

Life of this Riley devoted to protecting others' lives

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

GENEVA — Marguerite "Peg" Riley spent many a day picketing against abortion at such sites as Geneva General Hospital. But don't mistake her for someone who enjoyed it.

Although some passersby were sympathetic to her cause, she said, others made unpleasant faces at her. Nonetheless, she felt the fate that awaited the unborn through abortion was far worse than any difficulties she experienced demonstrating.

"I didn't like to do it," she said. "I didn't want to do it. But it was the thing to do, so I did it. I believe that it's a baby, not a blot of tissue."

Fighting for the unborn is not the only cause that has occupied the time of Riley, who coordinates pro-life activities for St. Francis DeSales Parish through its social ministry committee. A 1932 DeSales High School graduate, Riley is a retired business secretary who has spent much of her free time in the past three decades working for several different causes that protect and enhance life.

Her many activities earned her recognition last October from Catholic Charities of the Finger Lakes as a "Dedicated Social Minister."

Riley spoke to the *Catholic Courier* just before Christmas in the Geneva apartment she shares with her sister, Elizabeth. As she spoke, she detailed a long and rich involvement with various movements and efforts to protect the sanctity of human life.

As a member of the Legion of Mary, for example, Riley said she has visited with and prayed with inmates at Auburn Correctional Facility, a state prison. She has also lobbied against the death penalty and physician-assisted suicide. She regularly vis-

its elderly homebound people and the sick and has organized numerous baby showers for women facing unplanned pregnancies. She also helped establish a crisis pregnancy center to serve such women in Geneva.

But Riley is a rather modest woman, so you can probably learn more about her by talking to Anne Walsh, treasurer of the social ministry committee at St. Francis DeSales Parish. Walsh said Riley has done just about everything one person can do to serve both the church and the cause of life. Riley has been a eucharistic minister, a lector, a parish volunteer and a great friend, Walsh noted.

"Life without Peg Riley at St. Francis DeSales would just not be the same," Walsh said. "I just envy her goodness and rejoice in it. Anybody who needs anything — if you just call Peg, there's no such word as 'no.' She's goodness personified."

Riley noted that she is glad to live in a diocese that firmly supports the consistent life ethic, which sees abortion, war, poverty, euthanasia and the death penalty as threats to life. Promoting the ethic was made a diocesan priority during the 1993 Diocesan Synod.

"I believe that we have no right to take life anywhere," she said.

She acknowledged, however, that some people who share her views on abortion disagree with her opposition to executing convicted murderers. Families of murder victims may feel the death penalty is a valid response to the crime that killed their relative, she noted. However, her prison work made her view inmates as more than the sum of their crimes, she commented.

"From the time they were kids, they were brought up in the streets, and they didn't have a chance," she said of inmates she met who were serving life sentences.

She added that she's also known many



Greg Francis/Staff photographer
Marguerite Riley, shown at her Geneva home Dec. 23, has devoted herself to defending the rights of the unborn.

people who don't share her view that abortion is murder.

"I know a lot of people who have had abortions," she said. "I felt very bad about that, but you can't change some people's minds."

Although devoted to her causes, Riley does not just see life as an endless battle against the forces of the culture of death. She likes to relax by reading mysteries, and enjoys the spiritual works of Thomas Mer-

ton and Henri Nouwen.

"Even when I was young, I used to read religious books," she said. "They just appealed to my heart."

Whether or not the whole nation embraces the consistent life ethic is irrelevant to Riley's choice to commit to it. She said she'll never give up fighting to protect life both inside and outside the womb.

"You can't get discouraged," she said. "Then you're beat right there."

Thoughts to Consider



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