

SENIOR LIFESTYLES

Reflection becomes way of life for Ignatian corps

By Kathleen Schwar
Assistant Editor

Even when he's not writing in his journal, Tom Curran is reflecting on what he may write. And for that very reason, the retired oral surgeon said, the Ignatian Lay Volunteer Corps is changing his life.

"It has been very meaningful to me," Curran said. As part of his commitment to the corps, he volunteers one day a week doing oral surgery at the Chemung County Dental Clinic, which he helped start. He also advises organizers working to establish a similar low-income dental clinic in Corning. And he is helping organize a branch of the corps in the Southern Tier.

But for him, the highly suggested journaling has proved "the biggest thing."

"I wish that somebody taught me journaling 40 years ago," he said. "You do things and you keep doing them, and never stop and say, 'Am I doing this right,' or 'What's the meaning of this.'"

But he said the reflection prompted by keeping a journal, "makes you think 'What am I doing here, why am I doing it and how can I do it better.'"

Joining him in the corps are Bob Lagonegro, a retired teacher who tutors at a settlement house and works with the Southern Tier Hospice; and Dick McGill, a retired parole officer who helps out at Second Place East, a center that provides food, shelter and other emergency needs. The three men, all in their 60s, joined the Ignatian Lay Volunteer Corps in September.

The corps may be unfamiliar to many — even Curran's brother, a Jesuit priest, had never heard of it until Curran told

him about it. It is similar to the longer-standing Jesuit Volunteer Corps in that it involves work with low-income people and is rooted in Ignatian spirituality. However, the newer program recruits seniors to work in their hometowns, whereas the Jesuit Volunteer Corps usually involves recent college graduates living together in communities far from their homes.

The seniors program was started in 1995 in the Jesuits' Maryland province, with Jesuit Father James R. Conroy as co-director. It now has about 60 member volunteers primarily in Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York City and Syracuse. Mary Ellen Vasile of Syracuse, a Nazareth College graduate, is upstate New York coordinator. She and Jesuit Father Bill McCusker, spiritual director for the Rochester corps, have been holding informational meetings in Rochester for several months.

They plan another for 3 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 8, at McQuaid Jesuit High School, 1800 S. Clinton Ave., Rochester.

"The spiritual component is often what attracts people — along with the awareness of so much need in our communities," Vasile said. "It's interesting how our attitudes change once we get earnestly involved with people."

It's the spiritual component that differentiates the corps from other volunteer programs, she added.

The Ignatian volunteers promise to spend two days a week working with the poor and also to spend time in reflection. In addition, they commit to meeting monthly with a spiritual director, and three times a year in retreat with all other corps volunteers.



Morgen Mike/Photo intern

John Blanton works at Rochester's St. Joseph's House of Hospitality as part of his Ignatian Lay Volunteer Corps commitment.

"What makes it different is the structure of getting together monthly with the other people, and getting together three times a year with everybody, as well as once a month getting together with our spiritual director," said John Blanton, 72, a retired St. John Fisher College mathematics instructor. He signed up last fall for the Rochester-based corps. "I was kind of looking for something like this."

In fact, he'd been looking into a similar program out in Oregon that required living with a community. Then he read a bulletin announcement about the Rochester corps at his parish, Church of the Transfiguration, Pittsford.

Blanton retired four years ago and keeps busy reading, doing the laundry, running errands, shopping for groceries and managing finances for himself and his wife, Claire, who is still working.

But he now reserves Mondays and Wednesdays for serving food to people at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality and tutoring math to people at the House of Mercy.

Volunteers also may work at such facilities as St. Joseph's Neighborhood Center, the Catholic Family Center Refugee Resettlement Program, the schools of the Wegman Inner City Voucher Program and Women's Place.

"What I use as a yardstick is the Sermon on the Mount," said Curran, a member of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish, Elmira. If the work a person chooses fulfills any of the sermon's components, he said, the work meets the Ignatian corps' criteria.

The corps' Southern Tier spiritual director, Father Frank O'Connor of Syracuse, helps volunteers make the decision, he added.

Meanwhile, Curran said, the reflection and writing encouraged in the corps does not have to be directly related to the work the volunteers do. He's likely to write about anything — including his grandchildren's visit to a convent infirmary.

"It isn't necessary that you have to go to work or the clinic and come home and write about that," Curran said. "That's the beauty of the program."

Because of the program, Curran said he even wakes up thinking about what he's observed, what his reactions were, and how incidents relate to the Scriptures.

"And it's so easy. It's simple," he said. Information about the Ignatian Volunteer Corps may be obtained from Curran, at 706/733-3071; or Vasile or Father McCusker, at 716/256-6147.

Elderhostel programs set

Notre Dame Retreat House in Canandaigua will host several Elderhostel programs for ages 55 and over, April 2-7, May 7-12, June 11-16 and July 9-14.

The April program will focus on the Crusades, Appreciating Classical Music and the Old Testament.

In addition to the three classes presented each day during the week, two bus tours are conducted to area tourist sites.

More information is available from Elderhostel at 877/426-8056.

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