

PARISH PROFILE

Neighborhood concerns focus urban cluster's effort

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Want to mess with the 19th Ward? It's probably not a good idea, given that this southwestern part of the city is home to some of the most civic-minded churches in the Flower City. Mess with them, and they'll fight back.

These communities of faith belong to the Roman Catholic Community of the 19th Ward, a multi-ethnic and multi-racial cluster comprising St. Monica's, St. Augustine's and Our Lady of Good Counsel parishes. St. Monica's and St. Augustine's turned 100 this year, and Good Counsel was founded 70 years ago. The cluster was formed in 1992.

A fourth parish — Emmanuel Church of the Deaf — rents space at Our Lady of Good Counsel, and its parish maintains an informal association with the other three. Emmanuel is also listed on the 19th Ward bulletin.

Heart of a ward

Talk to the staff about their cluster, and they'll tell you to learn about it from their parishioners. Talk to their parishioners, and it's interesting how again and again even those who don't live there anymore talk about the 19th Ward as if it's missionary territory for their Catholic faith.

The cluster churches have long supported various outreach ministries to the poor, the sick and the underserved. But in the past few years in particular, the 19th Ward parishes have made headlines by encouraging their members and their neighbors to publicly take back their neighborhoods. Indeed, in the not-too-distant past, this area of the city was often described as "crime-ridden," but in recent years, the 19th Ward's Christian soldiers, both

Catholic and non-Catholic, have been marching off to war against the factors that sullied their region's image.

"This is a lot like a small town, a small community," said Eileen Dillio of the 19th Ward.

Dillio attends Our Lady of Good Counsel with her husband, Richard, and three of the couple's six children who are still home.

"For me, the church and the family and the neighborhood has always been connected," she added.

Like many Catholics in the cluster region, Dillio is a member of Interfaith Action, an advocacy organization of church members and community groups that has planted deep roots in the 19th Ward Catholic community. From lobbying for better street lighting to rallying to end garbage disposal near their parishioners' homes, all three churches have been active in Interfaith Action in recent years.

For example, last April, Interfaith Action sponsored a meeting with Mayor William A. Johnson Jr. that drew 500 people opposed to a garbage transfer facility located on Cairn Street, just 900 feet from some 19th Ward homes. This month, Monroe County Executive Jack Doyle announced that, after negotiating with city and county officials, the facility's private owner had agreed to stop taking garbage to the site.

Charlene A. Witkowicz, a St. Augus-



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

Father Raymond Fleming, left, signs and jokes with, from left, Gina Middleton, Sharon Middleton and Christopher Benson-Middleton, all parishioners of St. Augustine Church, at a Roman Catholic Community of the 19th Ward open house for Lourdes Perez-Albuerne, the cluster's outgoing business manager, at Scutari Hall, Our Lady of Good Counsel Church, Sept. 18. Sharon is St. Augustine Parish Council chairperson. Father Fleming is pastor of Emmanuel Church of the Deaf.

tine's parishioner and an Interfaith Action member, said such victories have shored up people like her and her fellow 19th Ward Catholics, not to mention their non-Catholic neighbors as well.

"I do believe the neighborhood is on the upward trend," she said. She noted that at one time she didn't even leave plants on her front porch for fear they'd be stolen. Now, however, she said, she and her husband Peter, plan to stay.

She added that ward neighbors plan to hold a ceremony Thursday, Oct. 8, at 6:30 p.m., to celebrate the establishment of a community garden that stands where a dilapidated building once stood. The building, a hub of drug use and dealing, was torn down after 19th Ward citizens like Witkowicz lobbied city officials.

"I truly believe that we're doing God's work," Witkowicz said, attributing her political work to her Catholic faith. "I believe sincerely that we're called to do this kind of thing."

A centennial year

St. Augustine's, which comprises 308 families, will celebrate its centennial with a 1 p.m. dinner dance at the Mapledale Party House in Rochester on Sunday, Oct. 18. The parish also plans a reunion of its 1970s "Sun Folk Group" during the 10:30 a.m. Mass that day.

Bishop Matthew H. Clark will also celebrate a centennial Mass on Sunday, Dec. 6, at 10:30 a.m.

Meanwhile, St. Monica's, spiritual

home to 327 families, saw 850 people come to the church May 15 for a centennial Mass celebrated by Bishop Clark, according to Robert L. Mulcahy, chairman of St. Monica's Centennial Committee.

"Our church was full from stem to stern," Mulcahy said. He added that parishioners, both current and former, viewed old photographs and other parish memorabilia the same day at an open house in St. Monica's School and a centennial dinner later that day.

Like its sister parishes in the cluster, St. Monica's is home to a number of parishioners who love the 19th Ward and want to see it thrive, according to parishioners John and JoAnn DeMott. Among their volunteer activities, the DeMotts both perform in the St. Monica's contemporary and gospel choirs, John playing bass guitar and JoAnn singing.

John said he likes the parish because it has made an effort to integrate itself with its neighborhood, which is home to many African-Americans. The parish is trying to embody the Rev. Martin Luther King's dream of a country where black and white children could grow up in peace together, he commented.

"I've got to believe we've come as close to that as anywhere," he said. "That's what drew us to the neighborhood. To me, it's the real American dream."

Bonnie Moss joined St. Monica's a few years back because her daughter was attending the diocesan school located on



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

Kathleen Welling, left, and Alice DIMers, St. Monica Church parishioners, chat during the open house for Perez-Albuerne Sept. 18. DIMers graduated from St. Monica School in 1942.



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