

Fairport nurse's path leads to Navajo country

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

GALLUP, N.M. — Most college graduates look forward to finding jobs that will start them on the road to success in their chosen fields.

Lynn Lilly, who graduated from Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. two months ago, shares that goal.

The path to her chosen field, however, will include a few extra turns.

Last month, Lilly began pursuing her dream of a nursing career with the Public Health Service's Indian Health Service in this small New Mexico city.

The 18-month commitment to the agency is work in payment for a scholarship she received from the health service. The work is also intended as a learning experience, said Lilly, a parishioner at Fairport's Church of the Assumption, 20 East Ave.

"I guess I just thought it would be an interesting place to work," Lilly said during a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*. "I was also interested in learning about Indian culture. I've never had much contact with Indians.

"I want to learn about their history and culture from their point of view," she added.

Lilly has already begun to learn about the Navajos' culture from the nearby Navajo Indian Reservation.

"The Navajos tend to be very quiet and very reserved, so it's difficult to learn about them," she said. "But once you gain their trust, they begin to open up to you."

One of the ways to gain such trust, Lilly explained, "is to learn to approach them in a quiet way, not be ob-



Catholic University of America
Lynn Lilly, a parishioner of Fairport's Assumption Church and a graduate of Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., began her nursing career last month with the Public Health Service's Indian Health Service in Gallup, N.M.

trusive."

Such an approach is a far cry from the one Lilly used while volunteering as an undergraduate in urban health facilities in the Washington, D.C. area.

"I've spent four years in a city culture," she explained. "People (there) have to be loud, more direct. Out here, you have to step back and give people more space."

Lilly has a history of working in

areas touched by poverty and poor health care.

During her four years at Catholic University, she served as vice president and treasurer of the university's Appalachia Project, through which she painted houses, helped renovate buildings and worked on farms in Maryland and Ohio. She also volunteered with the university's Human Life Council, working with children at St. Ann's Infant and Maternity Home in Hyattsville, Md.

And during a summer job with the National Institute of Health's Public Health Service, Lilly helped treat a young urban cancer patient who ultimately had to have her leg amputated.

Her experiences through these volunteer activities helped her decide to become a pediatric nurse, Lilly said. It also made the Fairport woman critical of the health-care system in the United States.

"Many children in cities and urban areas are in poor health and lack adequate resources for health care," she observed. "If we fail to reverse this trend, we will see more chronic health problems that carry into adulthood and will cost the country a great deal of money."

Among the Navajos, Lilly said she will see many of the same health problems she saw in the inner city, including alcoholism's effects, lack of immunizations and poor nutrition.

In some cases, however, the problems are more extreme, Lilly said. Alcoholism is widespread among the Indians, she noted. Consequently, so is fetal alcohol syndrome, where babies are born smaller and sickly due to their mothers' alcohol abuse.

She also encounters problems she did not see in Washington.

"People have the (bubonic) plague

here, so there's a real concern about identifying that," she said.

At the same time, she finds that she has to change some of her ideas about health care. Although hygiene remains important, for example, New Mexico's arid conditions force Lilly to look at things differently.

"In the city, if you see a dirty-looking kid, you think the parents are neglecting them," Lilly said. "Here, there's no water for washing. It changes how you perceive those who come in for care in the hospital."

The Navajo culture also is forcing her to be more careful about the words she chooses.

She explained that while talking about heart disease with a patient from Rochester, for example, she might say that some of the cells in the patient's heart had died.

"A Navajo would take that literally," Lilly said. "They would believe that a part of their heart had died, and that means a part of them has died. They would think it took away something spiritually."

As part of her job, she will be going into the reservation for home visits and to provide health education. At the same time, Lilly observed, she hopes to learn more about the Navajos' spirituality and culture.

At the end of her year-and-a-half commitment, she might consider remaining with the service a while longer, Lilly said. Eventually, she hopes to return to school to pursue a graduate degree and become a nurse practitioner.

But Lilly also sees herself continuing to work with disadvantaged individuals.

"I tend to enjoy working in situations where there is a need," Lilly concluded.



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