

DIOCESAN NEWS

Ministry helps hearts heal after loss of a child

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

PITTSFORD — As Meg Smerbeck and Lisa Magguilli talked about Elizabeth Ministry outside St. Louis Church on a warm autumn day, several small children were laughing, shouting and talking happily on the parish playground.

But it's the children who weren't there — the ones who had perished through miscarriages, stillbirths and abortions — and their mothers who concerned Smerbeck and Magguilli. Both mothers themselves, they spoke quietly about their work.

"Some of these children — who haven't even breathed air — have brought us together in ways that we would have never known," said Magguilli of the people touched by Elizabeth Ministry.

Founded by the two women in 1999 to help women who have suffered either pregnancy loss or who are challenged somehow by a pregnancy or birth, Elizabeth Ministry's six volunteers, including Smerbeck and Magguilli, have aided more than two dozen women. The ministry is named for Elizabeth, who, pregnant with John the Baptist, shared her joy that her cousin Mary was carrying Jesus.



Elizabeth Ministry volunteers have supported women with phone calls, rides to appointments, personal visits, loans, and donations of clothing and equipment. Volunteers have also provided meals for women, prayed for them and referred them to agencies that can help them in various ways, the coordinators said.

Smerbeck and Magguilli, both parish council members, decided to found the ministry in part to respond to the Diocese of Rochester's "Pledge For Life" challenge two years ago in which parishes were asked

to respond in a practical manner to aid women facing crisis pregnancies. The women also said the ministry grew out of parish listening sessions during which St. Louis members informed their leaders what needs they thought must be met.

For example, Magguilli said, many women today don't live near their blood relatives, and feel relatively isolated and sometimes helpless when they have a baby. Elizabeth Ministry networks such women with people who can help them deal with the challenges that parenthood creates, she said.

Nine years ago Smerbeck herself had a stillborn baby named Mary, and remembered that while people were supportive of her through her loss, something was lacking in terms of the grieving process. Magguilli noted that it was in recognition of the pain felt by women like Smerbeck that Elizabeth Ministry was begun.

"There really was no formal way to acknowledge that loss, at least in our parish community, until we set up shop," she said.

The ministry marked its first year Sept. 19 with a prayer service. A plaque commemorating "all children who have gone to God" was placed under the statue of Mary in the church and dedicated that day. More than 40 people attended the service. The participants, and, subsequently, others in later instances, wrote their names and sometimes the names they had chosen for their lost children in a book placed

on a stand beneath the plaque. The book's entries acknowledge children lost to everything from miscarriage to abortion.

One woman who attended the service was Marcia Kosanke, a St. Louis parishioner and the mother of two living children, and one who died 16 weeks into a 1998 pregnancy through miscarriage. Like Smerbeck, she noted that there was no formal way to grieve her lost child.

"There wasn't the spiritual attachment or connection that normally comes to mind with birth and deaths," she said. "The prayer service they had (Sept. 19) provided some closure that a funeral service provides for people."

What was particularly painful for her and her husband, Tom, she recalled, was that her miscarried baby had been due on Christmas. Her voice quivered with emotion as she noted her disappointment, and as she tried to articulate how she felt when Dec. 25 finally came that year.

"Christmas is pretty special for me for enough reasons," she said as her voice briefly trailed off.

It's precisely for women like Kosanke that Elizabeth Ministry was founded, Magguilli said.

"This isn't a charitable organization," she stressed. "This is friendship."

EDITORS' NOTE: For information on Elizabeth Ministry, call 716/586-5675, ext. 345. Messages can be left any time of day.

Schools receive \$50,000 each

An anonymous donor has presented gifts of \$50,000 each to three Finger Lakes area Catholic schools.

The schools are St. Francis/St. Stephen, Geneva; St. Mary's, Waterloo and St. Michael's, Newark. All house programs for pre-kindergarten to grade eight, with enrollments of 213, 165 and 325 students respectively.

Although the diocese is seeking donors to support schools, Sister Anne Guerin, SSJ, assistant superintendent for school advancement, said the Finger Lakes donation had not been solicited.

"We are looking for donors, but this person found us," she said.

Timothy W. Dwyer, schools superintendent, said he welcomed the donation.

"These gifts are most encouraging and mean a great deal to each school," he said. "I hope that this generosity will inspire others to action as well."

The principals of the three schools also welcomed the donor's gifts. Elaine Morrow, principal of St. Francis/St.

Stephen, said the money will enable the school to make building repairs and upgrade school furniture and equipment, improvements that have been delayed in recent years due to budget constraints.

