

FEATURE

Program emphasizes spiritual journey

By Stephen Sears
Catholic News Service

ERIE, Pa. — They are the "sandwich generation": grown children caught in the middle of providing for their own lives — and families — and caring for their aging parents.

And if a parent is sick or dying, the emotional stress can be overwhelming for a guilt-ridden caregiver — with devastating results.

That's why Erie's Mercy Center on Aging recently sponsored a two-day seminar titled "You and Your Aging Parent," designed to help people cope with the realities of juggling their lives and caring for their aging parents.

Mercy Sister Mary Dolores Jablonski, executive director of the Mercy Center on Aging, said the focus of the seminar was not on the "practical stuff," like liv-

ing wills, Medicaid or nursing homes. This seminar focused on God's part in the aging and dying process.

"Our whole life's journey is in God's hands," Sister Jablonski said. "Sometimes we feel that we are the ones handling everything. We must understand that God takes care of all of us."

The seminar, the second offered by the Mercy Center on Aging, centers on a program developed by Applied Gerontology Educational Services Inc., based in Missouri. Using videotapes and discussions led by a facilitator, the program focuses on the "heart issues" of caring for an aging parent.

The program helps participants understand the needs of an aging parent and provides them with strategies to help break down barriers and open lines of communication. It also covers how to deal confidently with death and

grief.

"It really emphasizes that life is a spiritual journey," said facilitator Alice Chess, an assistant at Erie's L'Arche Community. "As we go through the different stages of life, we need to see the strength of our relationship with God."

Chess said people must realize that dying is actually an essential part of the living process created by God. The seminar, she said, helps both child and parent come to grips with aging and dying. What can turn the process into something spiritually rewarding is the quality and depth of the parent-child relationship.

Delving deeper into spirituality and downplaying the mundane is a must, she said.

"It's not always, 'Do you need more groceries?'" Chess explained. "It's, 'How do you feel about dying, Mom?'"

Sister Jablonski said many parents, facing their own mortality, feel compelled to put their lives in order and need more than surface conversation.

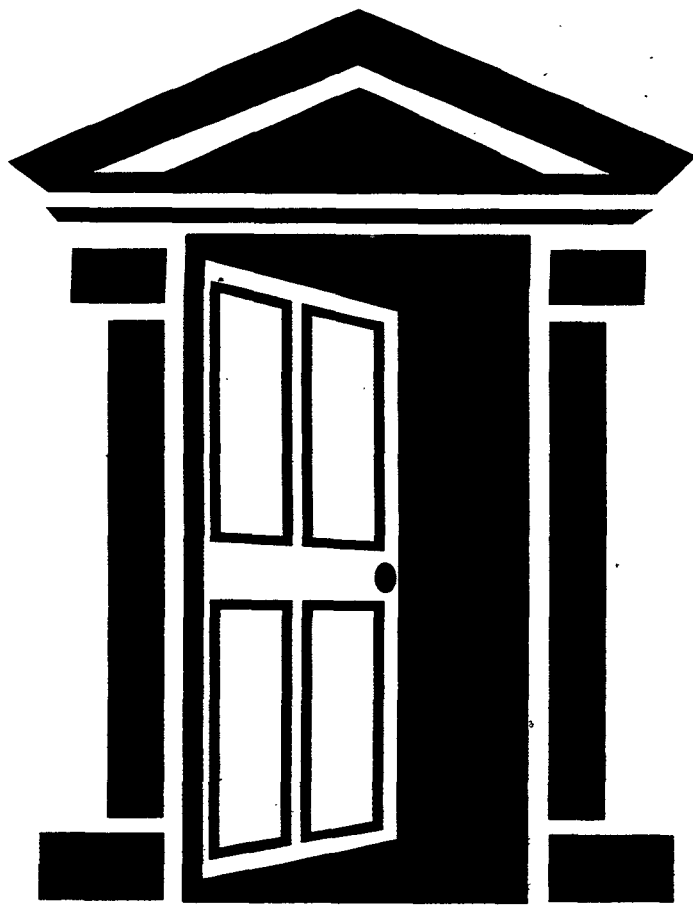
"Older people are more ready and able to focus on the spiritual dimension and want to look at their life and see meaning and purpose to it," she explained.

Chess said many children, because they see themselves in their dying parents, aren't equipped to deal with the situation. Many children also feel guilty because they can't solve all the problems brought on by an aging parent.

Chess advises them to let go. Although the problems seem overwhelming, aging and death are natural and are faced best with prayerful dignity, she said.

"It can't be fixed, because nothing is broken," Chess said.

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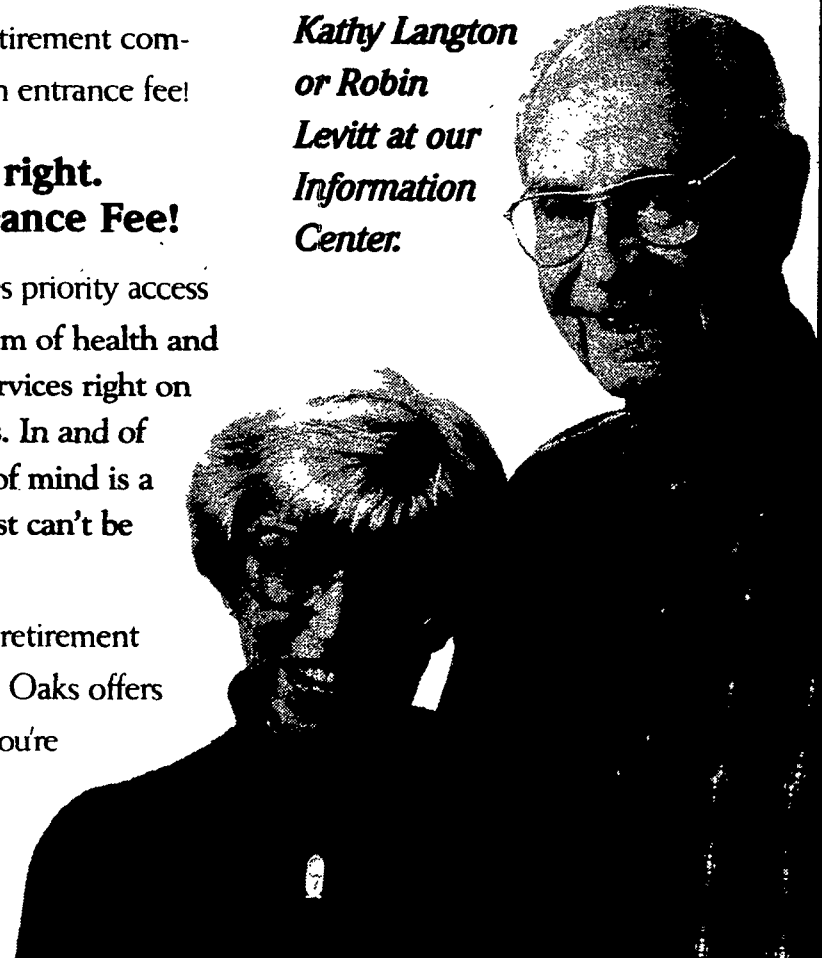
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