

Foundation grants prove key for homeowners

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

Around Thanksgiving time last year, Nancy Shea of Endicott in Tioga County faced the prospect of losing her home and children, as a result of county demands that she fix a drainage problem with her septic tank.

A neighbor had repeatedly complained to county officials that Shea's septic tank drained chlorine-treated water with an unhealthy smell into a roadside ditch. Eventually, after the neighbor reported the problem to the county health board, a Tioga County court ordered Shea to relocate her tank, build a new leach field of sand and gravel, and install a new fan filter.

Shea argued in court that her tank posed no health hazard to her neighbors, noting

CATHOLIC COURIER SOCIAL MINISTRY Christmas APPEAL

that she had had the water in the roadside ditch tested and that it was found to be safe enough for swimming. But the judge ruled against her, forcing Shea to come up with \$5,000 within 30 days to fix the problem. If she failed to do so, she would be ordered to vacate her property.

The divorced mother of four children had an income of \$200 a week, and made of point of informing the judge of her financial circumstances. The judge replied that the county would take Shea's children away if she couldn't afford to fix the septic problem and house her children adequately.

Distraught, Shea turned to friends and members of her local Methodist congregation, but no one she approached had anywhere near the amount of money she needed.

"I would have sold my house if I could have," Shea recalled, noting that the limited time permitted her by the court ruled out that option. "It was a very difficult time for me," she added.

Rural Ministries of Owego, an area social-service agency, referred Shea to the Bishop Sheen Ecumenical Housing Foundation, Inc., a not-for-profit organization funded in part by the Roman Catholic and Episcopal dioceses of Rochester. Matching grants from the state and federal government, and other agencies, make up the bulk of the foundation's budget.

More than \$6,000 of the funds raised

from other Rochester-based charities, the Sheen foundation gave Shea \$500 for the septic tank job. Between money raised in Rochester and Endicott, and a low-interest loan she took out, Shea was able to have her septic tank problems fixed by the county's deadline date before Christmas.

"It was Christmastime, it really was!" Shea exclaimed, recalling her feelings at the time. "(The Sheen foundation) helped and benefited my life." Shea wanted to tell her story to the *Catholic Courier* because, as she put it, "I'd always hoped that I'd be able to do that for anyone else."

"Anyone else" often resembles someone like Shea, explained Sister Rosemary Mackie, SSJ, rehabilitation specialist for the Sheen foundation. About one-third of all applicants for emergency home-repair grants are young families, usually headed by single mothers, Sister Mackie said. An even larger portion of the applicants — about two-thirds — are senior citizens on fixed incomes, she commented.

"We've got a lot of seniors that apply," the rehabilitation specialist said. "They might have an income of \$5,000-6,000 a year." Such a low income explains why someone who has — or once had — enough money to buy a house may later lack sufficient funds to make needed repairs, she said.

Many senior applicants leave their homes in a state of disrepair for years, Sister Mackie observed. Others lack running water, or porches, or painted walls. One such person was Marguerite Cole of Victor in Monroe County.

An elderly widow living on Social Security, Cole has lived in the same house on Plastermill Road for 40 years. A friend of Cole's had benefited from a Sheen foundation grant and referred her to Sister Mackie, who called her and asked what she needed done.

Cole noted that a Sheen foundation grant enabled her to replace the old pump sink in her kitchen with a new sink equipped with a faucet. The contractor also rewired her house, put a new roof on her shed, installed gutters and built two porches, including one on the side she hadn't had before.

Cole appreciated the efforts of the Sheen foundation, citing the installation of two new electrical outlets in her kitchen as an example. "The wires were getting pretty bad," she said, adding, "I had too many extension cords."

Since joining the Sheen foundation in 1987, Sister Mackie has seen it all, including a family sleeping in a car and living in a garage because they had no money to pay their home heating bills. "I never really knew poor people until I worked with Bishop Sheen," Sister Mackie emphasized.

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Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

Financial assistance from the Bishop Sheen Ecumenical Housing Foundation enabled Victor resident Marguerite Cole to replace the old pump sink in her kitchen with a new sink equipped with a faucet.

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through last year's Catholic Courier-Social Ministry Christmas Appeal were allocated to the Sheen foundation's Emergency Home Repair Fund, which provides grants to low-income home owners — like Shea — for house repairs.

Last year, the program made a total of 423 grants, and obtained funding for more than \$891,512 in emergency repairs. Christmas Appeal funds were instrumental in obtaining matching funds for \$139,600 of those repairs.

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