

Ontario program aims to make Yuletide bright

By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

ONTARIO — Most people wait until after Thanksgiving to begin their Christmas planning.

Louise Weller starts in September. But then again, Weller has not only her family of 11 to think about. She has more than 130 families relying on her.

A parishioner at St. Mary's of the Lake Parish, 5823 Walworth Road, Weller co-chairs the Christmas Sharing Program. The annual effort has evolved under Weller in the past decade from a parish program into an ecumenical enterprise involving churches in Ontario, Williamson and Walworth.

The program provides not only gifts, but also clothing, food and sometimes furniture for needy families.

In some cases, people helped through the program are subsequently linked with social ministry committees for long-term assistance. Throughout its existence, the program has helped people find hope for better futures.

"When I stop and look back at how far it's come since the beginning, I'm overwhelmed," Weller said.

The St. Mary's parishioner became involved in the Christmas Sharing Program in the early 1980s through her work with the parish's social ministry committee, which she and her husband, Stanley, helped form in the 1970s.

The committee originally coordinated the parish's own Christmas program. When Stanley Weller became the committee's chairman, she volunteered to coordinate the program.

At the time, Louise Weller recalled, the Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry provided the names of those to



Louise Weller, a parishioner at St. Mary's of the Lake in Ontario, co-chairs the Christmas Sharing Program. Here she tags one of the many gifts that she and volunteers prepared this year for more than 100 needy families.

receive gifts. But the people for whom gifts were to be collected were often scattered throughout the five-county region FLOSM serves.

She called officials at FLOSM to ask if any of the families seeking assistance lived closer to Ontario. "They said, 'We don't have any needy families in your area,'" Weller recalled.

When Weller said she could find local families, she was told to limit the number to 10. She easily identified 21 families that first year, Weller recalled. The numbers grew to well more than 100 as word of the program spread.

Rather than going through FLOSM, recipients' names are now submitted by

schools, churches and social-service agencies, Weller said. Beginning each September, she spends long hours on the phone to identify families and needs.

Sometimes those needs go beyond gifts or food, noted Ann Prinsen, who has served as the committee's co-chairwoman the past six years. When additional needs arise, Weller notifies social ministry committees or area churches.

"If we get a profile and they state that they really need two beds, we put that in the bulletins," she observed.

In addition, Prinsen said, some families have been assisted beyond just their Christmas needs.

"We've gotten people on welfare,"

Prinsen said. "We've helped people find apartments." But the bulk of the work is meeting people's needs at Christmas-time, Weller said.

Based on information she has received or collected, Weller identifies the number and types of gifts each family will need. Each child receives two gifts, while adults get one. For those who wish to provide more than the suggested gifts, the recipients' ages, clothing sizes, or other needs are also identified.

As the number of families seeking aid grew, Weller said, "We realized we had to reach out to other churches."

The ecumenical program now receives support from churches throughout Ontario, Williamson and Walworth. Weller coordinates the churches' work and that of various committees.

Meanwhile, even as contributors are taking care of the gifts, Weller is busy seeking donations of food, toiletries and other items from area stores and service groups. Food donations are used for Christmas dinners for the families. If not enough food is provided, Weller uses cash contributions to purchase more.

The gifts are all brought to St. Mary's early in December. This year, items were due by Dec. 13.

Once the gifts are all dropped off, Weller and volunteers make sure the items are sorted and properly tagged. If more gifts are needed, Weller or one of the other volunteers goes out to buy what is needed.

One interesting part of the program, Prinsen noted, is that some current volunteers were at one time recipients.

"We have people that we've helped through the Christmas program who, a couple of years later, have come back to help us," Prinsen said.

Weller acknowledged that she puts in long hours for the program come September — sometimes working right up to Christmas Eve.

"It's on my mind all the time," she said. "Sometimes, I don't get a full night's sleep."

Weller works part-time for the Town of Walworth. She also has to make time for her family — a formidable task considering she has nine children, ranging in age from 8 to 24.

By Christmas, Weller admitted, "I'm exhausted." But in spite of the work involved, Prinsen and Weller both said they enjoy the annual effort immensely.

"I feel like I've made Christmas good for people," Prinsen observed.

"I feel like I'm really helping somebody — for once a year anyway," Weller concluded.

Canandaigua family to present free dinner Christmas Day

CANANDAIGUA — James Rulison, his wife, Mary Ellen, and their 4-year-old son, Matthew, will not be spending Christmas alone this year.

Indeed, the St. Mary's parishioners won't even be at home for most of the day. Instead, they will host a free dinner for as many as 200 people from 1-3 p.m. at Canandaigua Academy, 435 East St.

Last year, Rulison recalled, "I was thinking about the people who are in their homes by themselves. So I decided to do something about it."

After enlisting the help of fellow Rotary Club members, he contacted

Canandaigua School District officials about using the academy.

Meanwhile, the Gleaners Community Kitchen, which holds an annual free dinner a few days before Christmas, asked if it could join forces with Rulison's group to provide food and help host the dinner.

A number of people have also contributed food for the meal, including five to 10 individuals who are donating turkeys.

Rulison said more than 80 people have volunteered thus far to help prepare and serve the dinner. About 100 individuals and families have already

signed up for the dinner.

Meanwhile, Ontario Transit Systems has offered free transportation to and from the event. And Abbey Industries will donate the use of its vans to help transport disabled individuals.

Although the meal will help to feed the hungry, Rulison noted that his main focus is reaching out to those who might otherwise be alone this Christmas.

"If you want to be with other people, come," he declared.

For information about the event, or to volunteer or make a reservation for the dinner, call 716/394-2800.

The St. Ann's family is sharing something very special this holiday.

Each other.

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