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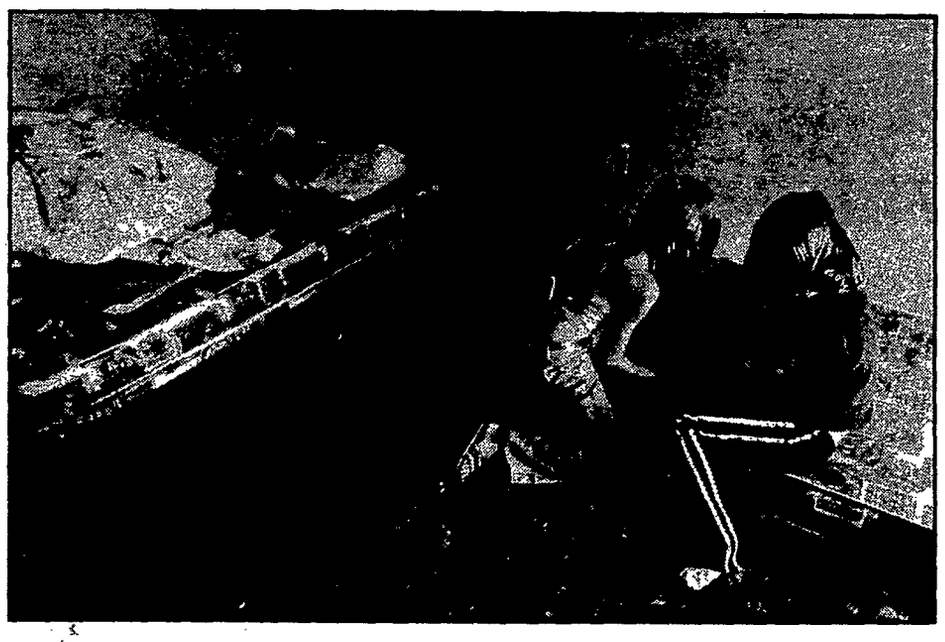

Jessica Bohart (left), 9, and her next-door neighbor, Mary Willet, 5, look at a tiny butterfly in Jessica's bedroom in Alpine.

Betty Morrell, 32, does laundry Aug. 15, in her home on Route 228 in Alpine. She and her two children, Caleb Castrenze, 10, and Jessica Bohart, 9, live with Morrell's fiancee, Stacey Smith, 30, who has been trying to find work for months.

morning, how many times are you late for work before you don't have a job anymore?" Sister Mackie said.

"Transportation is a major, major issue and stumbling block," said McMahon, who heads the rural issues subcommittee of the New York State Council of Catholic Charities Directors. The council advises the New York State Catholic Conference.

Conley noted that people caught in this dilemma are hampered by government restrictions, saying, "The 'Catch 22' is that individuals with a car valued over $1,500 are not eligible for food stamps. So they are forced to sell the car, which means they cannot work, because more than likely there are no jobs within walking or biking distance."

All these factors create a vicious cycle, Sebastian said: "So often in the case of poverty, the poverty feeds on itself."

The lack of mobility also takes its toll when it comes to getting help. Even though public assistance is available for the rural poor, Smith said, it can be a struggle to access the necessary social-service agency offices.

"Only 20 percent of the people get services in the rural counties, because they can't get there," Smith said.

Or, Smith added, people who need services may not even be aware they exist. She said this is a major difference between rural and urban poverty, explaining, "In the city, every neighborhood has a housing service or somebody on the block (to advocate for services). You have choices." But in rural areas, Smith said, "You don't know who to turn to or who to trust."

Bishop Sheen Housing helps out by offering financial counseling, and advocating for loans and grants for would-be homeowners. The agency also operates an emergency repair program for existing homeowners.

Meanwhile, Tioga County Rural Ministry's staff and volunteers assist clients with such expenses as utility and medical bills, and provide food and supplies at TCRM's pantry in Owego. In addition, workers make numerous trips throughout the county, bringing goods to people who can't travel. Sister O'Brien said she visits young families in mobile homes, as well as numerous elderly people – usually widows – who own their property but devote a substantial amount of their limited income toward housing expenses.

Mary Bachmurski, 76, lives alone in a small, cluttered house on farm land near Newark Valley. Her husband died in December and she rarely goes out because she is nearly blind.

