

# Rochester woman battles cancer with a joyful heart

By Lee Strong  
Senior staff writer

ROCHESTER — Ira Watkins can no longer smile due to the ravages of cancer.

Three surgeries on her face in the last 18 months have left her without part of her jaw.

Watkins has also suffered from diabetes and heart problems for years. Meanwhile, Joseph, her husband, is on dialysis due to kidney problems. And she is, in effect, raising two of her four grandchildren because one of her daughters is having personal problems.

Nevertheless, the St. Francis of Assisi parishioner exudes good humor and a deep faith despite her troubles — bringing smiles to all those who meet her.

"God really has brought me through some really trying times," Watkins acknowledged. "If I didn't believe in God deeply and the Blessed Mother, I could not have come through."

Indeed, taking a typically positive view of her life, she declared, "I tell people God always gives me the best."

Watkins herself has always given it her best, observed Father Peter Deckman, currently co-pastor of Penn Yan's St. Michael's Parish and St. Andrew's Parish in Dundee. Father Deckman came to know Watkins when he served as St. Francis of Assisi's pastor from 1987-94.

"She's a beautiful lady," Father Deckman said. "She's a lady of very deep faith — and she expresses it in a human way. She's soft spoken, but powerful."

St. Francis of Assisi Parish, Father Deckman continued, "is a very loving parish, and she was a part of making it a very loving place."

Watkins joined St. Francis of Assisi Church some 20 years ago. Although she no longer lives in the parish's neighborhood, she continues to attend the church faithfully every Sunday. She also tries to attend as many parish events as possible.

"I'm staying at St. Francis — that's my home," she said. "I'm not going to leave it until they carry me out."

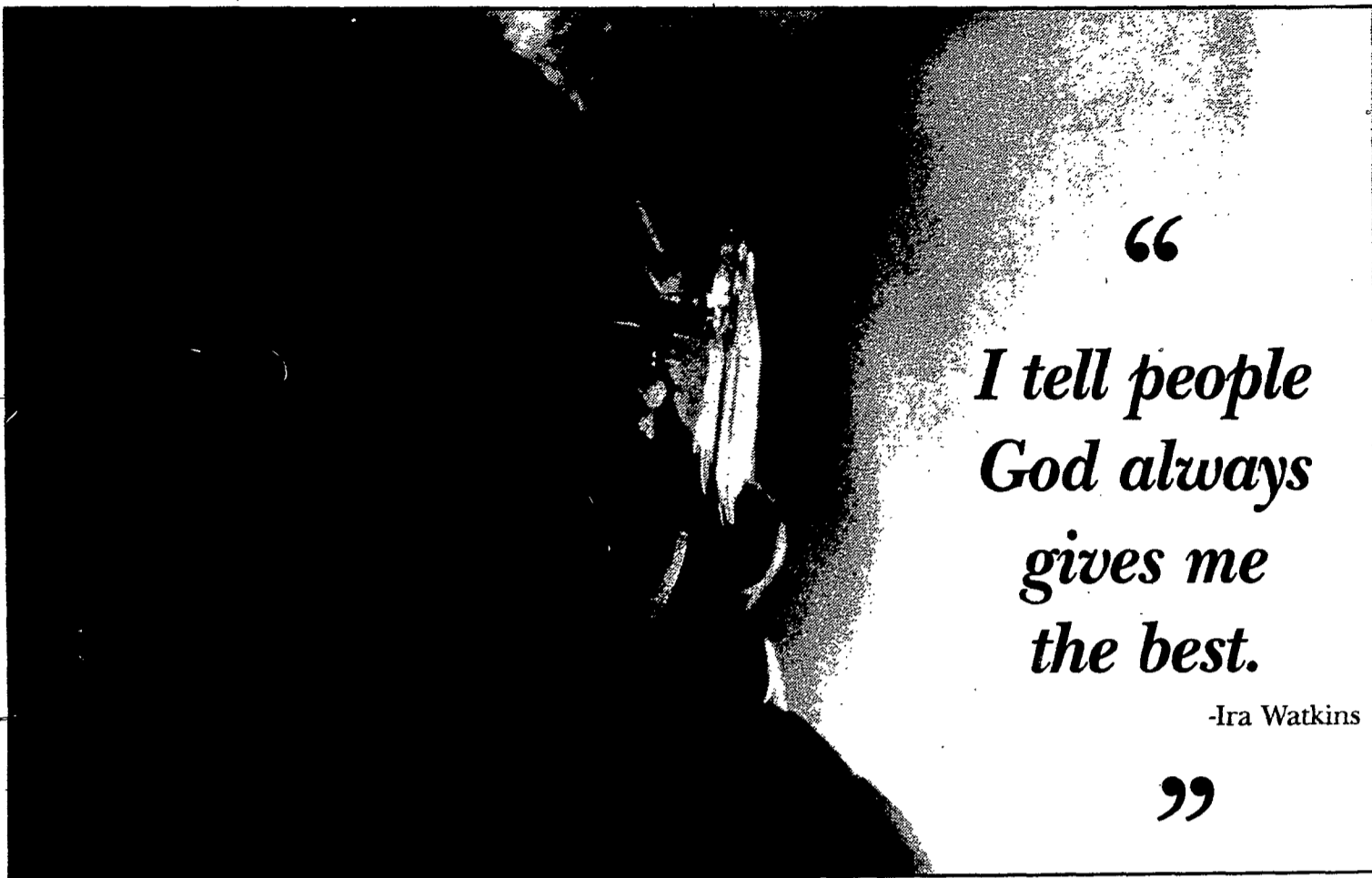
A South Carolina native, Watkins married and moved to Rochester about 36 years ago. The lifelong Catholic had three children and attended several different churches before settling in at St. Francis of Assisi Church, where she has served as a eucharistic minister and as a delegate to the Rochester diocese's Seventh Synod.

