

# SENIOR LIFESTYLES

## Former educator a certified 'buddy' to seniors

By Kathleen Schwar  
Staff writer

Teaching children to read and add was a great joy during her 44 years as teacher and principal, Sister Ambrosine Casey, SSJ, recalls.

While she still misses that, 13 years after retiring, she is happy reading letters and finding phone numbers for people 10 times their age in her work with seniors.

"I think it's people, whether it's the little ones or the other end of life. I just like people, I think that's the thing," she said.

Sister Ambrosine, 78, retired "three times ago," she laughed. She taught school for 30 years, served as principal for 14, and was secretary for St. Anthony of Padua rectory for eight years.

And please don't mention when she suffered her four heart attacks, she begs, least someone assume they resulted from stress of certain work or associates. She will say that she went in for quadruple bypass surgery in 1991, however, and, "That slowed me down a while."

Then she began caring for a friend she'd taught with at St. Francis Xavier School in Rochester in 1943, at St. Joseph's Convent Infirmary. Her friend died in 1993, and Sister Ambrosine stayed on to answer phones and help other residents.

"Some can't see to read a phone number, or can't dial the phone, or need a letter written," she said, adding others need help handling audiocassettes.

Wanting to do more, she became a nursing home advocate. She took a 40-hour training course through LIFESPAN, a community agency whose programs deal with the second half of life, was certified through the state as an ombudsman ("every man's buddy"), and was assigned to Arbor Hill Living Center in Rochester last fall.

As an ombudsman, she may visit any time of day to observe conditions, listen to residents' complaints, and represent residents in working with staff to resolve complaints. Her monthly reports are compiled with others for the New York State Office for the Aging to analyze. She is one of 29 ombudsmen assigned in Monroe County, which has 7,300 long-term care residents.

"I love it," she said of her new work. "I haven't done anything dramatic yet. But it's the small things that make life more pleasant for them."

She is trained to respond to anything from neglect to abuse, but at this stage has dealt mostly with locating missing sweaters and sorting through food complaints, which are common problems in nursing homes.

"Maybe it's just a feeling of doing something for somebody she can't do herself," she said. "There is such a need for volunteers."

"I think some people are afraid to be with older people," she added. "But they were young once, too."

*"Maybe it's just a feeling of doing something for somebody she can't do for herself."*

Sister Ambrosine Casey, SSJ



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Sister Ambrosine Casey, SSJ, serves as one of 29 ombudsmen assigned to Monroe County. Sister Ambrosine also taught school for 30 years and served as principal for a combined 14 years at three diocesan Catholic schools.

Having been curious how the infirmary compares with nursing homes, she immediately spotted one source of tension most infirmary patients don't have. The infirmary, she said, is "different from Arbor Hill and other nursing homes, because we know each other. It's like a large convent. We lived with or taught with each other. We're not strangers to each other, which is great. It would be more difficult to have a strange roommate."

Residents of homes are generally "at the mercy" of their caretakers, she also observed. Still, the shocking rape last

year and resulting pregnancy of a comatose young woman at Westfall Health Care Center in Brighton is certainly an exception, she said. She and her seven SSJ housemates at Church of the Blessed Sacrament Convent have had long discussions about it.

"It bothers me that that would happen to any nursing home patient, but it didn't deter me," Sister Ambrosine said. If anything, she added, it does point out the need for staff and others to be observant and to walk the halls.

Her ombudsman tag doesn't identify her as a woman religious, but somehow

people seem to figure it out.

"One man called me sister in 10 minutes," she said. "I suppose they just get that feeling, they knew sisters in school."

Sister Ambrosine will celebrate her 60th jubilee this year. She explained that she took her name from her grade school, St. Ambrose, at the suggestion of the pastor. Later she chose not to return to her given name (Veronica) when other women religious did, after the Second Vatican Council.

That decision came at about the time the church removed some saints from its General Roman Calendar in 1969, and issued revised General Norms for the Liturgical Year. Some saints, including St. Christopher, were removed after research was conducted to separate fact from legend.

"I figured I'd be safe; they'll never take St. Ambrose," she laughed, noting St. Ambrose is a Doctor of the Church.

Sister Ambrosine was the first girl to attend St. Ambrose School through eighth grade, she said. Her Irish parents sent her to St. Ambrose School because the school in their own neighborhood was German. It was the teachers at St. Ambrose who inspired her to enter her vocation.

Today, she noted with some regret, "Many students go through Catholic schools and only know one or two sisters."

She doesn't know of any school that has a full faculty of laypeople, she said, but believes it could work.

"The ones I worked with were very steeped in the faith," she said, "wanting to pass on the faith to youngsters."

"It's happening in every phase of the church," she continued. "We never had laypeople at the altar, reading the readings for Mass. So I think it'll work. I think the laity will be the salvation of Catholic education," she concluded. "There are so many devoted laypeople in the Catholic Church."

### Thoughts to Consider



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Funeral Director

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