

A child shall lead them



Andrew's Center helps families through the years

By Kathleen Schwar.
Staff writer

Joy and her four sons put up their tree long before Christmas. They found it in the garage of the house they rent in Rochester.

As for gifts and a turkey dinner to help add to the festivities, they can count on the Andrew's Center.

To a family that has suffered multiple trauma — this one has dealt with two shootings, paralysis, a house fire, numerous moves, children's learning disabilities, debt and other troubles — the Andrew's Center has been a godsend.

"If it wasn't for them, I wouldn't have survived with the kids," said Joy, who once had a daughter living at the center.

The center, at the St. James Convent in Irondequoit, is licensed to raise foster children with special needs. But its operators, Sisters Kathleen Kolmer, RSM, and Rita Habecker, SSND, follow the children and their families long after they leave.

"Our outreach follows them into their 20s or when they have their own kids," Sister Kolmer said. She estimated providing 75 to 100 families with emotional support, child care, and food and clothing throughout the year. They provide the help to families they come to know well.

"Some of the kids have grown to adults and are really struggling to find their way in life. And the holidays are hard. A lot don't have family support or any family at all," Sister Kolmer said.

"If there is a crisis they often turn back to us for assistance, be it clothes or food.

"Our outreach program has grown so much," she said. "We work with families to try to keep the families unified."

While currently caring for five children, all preschoolers, she and Sister Habecker also have been collecting Christmas gifts to wrap for 200 children they've come to know through their work. Donations come in from such places as churches, businesses and giving-tree programs. Sisters of Mercy and women volunteers pitch in at times with various duties at the center.

The gift-giving remains comparatively small and personal in contrast with the need, but is more than enough to handle. Sister Kathleen always regrets



Matthew Scott/Staff photographer

Sister Kathleen Kolmer, RSM, and Sister Rita Habecker, SSND, (left center and center) greet Stephanie Begandy, Maggie Torres and Colleen Starszak (left to right), delivering gifts Dec. 9 donated by Xerox Corp. employees for children helped by the Andrew's Center.

that when calls come in from other people who hear of the program, "I have to say I'm sorry."

Joy, whose family will receive some of those donations (and whose



Sister Habecker (left) and Sister Kolmer sort the gifts donated to the center.

last name is being withheld for the sake of the children), became close to the Andrew's Center women after her daughter was placed at the center a dozen years ago. Although

that placement proved traumatic to her, she said she's glad her daughter went there and not to another facility.

"Kathleen and them are a lifesaver," she said. "That's a good program. They had (the daughter) baptized. And everything they did they'd call me and tell me what was going on."

The women religious cared about her entire family, she noted. She recalled her surprise during one of her first visits to the center, around the holidays. "Rita came out and said, 'I have presents for the kids.' I said, 'You do?'"

Joy, who has epilepsy she can't always control, had three daughters and one son at home at the time, and was pregnant. The Andrew's Center staff would later help the family when welfare was temporarily cut off and numerous other times when the food needed to be stretched.

Joy remembers that when it came time for her daughter to leave the center, "I asked, 'Is it OK if I call you once in a while?'" and Kathleen said, "We're not going to lose touch."

When the children's father was shot and partially paralyzed while working as a parking attendant for bingo at Holy Family Church last year, Joy called every other day to update them on his condition and to talk. Parking expenses added up when she visited him in the hospital for seven months. To help her avoid having to spend more money, Sister Kolmer provided snacks for those visits. Months before, Joy's oldest son was shot seven times in a shooting apparently intended for the person he was sitting near in a car. Sisters Kolmer and Habecker were there to be of support then, as well.

"Some of these families do go through lots of tragedies," Sister Kolmer said. "You would think they are making up stories if you didn't know them."

It isn't her job to be judgmental, she said, "but you always have to be advocating for the child."

"It is amazing the strength of these people... the strength they have to have to just be able to endure life.

"They are an example to us," she said. "We always try to rush around in life. To me, it is a privilege to work with these people. They make you stop and think."

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