

SENIOR LIFESTYLES

Mercy nun wants folks to click with computers

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

BRIGHTON — Sister M. Augustine Malley, RSM, has been known to startle people when she calls them from her volunteer desk job.

"This is Sister Augustine from SeniorNet at the Jewish Community Center," she tells them.

For a brief moment, she said, some people on the other end of the phone line are taken aback by hearing a Catholic nun who's calling on behalf of a Jewish organization. But the program for which she works is open to anyone, Jewish or not, 50 years or older.

SeniorNet Learning Center is the Jewish Community Center of Greater Rochester's computer instruction program for older citizens who may have let the computer era pass them by, Sister Malley said. The program is affiliated with the San Francisco-based SeniorNet, a national not-for-profit organization of senior computer users.

Sponsored by the JCC and the Monroe County Office for the Aging, SeniorNet Learning Center has instructed 300 seniors in computer use since it began last year, according to Tamara Calkins, director. She added that she is the center's only paid employee, and that the center is staffed by volunteers like Sister Malley.

"She's fantastic," Calkins said. "She exemplifies the dedication and enthusiasm that our volunteers have for SeniorNet."

The Mercy sister has been volunteering on behalf of the program since she read an article about its inception last year. Every Monday from noon to 2 p.m., she answers phones, prepares course work, does paperwork and greets students. A former Catholic schoolteacher, the nun said that no one is ever too old to learn computer skills.

"People seem to pride themselves on being computer illiterate," Sister Malley said of her fellow seniors. "But they're going to be swept aside."

Seniors who pass up learning about computers also pass up gaining access to the wealth of information on the Web, as well as such communication tools as e-mail, she said. She chalked up seniors' reluctance to learn computer skills to igno-



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

Sister Augustine Malley, RSM, volunteers at SeniorNet, at the Jewish Community Center in Brighton.

rance and fear.

"They feel they'll fail, and people will laugh at them," she said. "You just have to be humble and say, 'Hey, I don't know how to do this.'"

She said the intellectually curious senior has much to gain by becoming computer-literate, noting that one gentleman who took a course at the center learned about South American flowers through the Web, and wound up traveling to South America to further explore his interest. She predicted that seniors would eventually get interested in computers on a scale comparable to the younger generation.

"When the car first came out, you didn't find many women driving cars," she said for comparison's sake. "But, today, who does all the driving?"

Sister Malley has spread the word about SeniorNet to her fellow sisters, five of whom have taken courses at the JCC. They include Sister Brigid Quinn, RSM, a volunteer at the Mercy Prayer Center in Rochester, and at Bethany House, a Catholic Worker facility for homeless and abused women and their children.

Sister Quinn took an "Introduction to Computers" course every Tuesday morning for eight weeks in March and April. A retired pastoral associate who left St. Charles Borromeo Parish in Greece last year, the 74-year-old nun said she never really used computers in her work. At best, she said, she knew how to turn a computer on and do a little word processing.

"I thought it was a wonderful program," she said of SeniorNet. "I liked it because it was taught by seniors, and the instructors were very patient and kind. I found a great deal of encouragement. They were there for you, and no question was a question you couldn't ask."

Sister Malley herself became interested in computer use a couple of years ago when she wanted to be able to correspond more regularly with her brother, Father William J. Malley, a professor of theology at the University of Davao in the Philippines. Whereas in the 1950s, when he began teaching there, it took two or three

weeks for a letter to reach him, now she can send him messages via e-mail almost instantly, she said.

She added that using computers has even improved her crocheting because she's able to find new patterns whenever she visits crocheting Web sites.

Sister Malley's work with computers is the latest stop in a varied journey of service to the community as a Sister of Mercy. She was raised attending St. Augustine's Church in Rochester, and entered her order more than 40 years ago. She taught science at such high schools as Our Lady of Mercy in Brighton, the now-closed Cardinal Mooney in Greece, and Notre Dame High School in Elmira.

In 1977, she became chaplain at St. James Mercy Hospital in Hornell, a position she held until her retirement 20 years later. Since then, she has spent the bulk of her time tending to her invalid mother, with whom she lives. Sister Malley also volunteers at a gift shop in the Sisters of Mercy Motherhouse in Brighton.

Sister Malley comes from a family notable for priests and policemen. Both her father and grandfather were Monroe County sheriffs, and she has two late uncles who were priests — Father Eugene Malley, CSB, who taught at the University of Toronto, and Father John D. Malley, who was pastor of St. Joseph's Church, Penfield, from 1954-72.

Sister Malley recalled that entering the religious life felt natural in her family.

"We were not pressured into religious life, but we were supported when we chose it," she said.

A graduate of Our Lady of Mercy High School, Sister Malley said the nuns there were visibly happy in their religious life, and that attracted her as a young lady.

"They were interested in people, and they were interested in you as a student."

She added that working at SeniorNet is in keeping with her order's reputation for being people-oriented. She also pointed out that she believes computers are a gift from God designed to help people better their lives, and that she wants to help people learn about this treasure.

"I think God wants us to use the gifts we have to make the world better."

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