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Former Rochester teachers gladly join study to help others

BALTIMORE (CNS) — According to Sister Mary Agnes Klug, 92, a participant in "The Nun Study," the research has not influenced her behavior in any way.

"Why should it? I'm not going to get Alzheimer's at my age. That's something you get in your 70s," she said.

Despite her age, study subject Sister Klug is still a brisk, lively woman. A member of the congregation since 1931, she runs the gift shop at Villa Assumpta, the retirement wing at the Baltimore motherhouse of the School Sisters of Notre Dame.

She still reads, plays bridge and travels. Her seven-decade career included teaching chemistry and serving as an administrator at the College of Notre Dame of Maryland.

Living in the retirement wing has taught her how to treat people with Alzheimer's, she said.

"But I'm a very practical person. I keep trying to bring them back to reality," she said in an interview. "Then I remember that's not right. My mind knows how to treat them, but I want to say: 'Please remember the things we did together.' And they just stare at you. It's mind boggling."

She also has learned that she needs "patience. Which I don't have. Calmness. Compassion is so important. I have that. I have everything except patience."

She hopes the study will teach people about early detection of Alzheimer's. "A cure? I doubt it. Instead we may be able to steer people away from the causes," she said.

A few of the sisters involved in the study were working in Rochester when they were recruited, and now live at the Wilton, Conn., motherhouse.

Sister Mary Louis Whalen, 93, a School Sister of Notre Dame for 71 years, joined the study while doing volunteer work with the diocesan education office. She had been girls' principal at Bishop Kearney High School when it opened in 1962, serving till 1968, and superior of the religious community; she returned to Bishop Kearney to teach chemistry from 1974-77.

In a note to the *Catholic Courier*, she said she was glad to be a study participant. "I realize the value of a study on this important topic of aging and how it could affect so many lives," she wrote.

Sister Mary Marcian Rotonno, a 100-year-old Rochester native, also was recruit-

ed. She taught chemistry and religion at Bishop Kearney for 30 years.

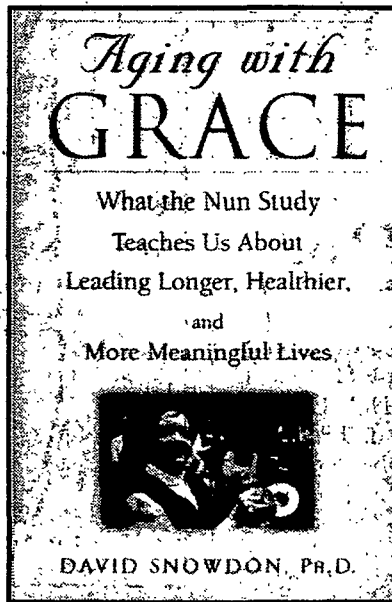
"In 1992, I left Rochester and retired to our Motherhouse in Wilton, Conn., where I have been living the life of Reilly ever since," she wrote to the *Courier*.

She said she was happy to be in the study.

"Because of the donation of our brains after death, this study has been able to explore some areas in greater depth. I am glad to have the opportunity to try to help many people. Aging is an ongoing process we all face. I

would love, at 100 years of age, to still be a teacher, teaching people how to face their golden years with joyful anticipation."

Another recruit, Sister Mary Ann Tantalio, 87, is a Rochester native and was a parishioner of the old St. Patrick's Church. She served as librarian at Bishop



Kearney from 1974 to 1998, and also taught math, religion and life skills. She left Rochester in 1999.

"I've always been interested in the capacity of the brain," she told the *Courier*, and noted that the church allows donation of body parts to science.

Sister Tantalio explained that her grandmother had worked in Italy during the 19th century with Maria Montessori, the brain surgeon, helping to devise methods of teaching children with brain damage.

Therefore when asked to donate her brain, she said, "I could cope with that. ... I thought it was a great enterprise."

She said her own life hasn't changed because of the study, "but I am much more aware of the disabilities of the aging process."

She has suffered major loss of vision,

but has become more audibly oriented today, and uses a special computer program to write and edit.

Sister Mary Virginia Geiger, 86, who taught history and philosophy at the College of Notre Dame of Maryland from 1938 to 2000, has been a study participant for 11 years. She still lives on campus and has an active writing schedule.

Sister Geiger noted that "St. Thomas Aquinas said faith opens up what reason is saying."

"We spent so long in our lives, not seeing life from this angle," she added. "In the 1930s, '40s, '50s, even '60s, we looked for what we could do for God. Now we see what God is doing for us."

Sister Geiger said she hopes the research will help the families of those with Alzheimer's because "the family suffers so intensely."

And she hopes the study will combat the "old-age stereotype, that the old are of no use to us anymore. I think it is the most fascinating period of your life," she said. "Intellectually and spiritually you are most alert at this time. It is the most beautiful time to live."

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Includes reporting by Kathleen Schwarz.

Study

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Alzheimer's. Also, higher education correlated with lower risk of Alzheimer's.

"I think the sisters would call it not coincidental, but providential, that our findings go back to the importance of the early years of life and that education then makes all the difference," Snowdon said.

• Folic acid deficit, which has been linked to the birth condition spina bifida, appears to also be related to Alzheimer's.

But more important than diet is community, the fact the nuns share all aspects of their lives, even meals, Snowdon thinks.

"Many old folks have just the opposite of what the sisters have. I saw from my first visit 15 years ago the importance of community in aging successfully and gracefully," Snowdon said.

"Stereotypes have broken down," Snowdon said. "We don't see old age as a time of

decline for everybody. We also know — don't wait until old age to make changes. Aging is a lifelong disease process."

He noted that Baby Boomers are investing their money but "they also need to invest in good mental and physical shape."

"We make investments throughout life. We also make social choices. The social part can't be underestimated. Being friends, family, part of something — it's a real life force," he added.

The care the retired sisters receive is "countercultural to what is offered to most older people," said Sister Mary Lou Simcoe, a Holy Union sister who is director of communications for the School Sisters of Notre Dame Baltimore province.

In an interview at Villa Assumpta, the retirement wing of the congregation's motherhouse in Baltimore, Sister Mary Lou said, "They are not put away. The province has invested finances and personnel in the older members."

"You don't see the signs of depression" in part, she said, because the convent "is not a climate that would condone that, they wouldn't let you lie in bed."

Younger members of the community and hired staff involve older members in special liturgies, Orioles games on a large-screen TV and even weight training.

The lesson for lay people seems to be "establish links, have a network," Sister Mary Lou said.

Snowdon remarked that the "the spiritual side is very related" to one's well-being and longevity. "People who are hopeful and happy when they have stresses can come back to a happy balanced state," he added.

"The oldest SSND, Sister Esther Boor, is age 106. She says she just 'takes life as it comes.' I love that," he added.

"She's celebrating her 85th anniversary of her vows, they don't even have a jewel for that. And she is still looking forward to the future," Snowdon said.

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