

Reading news spurs 'bird watcher' to action

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — John "Pat" O'Hara enjoys bird watching. A large bird feeder, which he can view through glass doors, hangs from a tree in his back yard.

And since retiring from the U.S. Postal Service in 1991, the 71-year-old O'Hara certainly has time to sit and watch his feathered friends in the comfort of his living room.

But he often leaves the birds and that comfort behind.

"I keep reading the newspaper and the paper gets me upset," he observed, adding, "It's really (Father) Thomas Merton, (Father) Daniel Berrigan, and Dorothy Day. I can't read those guys without going down to the cellar, painting a sign, and going down to the Federal Building."

O'Hara has done more in recent years than just paint protest signs and march in front of the Kenneth L. Keating Federal Building, 100 State St. A parishioner of St. John the Evangelist Parish on Humboldt Street, he has been arrested several times for his opposition to war and abortion.

His most recent arrest on Oct. 26, 1991, took place at the Planned Parenthood of Rochester and the Genesee Valley, Inc. offices at 114 University Ave. O'Hara and four other people — including one of his admitted heroes, Father Daniel Berrigan, SJ — staged a sit-in to protest the agency's plans to open an abortion clinic.

The five protesters were found guilty of trespassing Jan. 30, 1992, in Rochester City Court.

A World War II veteran, O'Hara acknowledged that for most of his life he never would have considered protesting anything — much less facing arrest. Family had been the center of his life.

"I never did much outside my family," he said. "That's the kind of family I was raised in."

Born Aug. 12, 1921, in Rochester's Corpus Christi Parish, O'Hara graduated from St. Boniface School and Monroe High School.

Following graduation, he worked at several jobs while pursuing a dream to be a pilot. In 1941, he joined the reserves and began flying lessons.

When the United States entered the World War II in December of that year, O'Hara was called up by the Army Air Force and sent to Texas for glider-pilot training.

He never achieved his dream to fly, however. Instead, in 1943, he was transferred to the Halloran General Hospital on Staten Island. The hospital served as an intake center for military



John 'Pat' O'Hara jokes around with Rufus his dog in front of O'Hara's Rochester home.

Babette G. Augustin/Photo editor

patients being sent home from overseas. The patients were then sent to hospitals around the country.

O'Hara began as a clerk, occasionally helping to unload patients from ships. Gradually, however, he became an aide, escorting patients to other hospitals nationwide.

Working with patients had a profound affect on him, O'Hara said.

"I was just a kid. I wanted to be a hero. I wanted to be a pilot," he recalled. "I think working at the hospital sobered me up pretty fast."

After the war, O'Hara attended the University of Rochester on the G.I. Bill, hoping to become a history teacher. But marriage and a baby ended those plans. Instead, he tried sales.

"I loved it, it was a struggle, and I didn't make any money," O'Hara laughed.

Part of the problem, he acknowledged, was that his marriage suffered from ongoing problems. He then had to spend time working with counselors.

In 1962, despite three children and repeated attempts to keep the marriage going, he divorced.

"I think I lived a sheltered life, but with the divorce I kind of bumped against reality," he said.



This portrait of O'Hara and his wife, Rita, taken at a Cornhill Festival, is one of their favorites.

O'Hara joined Parents Without Partners. He soon discovered that even though he was suffering because his marriage ended, he was better off than many people in many ways. He had found a good job with the post office and enjoyed his family's support.

His involvement with Parents Without Partners helped open his eyes to social problems, O'Hara said. It was also through the group that he met his current wife, Rita.

After they were married on April 22, 1972, the couple became increasingly involved in Rita's parish, St. John the Evangelist. Although he had never

been active politically, O'Hara found himself gravitating to the social justice committee.

That involvement led him to read and think more about social issues. What he gradually realized, he said, is that the Christian faith calls people to act.

"I think that our church has done a great job of teaching who Jesus Christ is and how Jesus Christ lived and what Jesus Christ wants us to do, but most of us are not doing it," O'Hara remarked.

Eventually, he joined the Faith and Resistance Community, which advocates a consistent pro-life attitude on such issues as war, abortion and the death penalty. The Planned Parenthood protest was part of one of the community's retreats.

O'Hara said he doesn't see himself as an activist or a leader.

"I'm never one of the people who are really involved," he said.

Indeed, he claims he spends more of his time watching birds, socializing with his wife and caring for his seven grandchildren than with taking part in protests.

But then he picks up the newspaper, and the paint brush in the basement beckons once again.



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