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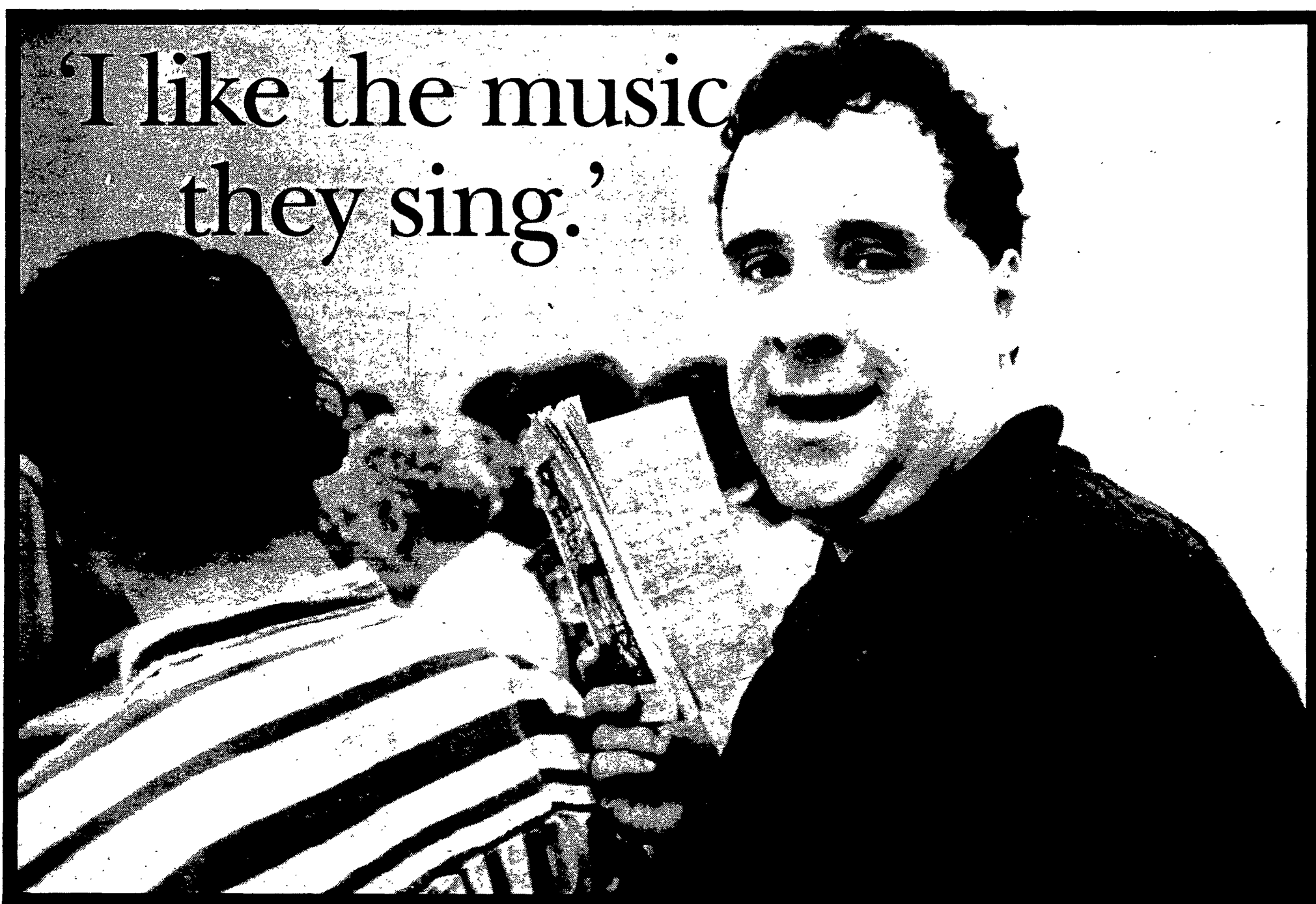
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St. James parishioner, David A. Russell

People with developmental disabilities contribute talents to diocesan parishes

In addition to working two jobs and living in his own apartment, David A. Russell sings every Sunday at 9:30 a.m. Mass in St. James Church, Irondequoit. His favorite hymn is "Immaculate Mary."

"I like it," he said with a smile as he sat in his home. He lives in a four-apartment residence operated by Catholic Charities Community and Residential Services. Russell added that he joined the St. James choir 20 years ago because "I like the music they sing."

Russell also was a bingo worker at the church for years, and he especially enjoys the parish's coffee hours following the 9:30 a.m. Mass.

"I like to be around people," he said.

All in all, he's one of thousands of diocesan Catholics who work hard, pay their bills and try to give as much time to the church as they can.

But the 39-year-old Catholic is also one of hundreds of Catholics with developmental disabilities in the Diocese of Rochester. These Catholics often face mental and/or physical challenges that the majority of Catholics do not have to face.

To help parishes better integrate Catholics with disabilities into their communities, Catholic Charities Community & Residential Services last year created the position of community awareness coordinator, a position held by Lyn Zyla. Zyla said she has already conducted several workshops with parish catechists and liturgical volunteers on working with people with developmental disabilities.

Zyla's office is one of many developments over the last several years that

point to the church's growing awareness of people with developmental disabilities. The U.S. bishops issued a pastoral statement on people with disabilities, both physical and mental, in 1978, and "Guidelines for Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities" in 1995.

"Catholics with disabilities, as well as those who minister to or with them, often point out that pastoral practice with regard to the celebration of the sacraments varies greatly from diocese to diocese, even from parish to parish," the 1995 document said.

Zyla pointed out that while some parishes here in the diocese, such as St. Ambrose Church in Irondequoit, have been reaching out to people with disabilities for the last couple of decades, work still needs to be done by many churches in the 1990s.

"I think a lot of our parishes are not aware of people in their communities with developmental disabilities," she said.

Zyla and other experts also pointed out that Catholics with disabilities and their families also have a responsibility to speak up about what they want from their parishes and what they want to give to their parishes.

"These people need to let their parishes know they are there, and that they would like to participate in worship and parish activities," she said.

But what exactly is a developmental disability? New York State legally defines developmental disabilities as attributable to mental retardation or any condition related to mental retardation or similar to it that impairs

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Story by Rob Cullivan • Photograph by Matthew Scott