

# Auburn center has answered call for 75 years

By Lee Strong  
Senior staff writer

AUBURN — Last Armistice Day, Nov. 7, 1993, Mercy Health and Rehabilitation Center staff organized a party for Harold Short, a World War I veteran celebrating his 98th birthday.

In addition to decorating a room and preparing the food, staff invited family members, Auburn's mayor and other public officials, and even videotaped the celebration for Short and family members — including those who were not able to attend the gala.

"They didn't have to do it," said Jane Balian, Short's daughter, referring to Mercy's staff.

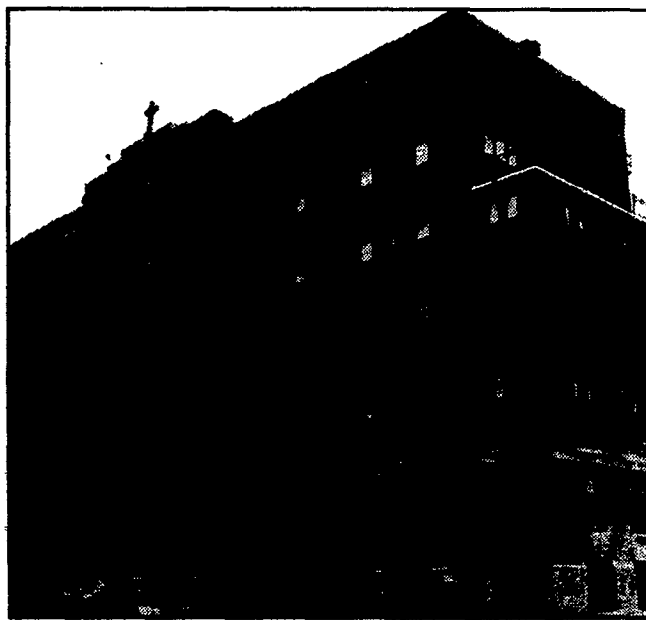
"They're always thinking of things like that. I think they really go beyond the call of duty in many little ways to please the patients," she added.

It's those "little ways" — such as the party for her father, who has lived at Mercy Health and Rehabilitation Center for 11 years — that help to set Mercy Health apart, Balian observed. She also cited personal touches such as staff bringing around a cart with items from the gift shop for residents who can't get to the shop to browse; a member of the activities staff coming to residents' rooms to play the flute if they can't make it to a concert; or producing a large-print edition of a news letter so that people like her father can read it.

"I feel that Auburn is very fortunate to have Mercy Rehab," Balian said.

Auburn has enjoyed Mercy Health and Rehabilitation Center — both in its current manifestation as a nursing home and formerly as a hospital — for 75 years.

Its anniversary will be marked with a 3 p.m. Mass celebrated by Bishop Matthew H. Clark this Sunday, Sept. 25 at St. Mary's Church, 17 Clark St. The Mass will be followed by a cash bar (4:30 p.m.) and dinner (5:30 p.m.) at the Holiday Inn, 75 North St. The cost of the



Submitted photo

## Mercy Health and Rehabilitation Center.

dinner is \$25 per person. Reservations are required. Call 315/253-0351, ext. 210 for information.

In addition, a series of celebrations have been planned for residents, staff and volunteers.

Mercy Health and Rehabilitation was founded in 1919 as the realization of a dream by then St. Mary's pastor, Father William Payne, who longed for a Catholic hospital in Auburn. It was through his efforts that the Sisters of St. Francis became involved in the effort. The former Mercy Hospital was opened for patients on Oct. 15, 1919.

The hospital quickly outgrew its original buildings on Thornton Avenue, and a new edifice was erected and opened on the same avenue in 1931. That facility,

which ceased operations as a hospital in 1977, now houses the Mercy Apartments, which opened in 1989 as apartments for the elderly. The apartment project is incorporated separately from Mercy Health, but is operated by the Sisters of St. Francis.

Meanwhile, as a result of studies and discussions in the 1960s indicating that Auburn would not need two hospitals but would lack adequate extended-care facilities for the elderly, construction was started in 1970 on the 10-story building that eventually became the home of Mercy Health and Rehabilitation Center. The facility saw its first resident in 1972.

Mercy Health now provides beds for 297 residents, and is generally filled to capacity. It is also home to a three-day-a-week adult day care program serving an average of 15 to 20 people, noted Sister Mary Aquin McKenzie, OSF, administrator.

Sister McKenzie noted that the center is well respected because of careful planning and management, but also "because we are caring people. We do provide quality care."

In addition, Mercy Health officials have been keeping abreast of the latest trends in health care for the elderly, Sister McKenzie observed. An increasing emphasis is being placed on trying to help people remain at home for as long as possible. Future directions for Mercy Health may include programs to support these people in their homes, she said.

At the facility, Sister McKenzie observed, the average age of the residents — it is currently 88 — is increasing and patients are needing more care. Mercy Rehabilitation officials are looking into ways to meet these growing needs and to continue to provide quality care.

