

# SENIOR LIFESTYLES

## Award recipient just can't say no to volunteering

By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

PERKINSVILLE — After Gerry Recktenwald learned she was a nominee for Steuben County Office for the Aging's Volunteer of the Year award, she politely declined an invitation to attend the May 6 awards banquet.

Her reason was quite fitting: She was busy volunteering that night.

The banquet fell on the same night as first Eucharist at Sacred Heart Church in Perkinsville, where Recktenwald serves as religious-education coordinator for grades pre-K through six. But Recktenwald said that banquet organizers persisted, asking her to come to the banquet in Bath after the Eucharist liturgy ended. Still, no dice — this would cause Recktenwald to miss a reception for the first communicants.

"I said 'No, I want to go to the party,'" Recktenwald recalled.

However, her daughter insisted on driving her over to Bath, saying all nine nominees were required to attend.

"I really was upset. I just said, 'I hope and pray I don't have to say anything' (at the banquet)," Recktenwald remarked.

Recktenwald walked into the banquet at Haverling High School two hours after it had begun — and almost immediately, Volunteer of the Year presentations got underway.

Finally, it began to dawn on Recktenwald why her presence was so urgently requested. She wasn't simply a nominee; she was the Volunteer of the Year.

The award winner had mixed feelings about being thrust into the limelight, saying she doesn't seek attention for her volunteer duty.

"I was overwhelmed. I felt that the other people deserved just as much recognition," Recktenwald said. "I'm one who likes to do things and people don't have to know I'm doing them."

She was pleased to discover that she didn't have to make an acceptance speech. "Thank God," she said with a laugh. "I just had to say thank you."

Many of Recktenwald's good works are performed at Sacred Heart, a small parish in northwest Steuben County that is one of four churches in the Holy Family Catholic Community cluster. Recktenwald has been a religious-education instructor for 36 years, the last 31 as director.

"I'm still doing it — and love it," remarked Recktenwald, 65.

Recktenwald also keeps active with the parish's Golden Agers group. At holiday time, she makes enough cookies and fudge to fill 72 bags, and distributes the goodies at the Golden Agers' First Friday Mass and luncheon in December. She then takes the leftover bags to shut-ins.

Recktenwald's volunteerism at Sacred Heart extends all the way back to age 16, when she began counting the church collection money. (It figures; she's still do-



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

Gerry Recktenwald, with her grandchildren, from left, Ashley Helman, 5, Lauren Helman, 8, and Katelyn Helman, 11, at Sacred Heart Church in Perkinsville on July 6.



Gerry Recktenwald, right, explains a receipt to Agnes J. Kling while visiting at the woman's home in Perkinsville, July 6. She helps the 89-year-old woman several days a week, taking her to the store, church and the doctor's office; counting out her pills; and writing out her bills.

ing that, too.)

Recktenwald is quick to point out that she's not alone in her parish volunteer ministry, saying she is blessed with several long-time religious-education instructors. She further acknowledged that Sacred Heart hasn't had a resident priest for many years, so the entire parish community is accus-

tomed to pitching in.

"Everything was volunteer, and it still is," she said. "There's people that volunteer in this church more than I do. The only thing our parish ever paid for was a part-time cook."

Recktenwald's award from Steuben County Office for the Aging was based on other community involvement as well. She provides transportation for area residents, mostly senior citizens, and also helps with their other daily needs such as grocery shopping.

To top it all off, Recktenwald is sitting for her three granddaughters on weekdays through-

out the summer. So even though she is retired from Dansville Central Schools, where she was a cook from 17 years, her days are not exactly slow-paced and leisurely. In fact, during the award presentation on May 6, it was noted that Recktenwald hasn't learned to say no to anybody yet. Guilty as charged,

she admitted.

"It would have to be a very good reason when I say no. I'll always try to work something in," she said.

Father Stephen Kraus, pastor of Holy Family Catholic Community, called Recktenwald "one of the unsung heroes" of the parish. He added that she is a good leader who inspires volunteerism all around her.

"She's very good at getting people to do things," Father Kraus commented.

Recktenwald was born in nearby Sandy Hill and has lived in Perkinsville since she was 9. Her husband of nearly 43 years, Bill, is also a native of the area. He is a eucharistic minister at Sacred Heart, as is she (naturally). Recktenwald credits her husband for having the patience to allow her to be so active, enduring an occasional late dinner without complaint.

Recktenwald stated that she's perfectly content with life in Perkinsville, saying she couldn't imagine being as happy in a more populated setting.

"I would never move away from here," she said. "I never looked for the big things in life."

Her dedication to volunteer work, she added, is rooted in her upbringing.

"I have to say it was the example my parents gave me, to be a part of the community," she said. "We lived on a farm, but if anything was going on at the church, the chores would get done earlier so we could go to it."

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