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Quadriplegic is a primary mover in parish fund drive

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — It doesn't matter whether you're perfectly healthy or paralyzed from the neck down. The key component of volunteerism, Bill White says, is the willingness to make an effort.

White has been a quadriplegic for 29 years. Yet he has found the means to sell \$800 worth of T-shirts in a fundraising effort for St. Bridget's Church.

"Anybody can do this. People who think they're helpless aren't helpless," said White in a recent interview from his hospital bed at Strong Memorial Hospital.

"One person thinks he can't make a difference, like voting. But everybody can make a difference if they try," White stated. "I vote every year."

The 47-year-old White has resided in the rehabilitation unit at Strong since 1969. He was permanently paralyzed at the age of 18 in a mishap during a gymnastics routine; he accidentally landed on the floor while attempting a maneuver on the parallel bars.

White, who breathes through a respirator, is listed as a "C-2" — the second-most severe form of quadriplegia. He noted that he was not expected to survive for very long following his accident, but that he is now the oldest living C-2 victim. He has endured 48 operations in all.

White became involved in the St. Bridget's cause through Mike McBride, his longtime friend. McBride, a building inspector for

the City of Rochester, organized the fundraiser in 1994 after finding that several parts of the 121-year-old St. Bridget's structure needed extensive repair.

McBride spearheaded a drive to sell Irish hats, T-shirts and sweat shirts for the financially strapped parish, which was founded by Irish immigrants. Most of the current St. Bridget's parishioners are inner-city blacks and Hispanics.

The merchandise is sold by volunteers at Rochester-area bars and churches, and at such events as the annual downtown St. Patrick's Day parade. With T-shirts and hats selling for \$10 each, and sweat shirts for \$20, McBride said this project has already raised \$35,000 for building repair and renovation at St. Bridget's.

One of the fundraiser's biggest supporters is White, who sells the shirts and hats right from his hospital bed. He keeps stacks of the bright green apparel in his room, and makes sales to hospital employees and visitors of other patients in his unit.

"I called virtually everybody that I know at the hospital, which is quite a few people," White remarked. "I've gotten to know families, and they've sent checks to me."

McBride, a parishioner at Blessed Sacrament Church, said he was initially surprised by White's fundraising abilities.

"He was selling them like crazy. I said, 'What did you do, kiss the Blarney stone?' He said, 'No, I swallowed it,'" McBride re-



Matthew Scott/Staff photographer

Although he has been confined to his hospital bed for 29 years, Bill White has been an instrumental part of a fundraising drive for St. Bridget's Church, which needs building repairs and renovations.

called.

White was recently lauded for his fundraising by Father Anthony Mugavero, the pastor at St. Bridget's. Father Mugavero presented a plaque to White that stated, "A special thanks! May God bless you for your tremendous effort in helping St. Bridget's serve the poor and needy."

Though he was pleased by this honor, White said he doesn't seek personal recognition for his efforts. Rather, he'd like his actions to motivate other people to-

ward helping St. Bridget's.

"If it wasn't for the cause, I wouldn't be involved. But it's fun; you feel like you're accomplishing something," he said. "I think it's contagious. I hope it's contagious."

McBride, who has spent countless hours visiting his friend over the years, said that White shows tremendous compassion for others despite his own physical condition.

"He's a very unselfish person. When he sees you, the first thing

he asks is, 'How are you doing?'" McBride remarked.

McBride added that White is also a crack chess player.

"He can beat you in three moves," McBride said, prompting a mild correction from his friend.

"Four," White said with a smile.

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EDITORS' NOTE: Those interested in purchasing Irish hats and shirts may call St. Bridget's Church at 716/454-4236.



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