

# 'Unique' volunteers help Tioga Co. rural ministry

By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

When it comes to dedication, it's tough to beat the senior volunteer corps from Tioga County Rural Ministry.

And if that group was looking for a "poster senior," Kathryn Guinan would be a terrific candidate.

Guinan suffers from cataracts and recently endured a small stroke. Yet she refuses to let those ailments quash her involvement with the rural ministry, where she has helped out nearly every business day over the past five years.

"They said they couldn't go on without me. I say, 'Oh, you're just saying that!'" laughed Guinan, 77.

The rural ministry, operated by the Sisters of Mercy, maintains an emergency food pantry and offers other services, such as providing transportation and cash assistance, for families in need.

Guinan's list of activities has included stocking shelves at the food pantry; filling bags of groceries; and secretarial duties. She plans to keep a regular presence even though doctors have told her to take it easy.

"I can still go down and sit there with the people. We work closely together; we have a good time," Guinan said.

The volunteers not only enjoy their work, they are important to the operations of the ministry, according to Sister Lisette O'Brien, RSM, the ministry's director.

"I think that these people are very unique, they are just so supportive of us," Sister O'Brien said.

Bob Wolcott is so supportive of the ministry he continued with it even after enduring lung surgery in late 1996. Wolcott joked that he got involved in the ministry "quite by accident" when his wife volunteered him for a project several years ago.

"I've been doing it ever since," remarked Wolcott, 80.

Since then, Wolcott has spent much of his volunteer time working with groups of college students who also assist the rural ministry. One of their most significant efforts, Wolcott noted, has been to construct wheelchair ramps for home use by elderly and handicapped people.

Guinan and Wolcott were part of a large band of seniors who built new shelves at the rural ministry's pantry last fall. They



Greg Franca/Staff photographer

Tioga County Rural Ministry volunteer Cassie O'Gara, left, plans window treatments with Sister Lisette O'Brien, RSM, for the ministry's storefront Jan. 28. O'Gara has been a ministry volunteer for 30-plus years.

spent an entire week constructing, and then stocking, the shelves.

One assistant on that project was Bernadette Moesch, who celebrated her 85th birthday Feb. 11. Moesch said she has been volunteering for the ministry since it was established 20 years ago at the St. Patrick's Church rectory. Moesch continues to help the food pantry by arranging baskets and keeping shelves organized.

"I just like to be doing something, I guess," Moesch commented. "I've met a lot of interesting people and many beautiful sisters."

Moesch was referring to the Sisters of Mercy, who have operated Tioga County Rural Ministry since its inception. The ministry moved to its current location, at 60 North Ave., in the early 1990s.

Another person whose affiliation goes back to the ministry's early days is Cassie

O'Gara, 64. She helps not only at the food pantry, but also by driving people without transportation to appointments.

"When the need arises, I'm there. I don't think I've ever said no," O'Gara said.

O'Gara said she is moved by the plight of residents whose financial struggles make them dependent on the ministry.

"It opens your eyes up to what people have — and what so many don't have," O'Gara commented.

Sister O'Brien observed that the ministry's volunteers are often recruited through word of mouth and appeals at local churches. Wolcott, a parishioner at St. Patrick's Church, noted that most of the ministry's senior helpers own ties with St. Patrick's. However, he said, the ministry is supported by the entire community.

"Contributions come in from everybody," Wolcott said.



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