

# Newark senior's knitting warms hearts and hands

By Lee Strong  
Senior staff writer

NEWARK — Shortly after the turn of the century, women religious at a Catholic school in Holland taught Mary VanDeMortel how to knit.

Today, the 98-year-old VanDeMortel is still using that skill — now to help benefit St. Michael's Parish, 401 S. Main St.

VanDeMortel is a mainstay of the parish's biennial Christmas Bazaar. In fact, she produces so many knitted items that she has her own booth called "Mary's Knitting."

The nook is full of brightly colored mittens, scarves, socks and even clothes for dolls. All proceeds from the sale of items go to the parish.

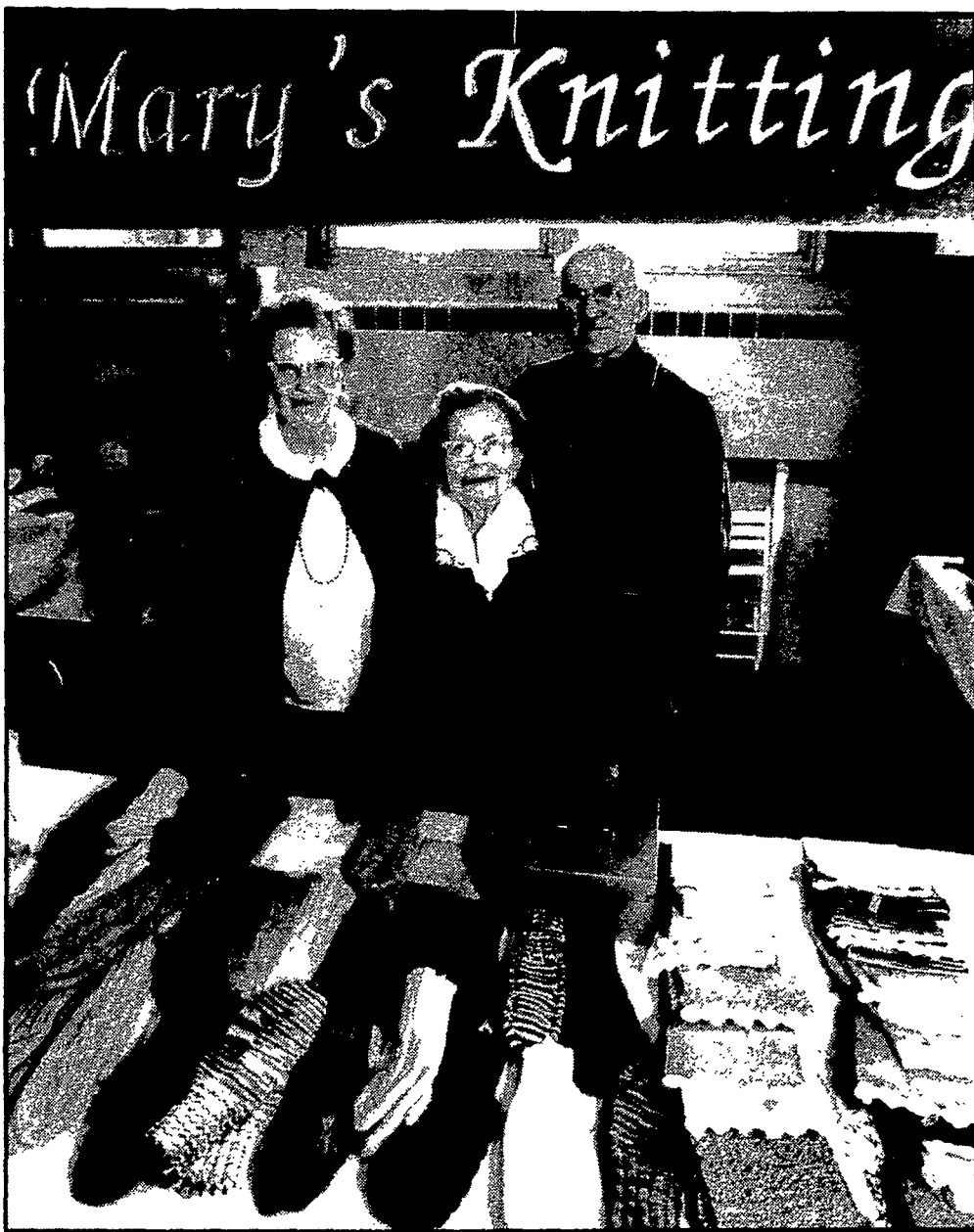
VanDeMortel was in her booth again Dec. 5, greeting friends and parishioners during this year's bazaar, titled "A Christmas Gathering." Two of her close friends, Dorothy and Leon Taylor, were on hand to help VanDeMortel serve customers.

"This will be the last time," VanDeMortel predicted. "My eyesight is getting bad."

VanDeMortel began knitting for the parish's bazaars when the event began in 1962. She spends the two years between bazaars knitting in preparation for the next sale. In addition, she has regularly helped at parish rummage sales.

Born Mary Sierens in 1894 in Belgium, VanDeMortel and her family moved to Holland when she was 4 years old. VanDeMortel recalled that she was taught how to knit while attending Catholic school there.

"In Holland, you knit everything yourself, stockings, mittens," VanDeMortel said. "We used to get half-an-hour a day to knit."



Mary VanDeMortel (center) is joined by friends Dorothy and Leon Taylor during the biennial Christmas Bazaar at Newark's St. Michael Church. VanDeMortel, who has been participating in the bazaars since 1962, knits as many as 400 items for the event. She donates all proceeds from her sales to the parish.

At age 16, VanDeMortel moved to the United States to join her brothers in the states. They settled in Newark, where she has lived ever since.

It was also in Newark that she met her late husband, Edward VanDeMortel, who died in 1968.

Although she was not knitting on a regular basis while raising a family, VanDeMortel used her skills with needle and thread as a seamstress. She worked at one area company for 28 years until company officials discovered that she was 67 — which was beyond their retirement age. They told her she had to retire.

"I cried like a baby," VanDeMortel recalled. "I was able to work, but I couldn't work any more."

Her desire to keep going is also manifested by the fact that she still lives at home, where she resides alone. The only assistance she receives comes from the Taylors, who do her shopping. Dorothy Taylor also stops by each morning just to make sure VanDeMortel is OK.

For the past 30 years, VanDeMortel has also found time and energy to be an active participant at St. Michael's bazaars.

She just made mittens at first, and the booth was called, "Mary's Mitten Corner." But she soon expanded her selections, and the booth was renamed "Mary's Knitting."


Although she has an amazing production level — she knits as much as 400 items for the biennial bazaars — VanDeMortel said she follows no rou-

Continued on page 14

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