

Angels Among Us



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

Mercy High School seniors Jeanne Kowal, left, and Margaux Sauls load food and gifts to be delivered to long-term patients of the Rochester Psychiatric Center Dec 17. Students held a Christmas party at the center for the patients. Mercy students brought the gifts to school and wrapped them earlier in the week.

Mercy girls spread cheer to Psych Center patients

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Many people may question whether their efforts at Christmas time are really worth all the hustle and bustle.

Rochester Psychiatric Center patients would answer a resounding "yes" — thanks to the ongoing work of students and staff at Our Lady of Mercy High School.

Over the last 40 years, Mercy has celebrated an annual Christmas party at the Psychiatric Center. Nearly 150 students and adult volunteers — and approximately the same amount of patients — took part in this year's event, held Dec. 17.

"Seeing the patients' expression on their faces when the students surround them — there's nothing like it, it's as simple as that," said Psychiatric Center recreation therapist Jim Sackeli, who has helped organize the party for the past 20 years.

"I enjoy coming here every year," said a beaming Sandra Harry, moments before she was presented with a huge box bulging with gifts.

The Wednesday night celebration began with a singing and dancing exhibition by the Mercy Show Choir, followed by cookies and ice cream. The climactic event was an elaborate gift presentation during which Mercy students gave more than 20 presents to each patient.

"The magic really starts when the presents come, because the students and patients have gotten to know each other," said Sister Joan McAteer, RSM, a Mercy theology teacher who helped coordinate the event.

Mercy freshman Jan Wopperer — who was volunteering at the party for the first time — saw that magic in one of the patients she assisted.

"I was about to turn around and leave, and he grabbed my hand and said, 'I'm so happy.' His hand was trembling, he was so happy," said Jan, a parishioner at St. Christopher's Church in North Chili.

Throughout the evening, students sat at tables with the patients and formed quick bonds with them. For instance, Mike Cieplinski had a grand old time with Mercy sophomore Jill Gersey, 15, who helped him unwrap his presents.

"Tell Santa and all the elves we like (the presents)," Cieplinski told Jill as he led his table in a round of applause.

Upon unwrapping a deck of cards, Cieplinski commented, "Just what I need! The one I had for the last six months only has 49 cards in it."

Sister Dismas Foster, RSM, began the Christmas party in the late 1950s. Also during that period, she began a weekly sewing club in which Mercy students work with Psychiatric Center outpatients. Sister Dismas — currently a staff member at Rochester's Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church — remains involved in both activities today.

To prepare for this year's Christmas party, students and staff busied themselves buying gifts and baking.

"We baked 2,000 to 3,000 cookies over the weekend, and the kids frosted them all," Sister McAteer said.

The gift baskets — which contain candy, clothing and other goodies — were also made possible through private donations.

"We were able to buy baseball hats for all the men this year," Sister McAteer noted.

One former Mercy student developed such a strong commitment to this event, Sister Dismas recalled, that "when she got her first job after college she sent in her first paycheck to support the Christmas party."

Sister Dismas said that the Psychiatric Center patients are equally attached to the tradition.

"They get individualized attention, which is something that is not plentiful in their lives," Sister Dismas said, explaining that many Psychiatric Center residents have no family to visit them or give Christmas presents. Sackeli added that most patients rarely leave the the Psychiatric Center grounds.

Mercy students, also, are conscious of how meaningful the Christmas party is for the patients.

"Our theology teacher (Sister McAteer) said they're really lonely, so they appreciate having people love them," said freshman Adria Farrington, 14, a parishioner at Rochester's Corpus Christi Church.

"I'm not sure what their usual lives are like, but I guess it's fun to have a change from what they usually do," said Jan's sister Nicole, 16, a Mercy junior.

Adria, when asked if she thought the Mercy students could be perceived as angels by the patients, replied, "Kind of."

"I know, when I go to sleep tonight, I'm going to be happy for what I did," Adria concluded.

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