St. Mary's will use the funds for new technology, teacher training and a student mentor program, according to Fred Smith, principal.

"Gifts like this make it possible for all Catholic schools in this region to work together," he said. "I know this will be a springboard to great things for all of us."

Kathleen Peters, principal of St. Michael's, said the money will be used to renovate the school's kitchen area, and may also be used to extend financial assistance to families of students at both St. Michael's and DeSales High School in Geneva.

"This donor has shown great faith in Catholic schools," she said. "Hopefully, this will send a message that the education we offer is highly valued by those in our community."

Former diocesan student to pilot space shuttle

When Pamela Melroy, 39, becomes the third woman to pilot a space shuttle to the International Space Station, she will carry tokens from her schools in the Diocese of Rochester — as well as the prayers of the school communities.

Melroy is a 1979 graduate of Bishop Kearney High School and a 1975 graduate of St. Louis School, Pittsford.

The launch is scheduled for the evening of Thursday, Oct. 5, from the Kennedy Space Station. Melroy will pilot the Discovery on this 100th shuttle flight, the STS-92 mission, which will last 10 days. The crew of seven is scheduled to deliver an adapter and piece of external framework.

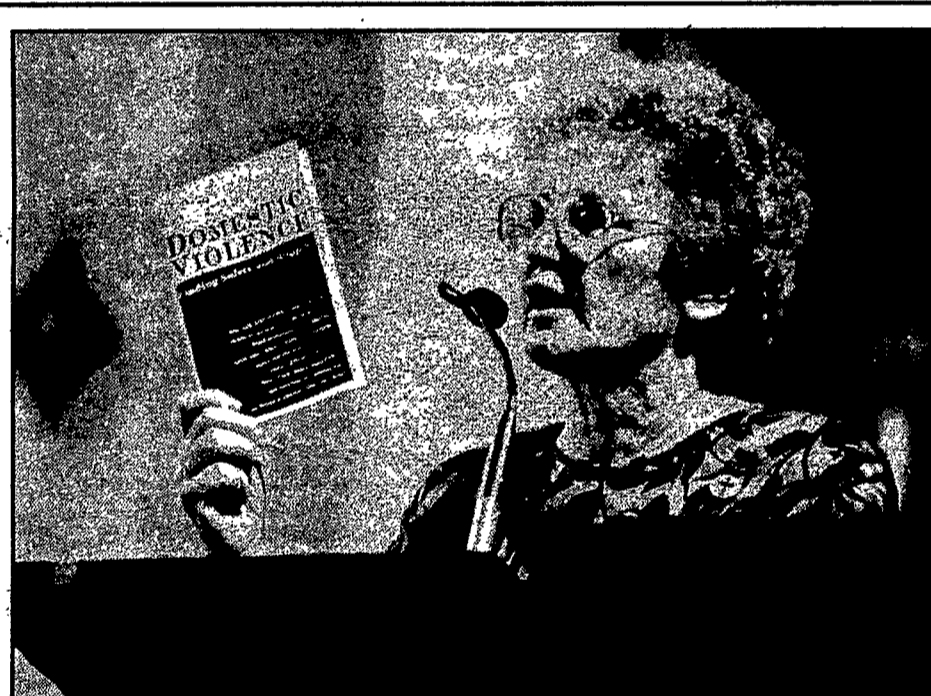
This is the first space mission for the daughter of St. Louis parishioners David and Helen Melroy.

In an April 3 letter to Kathleen Carroll, principal of St. Louis, Melroy said she was allowed to take 10 mementos on her flight.

"I would like to recognize the important role St. Louis School has had in my life and in educating future astronauts by flying a patch, emblem, or flag on my mission for presentation to you at a later date," she wrote.

The school arranged for its emblem to be made into a patch by Land's End, from which the school purchases insignia sweat-shirts. The emblem has a cross with a circle in the center, and the motto, "uniqueness, values, excellence."

Melroy will take a baseball hat, shirt and medallion from Bishop Kearney High School. The school plans a public "Blastoff Party" Oct. 5. Doors open at 9 p.m.



John Powell/Photo intern

Domestic violence month

Sister Kay Schwenzer, RSM, pastoral associate at St. Michael's Church, Rochester, speaks at a prayer and healing service for people who have been affected by domestic violence, at Sacred Heart Cathedral Oct. 1. The diocese sponsored two other services to mark the beginning of Domestic Violence Month, at St. Mary Our Mother Church, Horseheads, and St. Stephen Church, Geneva. A list of resources for victims of domestic violence was distributed at the three services.

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