Parishioners have been very supportive during her battle with cancer, especially following her surgeries last March and November, and May of this year, Watkins said.

"I tell you, there wasn't a day there wasn't somebody from St. Francis to sit there and visit," she said. "It's a small church, but it's a loving family."

Currently recovering from her latest operation, she said doctors have thus far failed to detect signs of the cancer's return. Watkins is anxious to return to more parish activities, including her duties as a eucharistic minister.

Her primary focus currently, however, is on two of her grandchildren who are living with her at this time: 8-year-old Leannah, a student at St. Boniface School, and 3-year-old Anthony. She is scrambling to find money to pay tuition and buy them clothes.



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”

—Ira Watkins

S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Ira Watkins, a delegate during the diocesan Synod and an active member of Rochester's St. Francis of Assisi Church, is battling cancer while caring for her two grandchildren.

"(God's) keeping me going, because he knows I need to be here for my grandchildren," she said.

Watkins' thoughts one particular day last week were on Leannah, whose birthday was Sept. 8 and for whom Watkins was planning a birthday party. This proud grandmother intends to be play a big part in her grandchild's future.

"I want to buy my granddaughter's wedding dress," she said.

She has also been active in efforts to reach out to black Catholics. She was a counselor at the Black Catholic Revival

four years ago, and hopes to be involved in similar efforts in the future.

Although her faith and beliefs are strong, and she does not hesitate to express her opinion, Watkins is humble about her own limitations.

"I'm not an educated woman," she observed. "My education comes through Jesus. He shows me things to do, and I try to do it. I won't say I won't fail, but I will try to do it."

And that attitude prevails when it comes to her cancer.

"I'm not the only person that has cancer," Watkins said. "I'm not going to let it get me down. I promised God I'm not going to let it get me down. I'm not going to let it get me down until I can't move."

In refusing to give up, Watkins also keeps in mind her grandchildren and all the people who have been supportive of her during her illness.

"I have to keep myself going for the good people who believe in me," she concluded. "That's where my strength is coming from."

## Thoughts to Consider



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