

SENIOR LIFESTYLES

'Unsung Hero' ministers to poor, Latino Catholics

By Rob Cullivan
Staff Writer

ROCHESTER — Father James E. Hewes was pastor of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish from 1981 to 1987 when the faith community increased its combined weekend Masses' attendance from fewer than 100 people to more than 400. Several people helped him to ignite the parish growth — especially a quiet, unassuming Mercy sister whom he calls the cornerstone of Mount Carmel — Sister Mary Regis Straughn, RSM.

"She gave me great encouragement and hope that God wouldn't let us down," said Father Hewes, currently parochial vicar of the Roman Catholic Community of Geneva, comprising St. Francis de Sales and St. Stephen's parishes.

After serving as principal from 1962-64 of Mount Carmel's school, which is now closed, Sister Straughn began a ministry to the area's Spanish-speaking population, a vocation she continues to this day. She has

visited with families, provided food and clothing to the poor, and prayed the rosary with people.

"She's the heart and soul of Mount Carmel in my opinion," Father Hewes said. "I think, quietly, she's a Mother Teresa of the area, but much less known."

Father Hewes nominated Sister Straughn for a "Mayor's Unsung Hero Award," which Mayor William A. Johnson presented at a Feb. 19 awards breakfast.

"It is because of caring individuals like yourself that Rochester continues to grow and prosper..." the mayor wrote Sister Straughn in a letter informing her of the award. "I hope this award will impress upon you that your efforts are making a difference, and that the work you are doing is truly appreciated."

Sister Straughn, a religious since 1934, is the first to downplay her achievements. Being a sister devoted to service has come naturally to her, she noted.

"I never had any other ideas," she said, pointing out that she grew up attending St.



Mike Mergen/Photo intern

John the Evangelist Church on Humboldt Street in Rochester. "I think it was always something I wanted to do. Even as a child, it was my aim."

After joining her order, Sister Straughn spent the first half of her religious life as an elementary teacher and administrator at

several parish schools. Her education career ended at Mount Carmel because Bishop James E. Kearney asked her to minister to the growing number of Puerto Rican Catholics moving into the city in the 1950s and '60s. Sister Straughn, who had studied Spanish, took it upon herself to become acquainted with her Puerto Rican neighbors.

"I found I loved the people and whatever helped them," she said, noting many Puerto Ricans shared her devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. "They were so grateful for the least little thing you could do for them."

Those "little things" have included translating messages from the parish's school and pastoral staff from English to Spanish, driving people to medical appointments and emergency rooms, and even going to jail to visit Spanish-speaking inmates. Many Spanish-speakers had difficulty navigating the social service system in the 1960s because there weren't as many bilingual social workers as there are today, she said, pointing out that she worked with people who needed help applying for assistance. She added that even today, the church still is often the only source of needed food and clothing for people who fall between the cracks in the welfare system.

Nellie Contreras, a native Texan of Mexican descent and a longtime Mount Carmel parishioner, has worked with Sister Straughn in her ministry. Contreras said Sister Straughn has "done everything" for her neighbors, including bathing the children of families who were hard-pressed for time to care for their kids.

"She is our blessed angel," Contreras said with emotion in her voice. "She is my second mother. Everybody knows her in the community. I don't think I could do without her."

Those sentiments are shared by Father Dennis Shaw, pastor of the Community of Hope, a cluster of Mount Carmel, St. Michael's, and Holy Redeemer/St. Francis Xavier parishes.

"Sister Regis represents the best spirit of her order," he said. "She has truly been an angel of mercy to thousands of God's children over her many years of service at Mount Carmel and (for) the diocese ... I hope she is praying for all of us because I am sure that she is very dear to the heart of our Savior."

To this day, Sister Straughn still operates a food cupboard for the community, and serves as spiritual director for the Spanish Legion of Mary. The nun is also spiritual director of the Monroe Curia of the Legion, which is composed of the various Legion of Mary groups operating in Monroe County.

Life has improved since the 1960s for her Spanish-speaking neighbors in the Mount Carmel area, Sister Straughn said, but she would still like to see the establishment of more job training for people trying to move off welfare and out of poverty. She added that she will continue to look out for those who seek aid and assistance from the Catholic Church, be it material or spiritual.

"It's been a joy for me all my life."

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