

St. Michael's pinch hitters won't give up work

By Kathleen Schwar
Staff writer

LYONS — Blink and you might miss them.

It takes just minutes for a team of retired, mostly 70-something men, to clean St. Michael's Church every week, top to bottom.

"On Wednesday you've got to get up, get going," said Chuck Donovan, the driving spirit who makes sure everyone has an assignment.

Their starting time: 8 a.m., but some come earlier.

Once inside the church, the four-to-six men fan out. One takes to the choir loft, one goes to the basement, one sweeps under the pews, one gathers the garbage, and so on. At times there are three vacuum cleaners going.

"It's fun watching them work. They're done in no time," said Marie Palmer, parish cook and housekeeper.

When the men are through, the 32 wooden pews gleam, the floor shines, the carpeting is spotless and the green hymnals rest perfectly straight and even in row after row on the backs of the pews.

Volunteers took up cleaning duties a couple of years ago when custodian Joe Ferndino broke his arm, putting him out of commission for eight months. Joanne Gutschow, religious education administrator/parish secretary, began to round up help to keep the church clean until he returned. The group has at times included a couple of women and two other men.

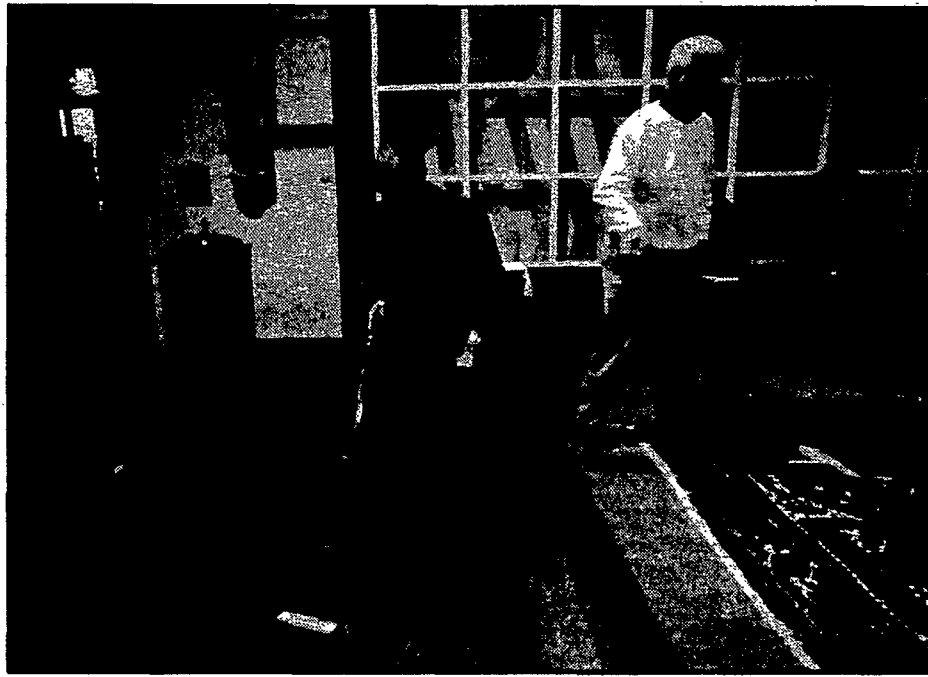
"They were calling me the boss," she laughed. "They're characters."

Then Donovan, who owned an auto parts store for 36 years, took over the recruiting, and built up the current work force.

"I'm surprised they're still involved," Ferndino said. "They've hung in there. They're faithful."

The men declined to drop their mops when Ferndino returned with a mended arm. They chose to continue their Wednesday get-togethers and assist Ferndino, a St. Michael's member since his baptism 68 years ago.

Their work frees him up to do more repairs and special projects such as installing track lighting over the parish's centuries-



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

St. Michael's Church volunteers Pete Patanzo, left, and Lee Boice vacuum the sanctuary of the Lyons church the morning of Feb. 4.

old statue of Our Lady of the Annunciation that came from Italy. At times they also have assisted with repairs and renovations.

Each man swears it's nothing; each swears it doesn't take long. Each puts in his time whether he has meetings pending or

his own home maintenance to tend to. On a blustery Feb. 4, for example, Bob Loveless pushed back his worries about a malfunctioning furnace at home to pitch in as usual.

The retired people need to help, Loveless said. Younger members "are mighty

busy trying to make a living."

He and Donovan, on the other hand, had already put in their time with New York Central railroad. Loveless also worked for the state and for 10 years as a jailer for the sheriff. Don Cataldi was a mason, Lee Boice a high school teacher and golf pro, John Lese the police chief, Jim Fabino the buildings and grounds supervisor for the Lyons schools. Several are World War II veterans.

Josephine Fabino, married to Jim, recalled that when the men banded to help clean, "They decided it would be fun to do it. And they just love it. They hate not going. They hate being sick. It's weird."

When Jim, Wayne County supervisor for the town of Lyons, has a meeting, he simply shows up earlier to work at the church.

"We're all quite close," said Pete Patanzo, retired from construction work and the local lumber company. On Feb. 4 he was wheeling out loads of poinsettias that had begun to wilt.

"Like I said, it's a small town," Patanzo said. "We've known each other all our lives. When you're born you know somebody."

Like most of the other men, he was baptized at St. Michael's "a lot of priests" ago.

Although he came on board the cleaning crew because "Chuckie Donovan asked me to help out," he added, "I think it's a nice thing to do anyway. If you can't help the Lord, you can't help anybody."

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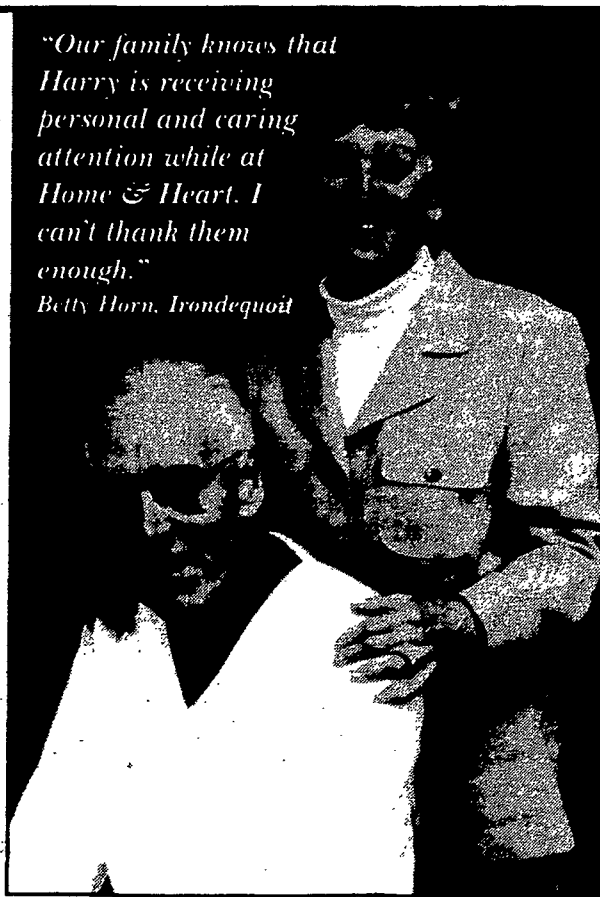
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