Balian, for one, is hoping that Mercy Rehab's history of care continues well into the future.

"If there's a time when I need care, I would choose Mercy Rehab," Balian concluded.

# Priest, author continues efforts to share intriguing portrait

By Lee Strong  
Senior staff writer

Father Joseph Girzone believes he has a simple message to share.

"What I do is just talk about Jesus, trying to give a portrait of Jesus people can understand," Father Girzone said in a recent telephone interview from Washington, D.C. "Over the years as a priest, and when I give talks, I find a lot of people don't know Jesus."

But once people know Jesus, Father Girzone said, they can begin to base their actions on asking themselves in difficult situations, "What would Jesus do?"

Father Girzone has tried to create a portrait of Jesus and what he believes Jesus would do through his series of Joshua books, his 1994 book of spiritual reflections, "Never Alone: A Personal Way to God," and talks such as the one he gave at Rochester's Corpus Christi Church Sept. 20.

Since the publication of his extremely popular book "Joshua" in 1983, Father Girzone has written a number of best-selling sequels in which Joshua — Jesus, returning to earth today — has helped resolve the conflicts in Northern Ireland ("Joshua and the Children") and the Middle East ("Joshua in the Holy

Land"), and has assisted a bishop reform his diocese ("The Shepherd"), using some of the ideas Father Girzone has about the church.

It is these ideas about the church — and Father Girzone's critiques of some church rules — that have made him a target of criticism.

Father Girzone in his books has indeed raised questions about church teachings concerning marriage, divorce, ecumenism, married priests and women's role in the church.

But Father Girzone, whose customary tone of voice is gentle and low-key bristles at suggestions that he is out to attack the church.

"I love the church deeply," Father Girzone said. "I'm totally dedicated to the church. It's a living extension of Christ."

What he attacks, the priest said, is the use of the church for personal gain and an excessive legalism he sees as rivaling that of the scribes and pharisees — people whom Jesus criticized.

"It's the same kind of people who had problems in the Gospel who have problems with 'Joshua,'" Father Girzone said. "Are we going to be the church of the Good Shepherd, or are we going to be the church of the scribes and pharisees?"

And rather than hurting the church, he has helped preserve it, Father Gir-

zone claims.

"I get letters from priests who say the 'Joshua' books saved their priesthood," Father Girzone said. "I've gotten thousands of letters from people who say the 'Joshua' books have led them back to the church."

Father Girzone's own vision of the church developed over years as a priest and a teacher.

Ordained a Carmelite priest in 1955, the Albany, N.Y. native taught in a number of Catholic schools — including the former Our Lady of Mount Carmel High School in Auburn. In 1964, Father Girzone became a priest of the Albany diocese, continuing to teach and also work in parishes. He also served on a government human-rights commission through which he helped negotiate a settlement to a riot in the Schenectady County Jail.

In 1980, Father Girzone was forced to retire from administrative duties at his doctor's advice. He then began writing full-time to support himself.

"Joshua" was initially released as a self-publishing effort. In the book, Jesus, in the form of Joshua, suddenly appears in a small town in central New York modeled somewhat after Auburn. He began to attract attention and to challenge some church teachings, eventually being summoned to Rome for a meeting with the Vatican authorities.

The book garnered a word-of-mouth following and eventually attracted a major publisher.

Father Girzone has used the books to

explore issues he discovered through years in ministry — and from people he has heard from and met in recent years.

"People are hurting," Father Girzone said. "You'd be shocked at the hurt and depression people live in. The loneliness is terrible."

Through "Joshua," Father Girzone said, he is attempting "to get people to try to be more compassionate."

And once again, he said, the way to become more compassionate is through coming to know Jesus.

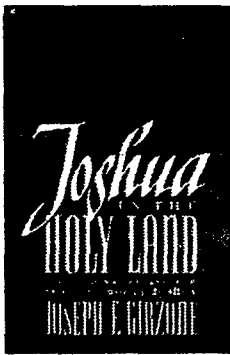
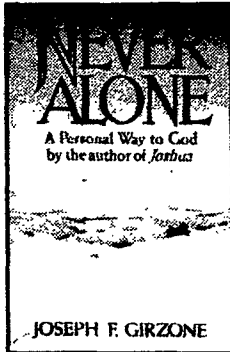
"Develop a personal relationship with Jesus," Father Girzone said. "Try to do what Jesus would do."

Father Girzone said the problem became clearer to him after he visited a country where Buddhism is a major religion. In his hotel room he found a book on the Buddha's life, which also summed up Buddhist teachings. Coupling the teachings with the life of Buddha helped to bring them to life, he observed.

"I wondered, 'Why don't we do that with Jesus?'" Father Girzone said. To address this need, he is considering opening "Joshua centers" around the country to study Jesus' life.

Saying that the solution to our problems is turning to Jesus may sound simple, Father Girzone acknowledged. "But it's not easy. I don't make religion easy. We don't become saints overnight. We have a long struggle," he said.

"To allow yourself to be open to God, it's so simple," Father Girzone added, "but it's so frightening."



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