

# Christmas Appeal

## Appeal enables her return to vocation

### What is the Christmas Appeal?

It is a cooperative effort of the *Catholic Courier* and diocesan Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Rochester to raise funds for people in desperate financial crises.

For the past 31 years, the appeal has enabled the Catholic community to help thousands of people in 12 counties to help meet life's basic needs. Christmas Appeal funds have been there for them when no other sources of aid were available.

### Who benefits from it?

The Christmas Appeal helps individuals and families in short-term financial crises. These are people who have no financial resources and are either awaiting or are ineligible for assistance through other sources.

### How does it work?

Appeal proceeds are allocated to the emergency funds of the following diocesan agencies: Catholic Family Center; Catholic Charities of the Finger Lakes; Catholic Charities of the Southern Tier; Catholic Charities of Livingston County outreach; Bishop Sheen Ecumenical Housing Foundation; and diocesan Urban Services.

By Kathleen Schwar  
Assistant editor

When "Mary" arrived at Catholic Charities' Turning Point center in Steuben County, Bobbi Knight, food pantry manager, recalled thinking, "She has to be 128 years old. She was stooped over and haggard, with lines. When you see her now ..."

Knight stopped for lack of words to describe the turnaround.

Mary herself describes her body as old. It has been through a lot of illness and stress.

Though on disability, the 54-year-old registered nurse now makes sick calls to the elderly through volunteer programs.

"It cheers me up knowing they are feeling better," she said.

Mary was torn between using her real name and using a pseudonym for this story. She wanted to praise all the people and agencies who have helped her since the days when she lost her home and slept in a park. However, she feared that identifying herself might affect her patients and her current work, which she performs as a highly qualified volunteer.

"I don't want my co-workers to feel sorry for me," she added. "That would ruin relations."

Mary earned her RN degree as a young, idealistic woman. "I was going to change the world, make everybody well," she said. She even went with her fellow nurses to Pakistan, where they worked for several months.

But she developed bone and blood diseases that greatly limit her mobility. Some mornings she can barely move. "Some people call it cancer, but the doctor and I don't," she said. Even a cold will throw off her metabolism and she has to get blood transfusions. Arthritis and a stroke are the icing on the cake.

For a time she used a walker, she said, "But who wants a nurse coming in with a walker? I'll use a cane when it's real bad."

She manages to climb the stairs to her second-floor apartment by holding tightly to the banister.

Money is tight. She doesn't have enough quarters to go to the laundry across the street — or to the local Catholic church, for that matter, where she feels "if I can't pay, I shouldn't be taking up space there."

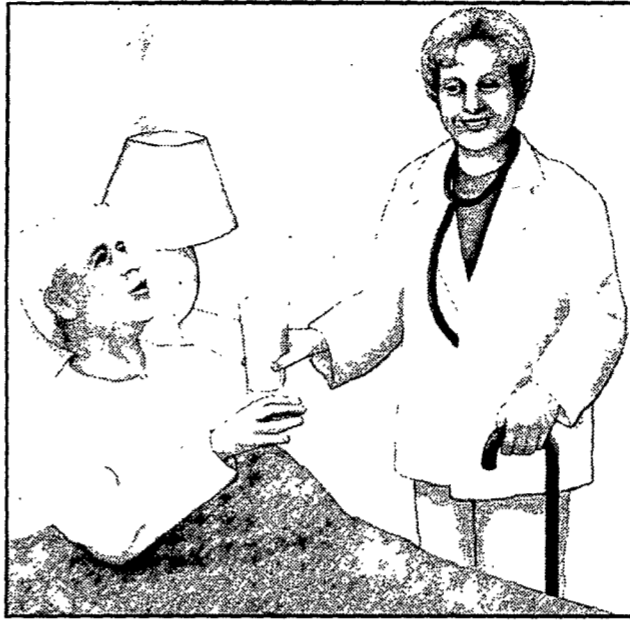


Illustration by Linda Jeanne Rivers

Catholic Charities met Mary when her daughter brought her in one morning. She had spent three days and nights living and sleeping in a park when her daughter spotted her while driving through town.

"She was disheveled, hungry, had a very bad, hacking cough and her thoughts meandered," Knight wrote in a report.

Mary was living on disability and had decided her rent was more than she could afford. She paid off her bills, and found a new apartment but by then had no money for the security deposit or first month's rent. So she abandoned most of her belongings and left town. She made an appointment with a mental-health professional who previously had helped her, around the time of her divorce.

After being found in the park, Mary didn't want to stay with her daughter, saying there was friction between her and her son-in-law. Neither did she want to go on public assistance, having had a bad experience with that — she once was told she had been overpaid and must pay back the money.

Mary went into temporary housing. The same night, the facility burned down.

"It was scary," she said. "Four people died, and a dog."

### People in need

Christmas Appeal funds are used year-round for such situations as these, submitted by various Catholic Charities agencies:

- \* Katie and Mary, sisters with developmental disabilities, live with their family in Rochester. Catholic Charities Community Services used \$20 in Christmas Appeal money for registration fees for a camp experience for the girls, and an appreciated break for the family.

- \* A young woman with AIDS that is being treated and is under control had completed a job-training program. Catholic Charities Community Services used \$38.50 in Christmas Appeal money for the woman to obtain her driver's permit — "a source of identification, independence, personal development and certainly growing self-esteem," a report stated.
- \* A 62-year-old had to move out of an

"It hurt every time I tried to breathe. I told God, 'Take me please.' I knew I was going to die." Mary believed that her window wouldn't open, "But 'someone' told me to go to that window. ... I went and it opened," she said.

She climbed onto the hot roof, and down a firefighters' ladder. She spent 10 days in the hospital for lung damage and other problems.

Later she moved in with a sister on Long Island. But because her sister was trying to sell her house, and was living on a low income, Mary returned to Steuben County. Living with her sister also would have cost her a reduction in disability payments, Mary said.

Her caseworker at Catholic Charities had called Long Island to see how she was doing, but at that time Mary was in the hospital with severe swelling. Her sister gave her the message.

"I kept that note," Mary remarked.

For perhaps a third time, she said, "You've got to say something about Turning Point and Catholic Charities, so people will see what good they are doing. They do make you feel like people. That is the important thing, to make you feel you are worth something. If you are constantly put down, it doesn't do you any good."

Thanks to funds from the Christmas Appeal, Catholic Charities paid for Mary's food, temporary shelter, gas money for her daughter to drive her to Long Island, and her nursing license.

Just five months after the agency began helping her, Knight stated, Mary is "in a totally different position than she had been in. She is healthy and happy." She is living almost entirely on her food stamps, doing certified volunteer work with the elderly and has renewed her registered nursing certificate. Mary also has resumed taking an antidepressant that she had stopped taking for lack of money.

"I don't know about the healthy part," Mary said, affirming that she was indeed happy "meeting people, realizing I can do good, using my skills."

apartment due to code violations. Catholic Family Center used \$45.73 to buy insulin and medication for a severe allergic reaction.

- \* Catholic Family Center provided \$80 in Christmas Appeal money for parents to buy a tracheostomy tube for their disabled infant, who cannot breathe without the tube.

- \* A 26-year-old single mother of three young children recently got off public assistance and became employed at a local nursing home. Catholic Family Center used \$50 in Christmas Appeal money for a uniform for her to start a training program. A voucher given a local thrift store enabled her to obtain appropriate clothing and shoes for nursing.

- \* A single mother, 27, with four children needed assistance with gas money so she could travel to and from work until she got paid on a new job as a teacher aide for the Rochester City School District. A \$25 voucher enabled her to buy gas.


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