

# DIOCESAN NEWS

## Brain injury unit has helped hundreds to heal

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — In July 1996, Theresa Beswick was out shopping with her mother and other relatives when they came upon a sign in a shop that said "Don't Fear Tomorrow — God's Already There."

A couple of days later, Beswick called up her mother and told her to go back to the shop and buy the sign because Beswick needed its inspiration. Her 22-year-old daughter, Kimberly A. Davis, had suffered a massive stroke.

"For the first two weeks, we were not sure she was going to live," Beswick recalled.

She added that doctors told her a person suffering a similar stroke in his or her 40s would have died. And even alive, Davis faced a possible life of paralysis, her mother recalled.

Beswick and her husband, Bob, spoke about their experience in their Victor home along with Davis and her boyfriend, Cory Masseth.

Davis said after she suffered her stroke, she first went to FF Thompson Hospital in Canandaigua and then to Strong Memorial Hospital in Rochester. After three weeks in Strong, Davis was transferred to the brain injury unit at St. Mary's Hospital in Rochester where she stayed for three months.

"I loved it," she said of her time there. "The therapists made you work even though you were tired. They understood that was part of the stroke."

Davis said she plans to attend a reunion marking the unit's 10th anniversary Thursday, Oct. 14, in St. Mary's Auditorium. The reunion, scheduled for 3-6 p.m., will bring together former patients and their families.

After her stay at St. Mary's, Davis eventually had open-heart surgery, and has regained much of her faculties. She still strug-



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

**Dr. Mary Dombovy, St. Mary's Hospital director of physical medicine and rehabilitation, brain injury and general rehabilitation department, uses a model of the human brain in educational talks.**

gles with certain tasks, she said, adding that her voice sounds somewhat nasal due to paralysis of her epiglottis, which folds over the windpipe during swallowing.

A paralegal and a ballerina before her stroke, she can now walk, but not run. She is employed again, working as assistant to the office manager at Camp Good Days and Special Times in Mendon.

Beswick, a Presbyterian, said many area churches — Catholic and Protestant — included Davis in their prayers after her stroke.

"There was a constant prayer circle around Kim," Beswick said. "My sister said, 'There was such shout for Kim that God had to listen.'"

Hundreds of success stories like Davis' can be recalled by Dr. Mary Dombovy, di-

rector of the physical medicine and rehabilitation, brain injury and general rehabilitation department at St. Mary's.

About 2,500 patients have been treated through St. Mary's brain injury program, Dombovy said. She noted that the unit, which occupies the fifth floor of the hospital, is the only one of its kind in the Finger Lakes region.

In addition to the inpatient 33-bed unit, brain injury rehabilitation for some patients also takes place at a 30-bed transitional care unit located at Park Ridge Hospital in Greece, she said. The two hospitals are allied in the Unity Health System. The Greece unit is designed for such patients as older stroke victims who can't tolerate the intense type of therapy they would receive at St. Mary's.

Outpatient treatment is available at area satellite clinics run by Unity.

Although brain injuries vary widely in their causes, the patients who come to St. Mary's generally go through a standard series of treatment steps, Dombovy said.

After patients are admitted, and their medical history determined, they are evaluated for treatment that involves a team of physicians, nurses and other health care professionals including speech, physical and occupational therapists. The team works with patients to help them regain the ability to use their brains, through a repetitive, daily process that often involves much work on such seemingly simple skills as brushing teeth, putting clothes on and eating, she said. When a damaged part of the brain can no longer tell the body to perform a task, other parts of the brain can learn how to do those tasks through intense practice, she noted.

"The goal is to get them to function as well as possible in the home," Dombovy said of her patients.

Patients can stay anywhere from a few days to five months at St. Mary's, with the average length of stay being 31 days. After they leave St. Mary's, patients must work with their families at home to continue their recovery. Program staff help the families prepare for what lies ahead when patients leave for home.

Dombovy noted that having a patient make a sandwich, peruse family photo albums, or go out to dinner are ways of helping the person readjust to a normal life.

In its decade of existence, St. Mary's brain injury unit has garnered much national attention, Dombovy said, adding that the unit treated a group of stroke patients who had been turned away from other brain injury units in the country because their cases were considered hopeless. Although those patients were originally destined for life in nursing homes, St. Mary's was able to send 68 percent of them back to their own homes, she said.

She added that working with those who have suffered brain injuries has changed her own perspective on life. Life can completely change in an instant, she said, and the unit is filled with patients who illustrate that truth.

"You learn to appreciate and get a lot of joy out of seeing small accomplishments," she said of working with patients. "You truly appreciate that success is doing the best that you can."

Unit staff members will celebrate a patient's triumphs, especially when he or she can walk on their own again, she said.

"Everybody will come and watch and applaud, from the secretaries to the cleaning people," she said.

Beswick and Davis noted that many unit staff members went out of their way to encourage Davis in her recovery, and comfort family members.

"They were just absolutely unbelievable people," Beswick said of the unit's staff.

## Record bequest to college may be used to buy acreage

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

Nazareth College has received the largest bequest in its history — approximately \$5 million — and may use it to purchase land owned by the Sisters of St. Joseph that lies adjacent to the college.

The college and the women's religious order are continuing to negotiate over a possible land sale, according to Sister Janice Morgan, SSJ, president of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester. Sister Morgan said the college and the order are discussing the possible sale of 60 acres of SSJ land, including the land on which the order's motherhouse and infirmary sit. A new motherhouse and infirmary might be located on the remainder of the SSJ's



property, which covers more than 130 acres, she added.

Nazareth received the \$5 million gift from a 1934 alumna, Anna M. Portka, who died April 24. A resident of Canandaigua who attended St. Mary's Church there, Miss Portka — who made her money through investments — had directed social services at the local Veterans Administration Medical Center until her retirement in 1982.

On an alumni survey, Miss Portka remembered her alma mater fondly, according to a press release from the college.

"Nazareth provided me with a basic

foundation for my career as a professional social worker, first with the Department of Public Welfare, then as a medical social worker with the American Red Cross in their army and many hospital programs, then with the VA where I spent 36 years working in medical and psychiatric hospitals," she wrote.

Nazareth's president, Dr. Robert A. Miller, said the college was surprised by the gift. He added that the gift was timely because the college is "bursting at the seams" with students and needs to expand either through renovation or the building of new facilities. He also he praised the alumna for her generosity.

"One of the things that I regret is that while Anna was alive, we couldn't celebrate her commitment to the college and celebrate her loyalty and support," he said.

### Correction

A story headlined "Sisters Care aids elderly, disabled in their homes" on Page 8 of the Sept. 9 edition of the *Catholic Courier* incorrectly stated that the Sisters of St. Joseph subsidized the ministry "to the tune of \$95,000 a year." The actual figure is approximately \$5,000 a year. The *Courier* regrets the error.

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