

Retired sister finds new ways to let light shine

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Former students of Sister Virginia Wilson, RSM, might be surprised to see the retired dean of students and social studies teacher these days.

Instead of chasing down school halls in hot pursuit of students — as she occasionally did during her teaching days — Sister Wilson can now often be found in the basement of the Mercy Prayer Center heating wax to make distinctive, multicolored candles.

Or she can be seen in the center's garden, rooting out miscreant weeds.

Or she might be found sitting in the "Kenosis," her basement hermitage at the prayer center, pursuing closer union with God.

Although the venues have changed, the 72-year-old Sister Wilson maintains the energy that sustained her 40-year career as a teacher in various Rochester Catholic schools, including the former Cardinal Mooney High School, and Our Lady of Mercy High School, from which she retired as a social studies teacher in 1981.

"I think I spend a lot of time praying for the people I disciplined," Sister Wilson quipped. "I guess I was pretty hard."

The path from academia to the prayer center and the life she currently leads began in the 1970s when the Mercy congregation began changing in response to Vatican II, Sister Wilson said.

A member of the Mercy congregation since 1941, she found that the changes left some of her prayer needs unmet.

"We began not to have community prayer, and I was searching for a group to pray with," Sister Wilson recalled.

Amid her search, the order held its chapter — a meeting in which all Sisters of Mercy gathered to establish congregational goals — and someone suggested that the order create some sort of prayer center.

So Sister Wilson and a group of like-minded Mercy sisters began to meet in 1977 to develop such a place. Their efforts led to the creation of the Mercy Prayer Center at Holy Cross Parish.

Sister Wilson divided her time between the center and Mercy High School until she finally retired from teaching in 1981. For the next seven years, she devoted herself to full-time work at the center, leading retreats, giving talks, providing spiritual direction.

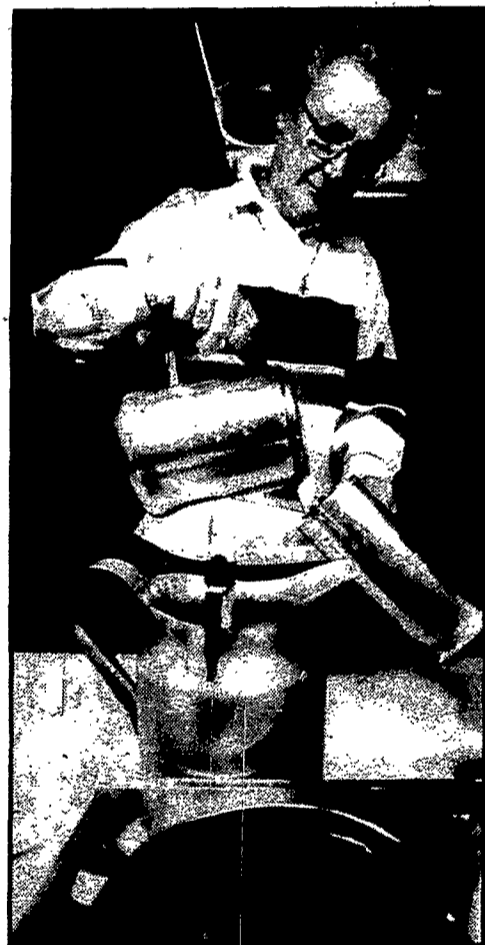
Finally in 1988, she was allowed to retire at the age of 70 and to devote herself more to prayer — although she did continue to provide some spiritual direction, and to care for the center's garden and plants.

By the time of her retirement, the Mercy Prayer Center had moved to its current location at 65 Highland Ave. Sister Wilson — who had begun to build her kenosis in the new location as soon as the center's staff had moved in — gradually expanded



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

Sister Virginia Wilson, RSM, finds a quiet moment in the "Kenosis," her basement hermitage in the Mercy Prayer Center of Rochester.



In her basement workshop, Sister Wilson pours heated wax into a candle mold.

the hermitage from a single room just for herself to a small suite consisting of a bedroom, a prayer room, and two spiritual-direction rooms that also are used by those participating in retreats at the center.

Kenosis, Sister Wilson explained, is a Greek word meaning "empty."

"I think I had the word in my spiritual life for a long time," Sister Wilson said. "At the Crucifixion, Christ had really given away everything. If my life isn't that, I've missed the boat as a Christian."

As people become older, Sister Wilson continued, they find it easier to let things go, to empty themselves so that things that seemed important no longer appear to be so. This letting go, she added, is part of an ongoing process of spiritual growth.

"It's something that takes a lifetime to do," she explained. "We don't just make it and coast."

Sister Wilson noted that the kenosis — and her retirement — are both gifts. "All nuns dream that they will find time to pray," she observed.

But even as she was developing the kenosis and carrying on some duties at the center, Sister Wilson also was being drawn into a ministry of candle making.

Two years ago, Sister Wilson explained, the congregation was starting Kate's Tea and Gift Shop at the motherhouse on Blossom Road. The shop was intended as an outlet for craft items produced by members of the congregation.

Sister Wilson had made candles nearly 30 years ago as gifts for friends and relatives. She hadn't continued with the hobby in the intervening years, but when the congregation began to discuss what would be sold at the gift shop, she decided to try making candles once again.

Her hope was that other women religious who made candles would also join the

effort. But she was the only one to come forward, and so she began to produce candles on her own, learning from books and through experience.

She makes her candles out of recycled wax from used candles donated by individuals and churches. Sister Wilson first heats the wax then pours it into greased molds, many of which she has received as gifts.

Sister Wilson employs a technique of tilting the molds and pouring in limited amounts of colored wax to produce candles of variegated colors. Since this requires that candles-in-process be allowed to cool between colors, the procedure can take as long as two days.

The transition from teacher to artist still serves to surprise Sister Wilson. "I never in my wildest imagination thought I'd be doing this," she acknowledged.

Yet Sister Wilson sees parallels between making candles and her own career in education. "It's interesting as it all unfolds, how it all connects," she observed.

As a teacher, she recalled, she often took on the most difficult students. She would work with them, trying "to get to them."

"It's the slow, careful reaching in that does it," she explained. Likewise, she remarked, making candles calls for patience and perseverance.

"It's the slow, careful molding, getting the right degree, the right temperature — because too much kills them," Sister Wilson said.

Making candles also suits her current life of prayer, Sister Wilson observed.

"It is a way of praising the Lord, it's a way of bringing about the awareness of the praise of the Lord," Sister Wilson said, adding, "There is something to making something pleasing to people. That's what we're all about, really."

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