

# Housing

Continued from page 1

will mark its anniversary this year with a Friday, June 5 dinner at Oak Hill Country Club on Kilbourne Road in Rochester. In attendance will be Bishop Matthew H. Clark and Episcopal Bishop William G. Burrill. Rochester Mayor William A. Johnson Jr. will give the dinner's keynote speech.

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester and its parishes have long been supporters of affordable housing. For example, in 1994, the diocese created Providence Housing Development Corporation, an affiliate of Catholic Charities, which has worked to develop housing for families, the elderly and people with special needs. Most recently, the corporation celebrated the opening of Union Meadows in North Chili, a residential community of 48 apartments for families and seniors.

Meanwhile, several Catholic parishes have worked with the Rochester's Flower City Habitat for Humanity, which works with low-income families to build their own homes. Parishes that have worked on, or that will be working on such homes include St. Louis, Pittsford; St. Joseph's, Penfield; Holy Trinity, St. Rita's and St. Paul's in Webster; Holy Spirit, Penfield; St. John of Rochester, Fairport; St. Theodore's, Gates; and Guardian Angels, Henrietta, according to Arthur Woodward, Flower City's executive director.

But the Bishop Sheen foundation is the granddaddy of the current diocesan affordable housing efforts. A foundation history points out that Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, who headed the Rochester Diocese from 1966 to 1969, was moved to begin the foundation because "he was appalled by the lack of decent affordable housing in the Diocese of Rochester."

Auxiliary Bishop Dennis W. Hickey, who served as Bishop Sheen's vicar general, recalled that the late prelate was speaking at a Rochester parish when he was challenged by an audience member over what the church was doing about housing. That incident inspired Bishop Sheen to take up the affordable housing cause, Bishop Hickey remembered.

"He saw the need here for housing, and then he planted the seeds," said Bishop

Hickey of Bishop Sheen.

In 1980, the foundation merged with the Episcopal Diocese's housing commission, and since then, the two dioceses have co-funded the foundation's administrative costs.

Allynn Smith, the foundation's executive director since 1983, said the two dioceses merged their efforts, in part, because the Catholic foundation was focused primarily on urban housing while the Episcopal commission dealt more with rural housing. She added that the two dioceses wanted to pool expertise, efforts and resources to better serve their clients.

Today, the foundation serves all 12 counties in the Catholic Diocese — seven of which are also in the Episcopal Diocese — as well as Allegany County, which lies in the Episcopal Diocese.

"I think it's been one of the most successful ecumenical movements," she said of the foundation.

According to its 1996 to 1997 annual report, the Bishop Sheen foundation managed the distribution that year of more than \$4.5 million in home repair and home ownership aid from the federal, state and local governments, as well as from foundations, churches and private donors.

Smith pointed out that a number of Catholic parishes regularly contribute to the foundation and that such donations are crucial because Bishop Sheen can use them to obtain matching government and private grants. That's a point seconded by Debbie Harris, the foundation's housing counselor, who helps first-time home-buyers through the purchasing process. The foundation knows how to divvy up seemingly small donations in way that enables it to obtain large amounts of matching funds, she said.

"Two thousand dollars to us can get \$100,000 (in matching funds)," she said.

Sharon Conheady, an aide to Rochester's deputy mayor, served as president of the foundation's 24-member volunteer board of directors from 1995 to 1997, when she was succeeded by Daniel Mossien. A veteran of local government, Conheady said she volunteers for the foundation because it has an excellent reputation for efficient administration of government grants.

"State officials will point to Bishop

Sheen as a very good example of a housing foundation," she said.

According to its latest annual report, in 1996 and 1997 the foundation helped 591 families who needed such services as housing counseling, closing costs assistance, mortgage principal reduction, emergency home repair, rehabilitation and new construction.

The foundation has also worked in the last couple of years with developers to create new affordable housing, such as 90 units of elderly housing in Henrietta, the report said.

Many clients of the foundation are poor people working low-wage jobs, Bishop Sheen staff members said. They range from senior citizens on fixed incomes to manual laborers who can't read well. But they often share a pride that doesn't allow them to readily seek help from strangers, staff members said.

Harris noted that many of the families she's helped didn't know they were eligible for all kinds of public and private assistance that would allow them to fulfill the dream of owning their own homes.

"It's kind of the families that aren't looking for a handout, but a hand-up, and they're surprised when they get a hand-up," she said.

Sister Rosemary Mackie, SSJ, has served as the foundation's rehabilitation specialist for the past decade. She noted that many of the homes she enters contain families who have needs as great, or greater than simple home repairs.

"One of the things that really startled me (when I started) is that I never really saw poor people until I went into their homes," she said.

She makes an effort to notice, for example, if the cupboards are bare and the refrigerator is empty. Smith added that Bishop Sheen is then able work with other agencies to hook such people up with services like home-delivered hot meals, or home health aides. Clients who obtain decent housing may then be motivated to seek more education or better health care, the staff members said.

What motivates the staff to do the work it does are the situations of people like Marian Reed, a 74-year-old widow who lives by herself in an old family home in Savannah, Wayne County. The foundation helped Reed obtain financial assistance two years ago to pay for the instal-

lation of a septic tank and indoor plumbing.

A retired factory worker, Reed said her only son, John, helps her out on weekends, but that he also must take care of his own family. So, prior to the work done on her house, she had to make regular 16-mile round trips in her car by herself to Clyde to obtain drinking water in a dozen jugs. She said her son used to worry that she might get in an accident, particularly during the winter when the road between her house and Clyde would get slippery.

She added that she never had hot water in her house until two years ago, and had to use an outhouse. But today, she said, she's living a far more comfortable life.

"I tell you, I enjoy my bathroom and my hot water and my drinking water," she said. "I really enjoy it."

The foundation's five staff members have heard many such comments over the years, according to Smith. During an interview in her modest office, she brought out a photo album filled with pictures and stories about families the foundation has aided.

One such family consisted of a single mother with two children, ages 8 and 9. The 9-year-old had severe physical handicaps and had to use a wheelchair, and the family's sole source of income was Social Security. Treatment for the boy's condition strained the family's limited income.

The foundation helped the mother obtain a low-interest loan that allowed her to buy a home that was fully handicap accessible. For the first time in his life, the boy was able to play outside on a regular basis, Smith recalled, adding that he blossomed socially and educationally.

Smiling broadly, she and Harris recalled that the children repaid the foundation staff for their work by inviting them to a party where they were served popcorn, chocolate cake, licorice and cheese sandwiches. It's those kind of moments that make it all worth it, the staff members said.

"It's not just a difference to their housing situation," Harris said. "It's a difference to their life."

For more information on the Bishop Sheen Ecumenical Housing Foundation, call 716/461-4263.

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