

# CONTINUED...

## RIJM

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members in contact with inmates. Colburn served as director of RIJM's Families Project, which began in 1987 and was integrated into the ministry's overall organization in 1991 due to financial difficulties.

Indeed, the ministry came close to ending in 1992 due to its own financial problems. However, a 30-day campaign begun with an appeal to the public raised almost \$10,000, and today RIJM is able to employ Colburn and a part-time staff member, the Rev. Pearl Cunningham of Mount Olivet Baptist Church in Rochester.

With the help of its volunteers, RIJM is experiencing more stable times, Colburn noted, although the ministry could always use a few more hands. Those interested in volunteering undergo a six-hour orientation session that acquaints them with RIJM and the legal aspects of working in the penal system.

Volunteers must be screened for any kind of criminal record, though RIJM has used ex-inmates in its ministry, Colburn said. He pointed out that such factors as the gravity of the ex-inmate's offense are weighed when reviewing a potential volunteer's chances.

Volunteers do serve in capacities from visiting and talking to inmates for an hour each week to helping prisoners arrange family visits or tutoring them in an academic area. The inmates' legal cases are never discussed with volunteers, Colburn noted.

"We don't want to get involved in anything where we could wind up on the witness stand against them," he added.

In fact many volunteers only give inmates their first names in order to protect their privacy, he said.

On the other hand, some volunteers have formed long-lasting relationships with inmates, even corresponding with them when they are transferred to other facilities, Colburn added.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Tickets for the Nov. 5 dinner are \$40 per person, and reservations are required. To learn more about RIJM, call 716/325-1942, or write to the ministry at 121 N. Fitzhugh St., Rochester, N.Y. 14614.



Angela Palmieri, who also serves on the Diocesan Synod Implementation Commission, is starting a small Christian community at the prison.

## Ministry

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God go I," seems to be the hallmark attitude of prison ministry volunteers, Nielsen explained.

"I think it's that often in their lives, these guys have never had anyone love them for who they are," she said.

Those thoughts were echoed by Jody Graves, another volunteer with Corpus' prison groups, which are overseen by Rogers House ministry, a program that offers transitional housing and employment to ex-inmates. Graves, who has seen some of her own family members go to jail over the years, noted that most of the inmates she has encountered experienced uncaring or broken homes, which caused them to grow up a lot faster than their peers.

"They just strike me as broken little boys who never had a chance to be little boys," she said.

Least readers get the impression that everyone goes into prison ministry with a bleeding heart, the story of Joe Buggie, another Corpus prison ministry volunteer, suggests otherwise.

Buggie frankly admitted that until he attended a week-long retreat that included visits to many of Corpus' social ministries, he shared many citizens' negative and dismissive attitudes toward inmates. But through the retreat and his weekly

volunteer work at Groveland, he has changed his mind about why so many are where they are.

"I've come to the conclusion that I'm part of a system that fosters it," said Buggie, who participates in discussion groups with Groveland inmates as part of his volunteer efforts.

Citizens tolerate too much violence in the mass media, and this unduly influences children, he explained. Meanwhile, people often reject opportunities to show love and compassion to those who did not receive it at home, Buggie said. He added that the vast majority of criminal defendants are poor, and that he rarely meets an inmate who could afford to hire his own lawyer.

"That tells me I can buy my freedom," Buggie said. "I'm not where they are."

Many inmates long to be where the rest of us are, and by volunteering to come into prisons and talk to them, Catholics can show these prisoners that the outside world values that desire, according to Deacon Gregory Kiley, chaplain at Cayuga Correctional Facility in Moravia, Cayuga County.

Although regulations now prohibit him from doing so, the deacon used to bring his entire family to the facility every Christmas to celebrate with the inmates. Prisoners, who rarely saw their own families, were grateful that the deacon was willing to share his home life with them, he said.

"It's overwhelming just seeing someone not in uniform," he commented.

No one would agree more strongly with those sentiments than Deacon Nemesio Martinez, chaplain at Groveland's neighboring facility, Livingston County Correctional, where inmates participate in drug- and alcohol-rehabilitation programs. Catholic volunteers at LCC play a crucial role in helping prisoners cope with their fate, he said.

"They see the volunteers as a piece of heaven falling on the facility," he added.

Several prison-ministry experts pointed out that the trust and caring that develops between a prison-ministry volunteer and an inmate can lead to rehabilitative breakthroughs that would not otherwise happen.

In a letter to the *Catholic Courier* praising Palmieri, Richard Dippolito, a Groveland inmate, credited her work with pointing him toward the straight and narrow.

"I cannot promise you that I will leave prison never to return to crime," Dippolito frankly admitted. "(B)ut I can tell you that should I do so, it will not be because of the expensive vocational, academic or counseling programs offered here. It will be because of Angela; because of the part of herself that she leaves with us each week."

Linda Burrell-Hale was herself an inmate at Groveland when it still housed a women's facility. She now regularly participates in "Residents Encounter Christ," a three-day retreat put on at various correctional facilities throughout the diocese. The program combines numerous talks centered on the theme of an inmate dying to self, rising with Christ and committing to the Lord.

Burrell-Hale credited a REC with helping to turn her life around when she was in prison, and she noted that such retreats enable and encourage inmates to become acquainted with other Christians in the system. Fellow Christian inmates can support one another's faith in an environment often indifferent or even hostile to Jesus' message, she said.

"You become more involved in trying to help someone next to you rather than trying to protect yourself," she said.

She added that not every prison conversion happens overnight, but still praised the REC as the possible beginning of a lifelong relationship with God.

"It doesn't have to be a Saul/Paul experience," she said, referring to the famed evangelist's dramatic conversion from persecutor to proclaimer of the Gospel. "But once they've done (a REC), they're more open to the Word."



John L. Lioi

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