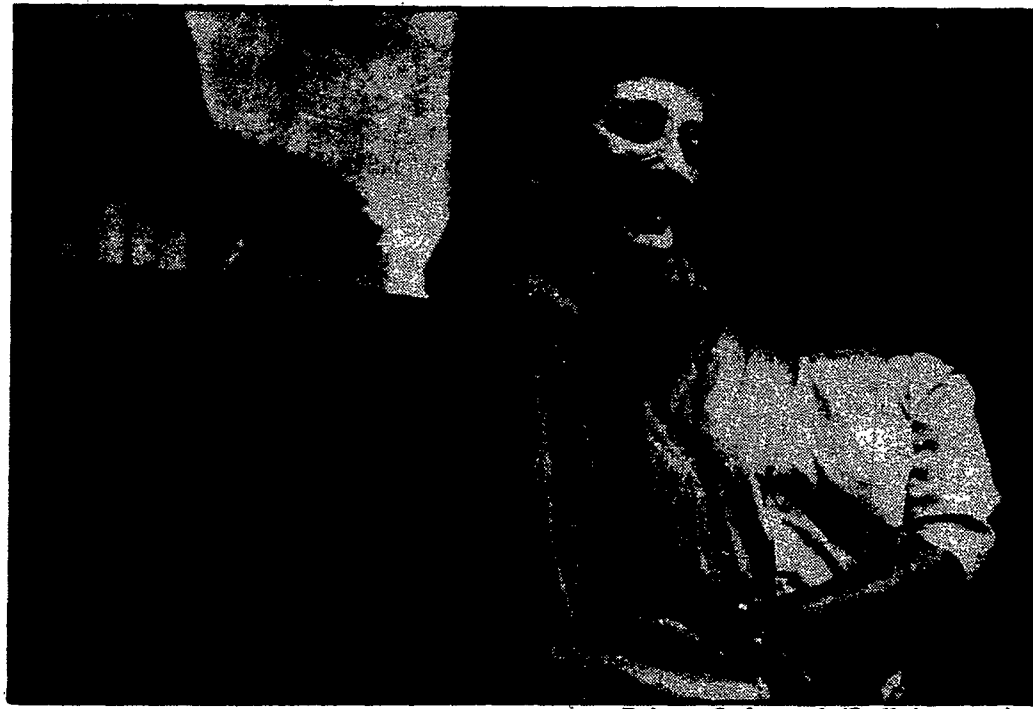
ROCHESTER — If it weren't for Melita House, Iris Gonzalez and Valerie Sullivan are both certain where they would be today.

"I'd be out on the streets," Gonzalez declared. "I'd be there, too," Sullivan said, adding, "I'd have to give my baby to foster care."

But instead of being on the streets, the two pregnant women — Gonzalez is 19, and Sullivan, 17 — have found refuge at Melita House.

Gonzalez and Sullivan are among the more than 300 pregnant, unmarried women between the ages of 13 and 30 who have come to Melita House in the 10 years since the ministry was established in the St. Michael's Parish convent.

Melita House — the name is Greek for "place of refuge" — will celebrate its 10th anniversary Oct. 14 with a 2 p.m. Mass at St. Michael's Church, 869 N. Clinton Ave. The Mass will be followed by a reception and open house.



Melita House resident Mary McKnight, right, jokes about the joys of motherhood with Sister Jean Marie Kears, RSM.

Melita House was officially founded Oct. 13, 1980, by lay people as a Catholic Worker House. In 1982, the Sisters of Mercy of Rochester took over operation of the center.

"This was a ministry very close to our hearts," explained Sister Jean Marie Kears, former superior general of the Sisters of Mercy and a staff member of Melita House since September, 1989. "It was responding to a severe need in society — safe, supportive housing for pregnant teenagers that would provide a community aspect."

At Melita House, which can accommodate up to eight residents at one time, the women are required to obey some basic house rules, such as observing a curfew, performing chores, cooking meals, and eating dinner together as a community.

The women are also required to attend school, work or enroll in one of the house's programs offered to help them gain job experience and skills. Those programs — the Volunteer Incentive Program and the Career Preparation Program — help find placement for women in local schools, businesses or agencies. Melita House provides a stipend for the residents in these programs.

"What we try to do is to enable them to be responsible women because no one is going to do that for them when they leave here," Sister Kears said. When the women leave, she added, they will "not only be responsible for themselves, they will be responsible for their babies."

