

Grandmother led successful fight against club

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Bernadine Gordon, 72, recalled the day this summer when her 7-year-old granddaughter, Evelyn Shepard, asked what a strip club was.

"Oh Grandma, that's terrible!" she remembered Evelyn telling her after receiving an explanation.

Gordon thought pretty much the same thing when her husband, Ralph, explained exactly what was meant by the term "gentlemen's club." Gordon first saw the term after she received a notice from the City of Rochester in July that just such a club had been proposed to open in her neighborhood.

"Gentlemen's clubs," Ralph Gordon said as he recalled her question. "There ain't a gentleman in them."

A lector and eucharistic minister at Most Precious Blood Church, Bernadine Gordon led a successful fight against the proposed strip club, which would have been located at the corner of Mount Read Boulevard and Lexington Avenue, only one block from her house. She spoke about her battle against the club during an interview with the *Catholic Courier* on Thursday morning, Sept. 3.

Gordon learned of the club when she and a few other residents received notices July 21 from the Rochester Planning Commission informing them that Edward Geska and Ronald Zavaglia wanted to open Centerfolds at 1485 Mount Read Blvd. in a mixed manufacturing and residential neighborhood.

Gordon, who had never been involved in a public political fight before, decided she had to act when she read the notice.

"I said to my husband, 'I shouldn't be getting involved in things like this,'" she recalled. "(But) I felt if I didn't do it, I did-



Greg Francis/Staff photographer
Most Precious Blood parishioner Bernadine Gordon gets a signature from the Rev. Samuel Wheatley on Planet St., Rochester July 22 on a petition opposing the opening of a strip club in their neighborhood. Rev. Wheatley is pastor of Cavalry Spiritual Church. Gordon's efforts against the club succeeded.

n't know of anyone else who would get involved."

Part of her desire to fight the strip club came from her faith, said Gordon, who also serves as the president of her parish's Sacred Heart League. As a Catholic and a daily communicant, she said she knew

she had to do something about it.

Gordon called Holy Rosary Church, whose parishioners who had successfully stopped a similar club from opening in their neighborhood in 1995, to get advice. She was referred to Interfaith Action, a community-based advocacy group that gave her tips on how to organize opposition to the club. Gordon also spoke up against the club at Masses at her church the weekend of July 25 and July 26.

With the help of such people as her son-in-law, Jim Shepard, Evelyn's father, Gordon led a drive in her neighborhood to gather signatures on petitions opposing the club. More than 300 people signed, and more than 120 supporters — including members of neighboring Catholic and Protestant churches — showed up with Gordon at the planning commission's meeting on the club on Aug. 3.

Gordon noted that at least one politician had told her she would probably lose the battle against the strip club. However, at the commission meeting, Gordon cited a section of the city's zoning laws that directed the commission to take into account whether such a club would contribute to an area's "general

welfare."

Gordon said at the commission's meeting: "In any area where these strip clubs are opened, the neighborhood deteriorates, crime, drugs, prostitution and violence move in, and another part of the city is destroyed. Are you ready to destroy our area?"

Gordon and her supporters got their answer two days later when Geska and Zavaglia withdrew their application.

"I was ecstatic," she said. She added that the victory was all the sweeter because she had been told she would probably lose.

Gordon's work against the club earned her kudos from her neighbor and fellow parishioner, Jean Arioli.

"She's a good leader," Arioli said of her friend. "She just seemed very, very determined this time that things would be the right way."

The pastor of Holy Rosary Church, Father Lawrence V. Murphy, helped Gordon with her work against the club. Holy Rosary is located several blocks down the street from where the club would have been located. The priest said he was impressed by how quickly Gordon and her supporters drummed up opposition to the club.

"I think she is a good neighbor ... and she did very well in getting together what needed to be done," Father Murphy said.

Since the battle ended, Gordon has returned to her normal routine, which includes gardening, reading, cross-stitching and spending time with her grandchildren. Gordon said she has lived in the Most Precious Blood neighborhood all her life and will continue to work to defend it from those she thinks may bring it down, like the strip club owners.

"It's a good neighborhood, and we wanted to keep it that way," she said.

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