

# SENIOR LIFESTYLES

## Pryor experience serves her well in outreach

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff Writer

ROCHESTER — Jean C. Pryor, 63, cannot hold back her enthusiasm, and that's a good thing. She is the outreach/evangelization coordinator for St. Anthony of Padua Parish on the city's west side.

"I love people," she said. "I love all kinds of people, and that's what gives me my stimulus."

While some citizens may be tempted to give up on inner-city young people, Pryor refuses to throw in the towel, calling teenage black males in particular "diamonds in the rough" who simply need adult attention to thrive. In an era of priest shortages, she said, city parishes should reach out to such young men because many African-American priests were first inspired to consider their vocation by their participation in a Catholic Church program.

She's organized Bible studies, crafts activities, softball games, reading sessions and social and cultural events for kids in the St. Anthony's neighborhood, and has collaborated with community groups on various outreach efforts. Her philosophy of action is rooted in her view of what the Catholic Church should be.

"There's more to the neighborhood than guns and drugs," she said. "A church that reaches out to the community that surrounds it — I think that's where it's truly being church."

She added that she likes to organize activities that bring together young people, adults and seniors to break down barriers between the generations.

"It shows the young people that we as a church care about them," she said. "It also says to seniors in the parish that all the children in this community are not bad."

Pryor grew up an American Baptist, but converted to Catholicism as a young woman, noting she was attracted to Catholic devotional practices, music and rituals. She belongs to one of the most prominent black Catholic families in the diocese. She is sister to Dorothy Dobson, who along with Pryor and several other African-Americans, founded the diocesan office of black ministries in the 1970s. She also is an aunt to Dobson's daughter, Jacquelyn Dobson, who headed the diocesan black ministries office from 1984 until September 1999, and Pryor herself chaired the office's board of directors



John Powell/Photo intern

Jean Pryor, coordinator of outreach/evangelization for St. Anthony of Padua in Rochester, serves water to children of Edgerton Recreation Center during a pickup softball game in Jones Park, Rochester, June 28. At right is Richard Stewart. Later the parish's seniors served the children ice cream.

from 1980-88.

Pryor has also served in several leadership roles with the Monroe County chapter of the American Association of Retired Persons, including serving terms as president, vice president and secretary. She has also served as a chairwoman of the Catholic Women's Group, an independent organization of Catholic women who do charity work, host various programs and go on retreats.

Although she worked in the health insurance field from the late 1960s until two years ago when she took up her position at St. Anthony's, Pryor has long been involved in the Catholic Church as a volunteer. For example, for much of her working life, she volunteered in religious education and

youth ministry at Immaculate Conception Parish. She also worked with Immaculate Conception's former pastor, Father Robert G. Kreckel, in the 1960s on the Rochester Catholic Interracial Council. The council advocated for blacks in the church and the wider community, and worked on such issues as open housing, Father Kreckel said. In particular, he remembered Pryor as a person who could help people work out their differences.

"Jean is very, very perceptive, and I think she works well when you've got conflict," he said. "She can handle it without losing it. She's very sensitive to people, even people who disagree with her."

Pryor has worked with literally hundreds of people in the Rochester community

through the years, helping them to improve their lives. One such person was Sheila Clements, now a 34-year-old social studies teacher at East High School.

Clements said her self-image as a woman was significantly shaped by a debutante program sponsored by The Bridgettes, a bridge club whose members included Pryor. The club's African-American female membership sponsored the debutante program for young black girls in the 1970s and '80s. The program consisted of charm lessons, social service projects, dance instruction and several other activities designed to bolster the participating girls' self-esteem, morals, character and talents. It culminated in a debutante ball when the girls were 16, a huge social event at an area hotel.

"It was big deal," recalled Clements, who grew up attending Immaculate Conception. "I had four tables of people celebrating my coming out."

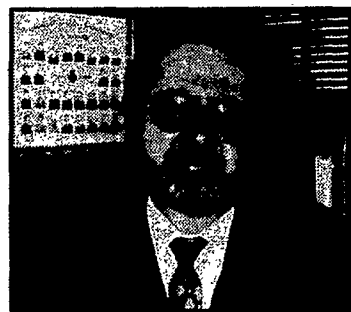
Like Pryor, Clements noted that the Rochester debutante program was different from ones found in the southern United States among African-Americans. A girl's family income did not determine whether she was a debutante, nor did her pigmentation. Many Southern debutante programs favored wealthy, light-skinned girls, she said, but that was not the case with the Rochester girls.

"We were all shades of the rainbow," she said.

Regina Maye, 34, a legislative assistant to Rochester City Councilman Tony Thompson, was also a debutante and particularly remembered Pryor's influence on the girls in the program.

"She showed us how to be ladies," Maye remembered. "She would not accept us being anything less than what we were capable of."

### Thoughts to Consider



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