Sister O'Brien noted that the dirt road leading to Bachmurski's property is literally impassable during parts of the winter. But on a recent July day, Sister O'Brien visited with Bachmurski for a few minutes after giving her a shopping bag full of cold cuts, cleaning supplies and toilet paper.

"It's good to see somebody around once in awhile," Bachmurski said.

Though Bachmurski appreciated the visit, Sister O'Brien said that many more people who could be helped by her agency don't want to admit their poverty. Indeed, a woman in her late 80s who Sister O'Brien and a *Catholic Courier* reporter visited later that day said she didn't want to be identified in print.

Sister Mackie of Bishop Sheen Housing said this is quite natural, commenting, "They're not going to put a sign out there saying 'I have an outhouse.' "

Sister Mackie said that many of the housing cases she handles are from referrals. Once, she recalled, her office became aware of a woman's plight only after a taxi driver who occasionally took her shopping noticed how decrepit her home had become.

"You have to wait until there's a major crisis," Smith said.

Mutual mistrust

Such agencies as Tioga County Rural Ministry, Catholic Charities and Bishop Sheen Housing may be among the few willing to get deeply involved with a population that is often dismissed by society.

Whereas the urban poor is made up of a wide range of cultures, Sister O'Brien said the great majority of Tioga County's rural poor are white families who have lived in the area for many generations. "Their families have grown up here, and this is what they know. Until they know something else, you might as well be with the people you know," she said.

Smith, also, said most of her clients are white. But she commented that this population shouldn't be ridiculed for not being able to afford new clothes, cars and houses, and otherwise failing to meet societal expectations.

Smith and McMahon added that it's hard to shake this negative image even when people may want to. For instance, Smith said, single mothers who work low-paying jobs aren't likely to be devoting time and money to beautifying themselves or their homes.

"They're very hard-working," Smith said. "If you put an urban or suburban person out there, they'd see how hard it was."

Added McMahon: "We work with people who have very strong feelings about their appearance, but they're over a barrel." He noted, for example, that "there are many, many rural counties in the state where there are few Medicaid providers for dental services."

As for people getting to these services, "If you ask them to drive an hour and a half to the doctor or dentist, they're not going to," Smith said. Residents of Monroe County, where such services are more plentiful, "take so much for granted," she stated.

Unfortunately, Sebastian said, society is quick to judge the rural poor rather than seek the reasons for the poverty or attempt to help.

"The sort of stigma of people who live in a mobile home is not fair at all," said Sebastian, who pointed out that many retired people buy mobile homes and move to warm-weather climates but aren't judged harshly.

Such terms as white trash and trailer trash are "every bit as bigoted as some of those other terms that are not 'politically correct,' " Sebastian added.

Meanwhile, the mutual gap of mistrust remains between the rural poor and the outside world. Husner said she avoids traveling into villages and cities to avoid public scrutiny.

"I don't like going anywhere very much if I can help it," Husner said. "(People) look at me. That's why I have anxiety."

Some of her misgivings stem from the treatment Husner says a daughter received while attending public school.

"No one would eat with her and no one would sit on a school bus with her, because she was a poor kid," Husner said.

Yet for Husner, moving up the economic ladder isn't a huge priority. She said her mobile home will be paid off in two years, and she's perfectly content to stay put.

"I'm not a material person and I don't care," she said. "I've never considered myself poor. It's quiet here – I don't really know how to explain it, it's freer living."

Husner's remarks raise a significant point: Not all rural poor are necessarily bent on attaining what others would consider a higher standard of living.

"They choose independence even if it means substandard housing," Smith said.

Added Sister Mackie: "Their situation would bother us a lot more than it would bother them."

Keeping this point in mind, Dubel said she has been advocating for modification of current welfare laws that threaten to cut off support unless rural poor move to more populated areas to find work.

"Many of the people, that's where they grew up and they lived there all their lives. There is starting to be a recognition that you can't force people to uproot and move to the city," Dubel said.

Sister O'Brien said the majority of her clients don't relish the idea of either moving or changing their lifestyle. "They have a 'We prefer it this way' attitude, 'I'm going to make it,' " she said.

dining guide

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dining guide

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Italian Specialties
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$5.95 to $9.95
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Parties and Banquets For Up to 50 People
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