

Youth finds strength by supporting others

By Barbara Ann Homick
Staff writer

CHILI — Aimee Erwin was only 7-years-old when her father died of cancer so she was unable to understand fully his ordeal and help him through his suffering.

But the St. Pius X youth group member said her inability to help her dad then has inspired her to help others who need her support now.

"At that time I couldn't help my father, so indirectly I wanted to help him by helping other people," explained the Chili resident.

One of Erwin's projects is volunteering — along with her mother — at the Ronald McDonald House, 333 Westmoreland Ave., in Rochester. The house is a temporary lodging facility for families with children being treated for serious illnesses at nearby hospitals.

Erwin said she and her mother decided to volunteer at the agency when they received an application for volunteer work after making a memorial donation in 1989.

"My mom asked if it was something I'd be interested in and I said 'sure,'" Erwin remembered.

The Aquinas senior recalled that the application asked if volunteers would feel uneasy working with patients who did not have hair or were without certain limbs. Erwin said she thought then that she could deal with those difficult situations.

"I remember thinking that I dealt with the hardships of my father's dying, so I could deal with (the hardships of) strangers," remarked Erwin.

The 17-year-old works at the facility every other Saturday. Her duties include housekeeping chores and serving meals.

Pat Fitzpatrick, SSND, house manager at the facility, noted that Erwin has been faithful and committed to her work.

"She has a nice way about her and with those in the house and the volunteers," said Fitzpatrick, who added that she was impressed that Erwin was willing to fill in when her mom couldn't work.

Although Erwin said she enjoys talking with other volunteers at the House, she said that the time she spends with children is the highlight of her working hours. But she also noted that becoming attached to the kids has its drawbacks.

"The hardest thing is hearing about the children you played with and seeing their death notices (in the paper)," she added soberly.

Erwin said she thinks her biggest role as a volunteer is to provide emotional support

for families of the sick children. During workshops she attended before becoming a volunteer, Erwin recalled trainers stressing the importance of listening to the children's families.

"Who are we to tell them the actions to take next? I just let them (the families) air out their problems and give them support. All I can tell them to do is keep praying," said Erwin, who plans to continue her volunteer work as long as she lives in Rochester.

Erwin said her own religious beliefs are a result of the many trials she has been through — and is still going through — during her life.

Although she attended St. Pius X grade school until the sixth-grade, the AQ student said she owed much of what she learned about herself to her experiences at Churchville-Chili Middle School.

"At St. Pius, the teachers taught and as a student you believed everything they said," Erwin explained. But things changed when she enrolled at Churchville-Chili, Erwin said.

"There I saw the real world, how people are and how you can act. It was then that I started to question my faith," she said.

By the time she was a freshman in high school, Erwin said she accrued many questions about the role of religion and her life. It was then that she formed a very special relationship with her new youth minister, Patty Young.

"Patty came in my freshman year, and I



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

Aimee Erwin spends every other Saturday volunteering at the Ronald McDonald House, a temporary lodging for families with children being treated for serious illnesses at hospitals in the Rochester area.

had so many questions for her and she had so many answers. She set me back on track, and showed me my faith and where to take it from," Erwin said.

Erwin and Young have spent many hours together planning and organizing youth group activities. Young credited Erwin with being instrumental in influencing the direction of the group.

"Two years ago we were struggling with how to build it (the group) up again, so I asked Aimee (out) to lunch to get her ideas. I could tell she was in touch with her peers and sensitive to what they need and want," the St. Pius X youth coordinator recalled.

Erwin played a large part in establishing a new youth group for junior-high school students, and has been a peer counselor on confirmation retreats. The youth said she loves the retreats even though she finds it hard to leave the other participants when the weekend is over.

"I think it would be great if all the people you deal with everyday could go on retreat with you, so when you leave everyone would have experienced the same things as you did," wished Erwin.

Young noted that Erwin has been a strong influence for many of the youth group members. "She is a real example to me and the others ... of caring, concern

and being there," added Young, who noted that Erwin has endured many trials throughout her life.

One of those ordeals was a car accident that Erwin was involved in last year. Erwin recalled that she and her girlfriend were planning to spend the night together, but as Erwin pulled up at her girlfriend's house in Penfield, her friend — for some reason neither girl still understands — said good-night and went into her house. Erwin said she drove away, giving no thought to the change in plans.

On the way back to her home in Chili, Erwin hit a patch of ice and her car slid under a guard rail. The passenger side of the car was crushed.

"My friend would have little chance of surviving. God saved my friend," said Erwin, who is still unable to explain the change in plans.

In addition to her father's death and the car accident, Erwin is facing another trial now — one of her closest friends has been diagnosed with cancer. But the optimistic young woman said she is not going to give up.

"I'm a very changing person," Erwin said. "But I have found myself and I know who I am. Not many people my age can say that."



Erwin's duties at the facility include housekeeping chores, serving meals and providing emotional support for families of sick children.

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