In addition, the women are required to see a professional counselor on a regular basis, and to take part in child-birth education courses and a single-parent program, where they learn parenting skills and work on self esteem.

"One of the biggest problems the girls have is lack of self esteem, a lack of self worth," Sister Kears observed. The hope of the staff, she noted, "is to have them go away with the realization that they are women of great worth and they have rights — and primarily they have a right to be respected."

The basic goal is to have the women get on their feet and become self-sustaining, Sister Kears explained.

Rodriguez, for example, was living with her boyfriend when she became pregnant. Although her boyfriend was supportive, he was not in a position to take care of her and the baby.

"At the time, I didn't know where I was going," Rodriguez acknowledged.

Since coming to Melita House, she has returned to school and is expected to graduate in January. She also applied to the

Activist draws from life's experiences

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Jim Forest, a founding member of Pax Christi USA, claims to dislike confrontation, argument, and debate.

But a glance at the events of his life would lead one to think otherwise.

For more than three decades, Forest has challenged everybody from the U.S. government and military to fellow leftists and Catholics in his struggle to forge a world that respects life from conception to the grave.

A noted opponent of the Vietnam War who spent a year in prison for burning draft records, Forest visited the Rochester diocese last weekend to speak on the connection between war and abortion. He talked at Saturday and Sunday Masses in Corpus Christi Church, and was scheduled to address audiences at Hobart William Smith College on Monday, Oct. 8, and DeSales High School in Geneva on Tuesday, Oct. 9.

In an interview on Saturday afternoon, Oct. 6, the journalist/author, who now lives in the Netherlands where he directs *The Peace Media Service*, admitted that he doesn't enjoy protesting legalized abortion publicly.

"It's terrifying ...," he said. "I don't like to be stared at, or picketed, or seen as a man that is insensitive to women."

Forest paused, and then added, "On the other hand, it wasn't lots of fun being against the war in Vietnam."

Born in Utah in 1941, Forest may have inherited his penchant for taking unfashionable stands from his parents, both of whom were members of the Communist Party.

"Both were very idealistic people being true to their values," Forest said of his parents. "I know very few Christians who try as hard as they did in living their values."

Although political conversation was often served with dinner at the growing boy's household, religion was not on the menu. He recalled asking his mother whether there was a God or not.

"She said 'no,'" Forest remarked, "(but) I was more impressed with the sadness in her voice and the expression in her face than her answer."

That sadness shadowed his father's life, too, Forest said, noting that his father had dreamed of becoming a Catholic priest as a boy, but was eventually turned off by a parish priest who condemned the senior Forest for joining the "Protestant" Boy Scouts.

Despite his parents' example, Forest didn't care too much for politics. Instead he preferred hiking and climbing in the wilderness where he envisioned himself becoming a park ranger some day. He observed that when he traveled in the Soviet Union to interview religious believers for one of his two books on religion in Russia, many of the believers recalled a similar desire — a wish to ignore their parents' ostracized religion just as he had wanted to shun his parents' socially unacceptable communism.

The "totally unpolitical" teenaged Forest decided to join the U.S. Navy in 1959, and while attending meteorological school, he happened to catch a movie called "The Nun's Story" starring Audrey Hepburn.

Hepburn's portrayal of a Belgian attempting to live out her beliefs in World War II

moved the young serviceman. "(The nun's) struggle to live a life every inch of the way framed by the gospels inspired me," Forest recalled, adding that he went to a Catholic Mass the very next day.

His conversion to Christianity led him to begin examining peace issues. "The ironic thing in my life is that I didn't start making political connections until I became a Christian," Forest said, alluding to his parents' political lifestyle.

Forest eventually got in trouble with his superiors in Washington, D.C. when he participated in a protest against the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. The third class petty officer was offered two choices by the Navy — a life in jail or a life in espionage. Forest chose jail.

But he didn't go. As luck — or providence — would have it, Forest met a Quaker lawyer at Catholic University of America who helped the young man obtain conscientious objector status and a special discharge from the Navy.

"I hadn't planned to become a conscientious objector," Forest joked.

Another conscientious objector he met would irrevocably change the newly discharged Forest's life — Catholic Worker co-founder, Dorothy Day.

Forest joined Day's community in New York City, and eventually edited its newspaper. He praised Day for showing him one could live a life of prayer and action.

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