

# SENIOR LIFESTYLES

## Sisters Care aids elderly, disabled in their homes

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

IRONDEQUOIT— Sitting in the apartment he shares with his mother, 97-year-old Betty Cohn, Loren Cohn summed up the role that Sister Doretta Rhodes, SSJ, plays in his mother's life.

"She helps (mother) like a companion," said Cohn, 71. "She's very helpful and encouraging."

Sister Rhodes smiled and added quickly: "By that, he means when his mother is scolding him, I act as referee."

Referee duties are among the many Sister Rhodes performs for the Cohns, who spoke highly of Sisters Care, a ministry operated in Monroe County by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester.

Sisters Care helps more than 40 people by providing assistance with such tasks as light housekeeping, grocery shopping and transportation. Sisters Care will also provide spiritual support to clients, and bring Communion to Catholics, although the service is open to all in need regardless of their beliefs.

Sister Rhodes said she visits the Cohns three times a week for a total of four hours weekly, dusting their apartment, making Betty's bed, and providing companionship for the woman who is beset by chronic arthritis.

"I don't know what I'd do without her," Betty Cohn said.

Sister Rhodes is one of 10 Sisters of St. Joseph who work for Sisters Care, according to the ministry's administrative assistant, Sister Loretta Poole, SSJ.

Established by the congregation in 1993, and modeled after similar programs oper-



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

At left, Sister Doretta Rhodes, SSJ, assists Betty Cohn, 97, move about her home after a bath Sept. 2. Above, Sister Rhodes chats with Cohn at her Irondequoit residence.

said, adding the ministry is seeking further donations.

"You have to be a good listener, and have a lot of patience," Sister Stephens said when asked what qualifies a sister to work with clients. "You have to really like people. The sisters — myself included — tend to develop personal relationships with a client."

Indeed, Sister Stephens said loneliness is one of the biggest problems facing her elderly clients. Sister Poole added that an elderly person living alone may be too proud to ask for help.

"As they further withdraw from contacts with anybody, the pride drives them into this isolation," she said.

Both sisters said Sisters Care has taken referrals by various agencies who ask them to help elderly people who are neglected by their relatives, or, worse yet, exploited by them. They recalled one case in which a

young couple living with an elderly woman and "helping" her actually wound up stealing from her. In a sometimes cruel world, Sisters Care has developed a reputation as a ministry that elderly people can trust, they said.

"They can depend on us, and we're honest," Sister Stephens said.

Sister Stephens added that her ministry helps people who, for various financial reasons, fall through the cracks in society's social services network. Sister Stephens said she has a waiting list of people needing services, and that she gives top priority to clients with no relatives, or whose relatives are overwhelmed by helping them.

Sister Stephens emphasized that Sisters Care is something of a "last resort" for people who need assistance. She pointed out that when she's contacted for help, she urges people to look to their own churches or other agencies for service first before using Sisters Care. To that end, she noted that while some Catholic parishes offer similar assistance to the elderly, she hoped that even more would consider starting ministries of assistance to elderly people living at home.

"What I'd like to see is the church keeping in touch with the needs of people as they age," she said.

Interestingly, the sisters who work for the ministry themselves are in their 60s and 70s, Sister Stephens said, noting that many were motivated to work for Sisters Care when they saw that their own relatives had needs similar to those of the ministry's clients. She added that the age similarities between the sisters and their clients helps them develop bonds that younger people working in similar circumstances might not be able to forge.

"Their experiences flow out of the same experiences as the clients," she said.

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To learn more about Sisters Care, call 716/383-8930.

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