

# a Young

## Woman fought disease with faith

By Rob Cullinan  
Staff Writer

**ROCHESTER** — In the autumn of 1994, Yolanda Ortiz was climbing the corporate ladder, having just been offered a promotion at a local company to a newly created position where she could use her command of Spanish as the firm's bilingual consumer affairs representative.

"I had goals in life," said the 36-year-old Rochester native, who had previously worked as a public school Spanish teacher. "Then everything came to a halt."

What put the brakes on her career was a rare connective tissue disease called polymyositis — "many muscles inflamed" — which afflicts the body's immune system. Ortiz had begun to feel the effects of the chronic disease, which can be controlled but not cured, while she was attending St. John Fisher College, from which she graduated in 1987. She said her physicians could never figure out what was wrong with her.

"I was kind of tired of 'Take this, maybe this will help,'" she said, remembering the numerous treatments suggested to her before she was properly diagnosed.

She was tested for such diseases as lupus and multiple sclerosis before she was diagnosed with polymyositis in October 1994. At that time, the disease had caused her to gain 30 pounds in one month, and she realized after her diagnosis that her condition would make it impossible for her to continue to work steadily. So she had to let her company know she was no longer available for the new job, and would have to leave her current position as well, a concession to reality she recalled as depressing.

A lifelong parishioner of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, Ortiz is the eldest of five daughters of Ana and Concepcion Ortiz who were themselves Puerto Rican natives. Having been raised with a strong faith, Ortiz has needed to rely on her Catholicism to get her through the battle that her illness forced upon her.

"I have never said 'Why me?'" she commented. "It has a lot to do with the fact that I'm a firm believer that God doesn't give us anything we can't handle."

In search of God's comfort and aid, Ortiz attended a healing Mass at St. Louis Church, Pittsford, in 1995, and said she felt the presence of the Holy Spirit within her during the liturgy.

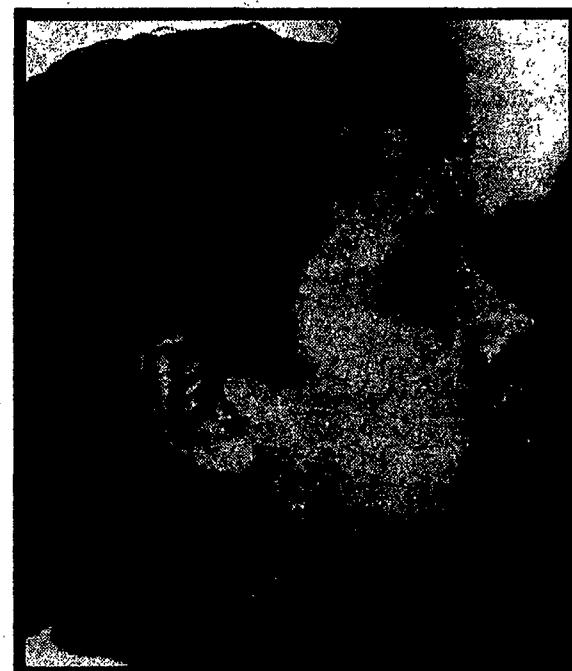
"Ever since then, I have not gotten worse," she said. "I have gotten stable and lived life as normally as possible."

She credits both the Spirit and regular gamma globulin treatments she first began receiving monthly, and now receives every four months, for helping her to live with her illness over the past five years. Ortiz also said she believes that she was allowed to suffer the



Andrea Dixon/Staff Photographer

**Yolanda Ortiz, left, and Basilia Rivera sing with the rest of the parishioners assembled at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, Rochester, on Sunday evening, May 21. Below, Ortiz closes her eyes in reflection.**



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disease for a divine purpose — to share her Catholic faith as her parish's coordinator of religious education and faith formation. She was offered the volunteer position when she was still working in the corporate world, but had turned it down because she was too busy. However, she decided to take it up in 1996 when it was offered again, seeing the position as a vocational call.

"God had a mission for me, and it wasn't to own a beautiful car and a nice house, but to serve him," she said.

Ortiz oversees the work of 13 volunteer "faith partners" or catechists who instruct 125 children for one hour prior to 11:30 a.m. Spanish Mass at Mount Carmel every Sunday. In addition to her catechetical work, Ortiz serves as a lay presider at Communion services, and is also a member of the Diocese of Rochester's Liturgical Commission.

A devotee of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Ortiz relishes such Puerto Rican customs as nightly public gatherings outside her church to pray the rosary

### Events

For information on the following events, call the hotline for Odyssey, the diocesan-sponsored young adults network, at 716/328-3228, ext. 375, or 1-800-388-7177, ext. 375, or visit the Odyssey Web site at [www.ggw.org/odyssey](http://www.ggw.org/odyssey).

• **Friday, June 2:** to Sunday, June 4: Third annual Odyssey retreat at Casowasco Conference Center on Owasco Lake near Auburn. Topic: Explore the different ways we play "hide and seek with God." \$89 per person, includes meals plus accommodations for two nights, 7 p.m. Friday-2 p.m. Sunday. Registration deadline is May 29.

• **Thursday, June 8:** "Soup, Bread and Service": Marvin Mich, director of social policy and research at Catholic Family Center, Rochester, will discuss his recent book *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements*. \$5 suggested donation to cover cost of dinner. Sullivan Center, St. John the Evangelist Parish, 150 Flaverton St., Rochester, 6:30 p.m. RSVP by June 5.

• **Saturday, June 10:** Rochester Rhinos soccer game against Montreal, 7:35 p.m. Tickets are \$9.50. RSVP by June 7.

• **Thursday, June 22:** Dinner at the Elmwood Inn Restaurant, 1258 Mt. Hope Ave., Rochester, 7 p.m. RSVP by June 21.

• **Saturday, June 24:** Fourth Annual Odyssey Picnic and Mass at Hopkins Point Lodge in Mendon Ponds Park, Mendon, 12 p.m. Games, hiking, softball, music, dinner and socializing into the night. Cost: \$5 per person, includes meal, rolls and cabin rental. Bring a beverage, salad, snack or dessert to pass. Registration required by June 19.

the last week of May each year. She considers the mother of Jesus a role model.

"To be a woman like Mary is to be strong, faithful to family, friends and to God."

She added that she hopes anyone with her condition can learn from her example.

"I think people need to realize whether you're living with a physical disability or a chronic illness, if you keep a positive spirit and continue to believe that God is with you ... then nothing is lost, and you can continue to live a beautiful life," she said. "Nothing is ever hopeless."

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