

FEATURE

Devout senior loves libraries, faith and community

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

GATES — Sam Palma, 81, didn't want any newspaper article about him to be "syrupy," for heaven's sake.

"I don't want people to say, 'Well, you can walk across the canal without using the bridge.'"

Although Palma cannot walk across water, the energetic senior citizen has achieved a long list of accomplishments in a life of service to his community and church. An Army veteran of the European Theater in World War II and an award-winning former scoutmaster, Palma has made a life out of his dedication to others.

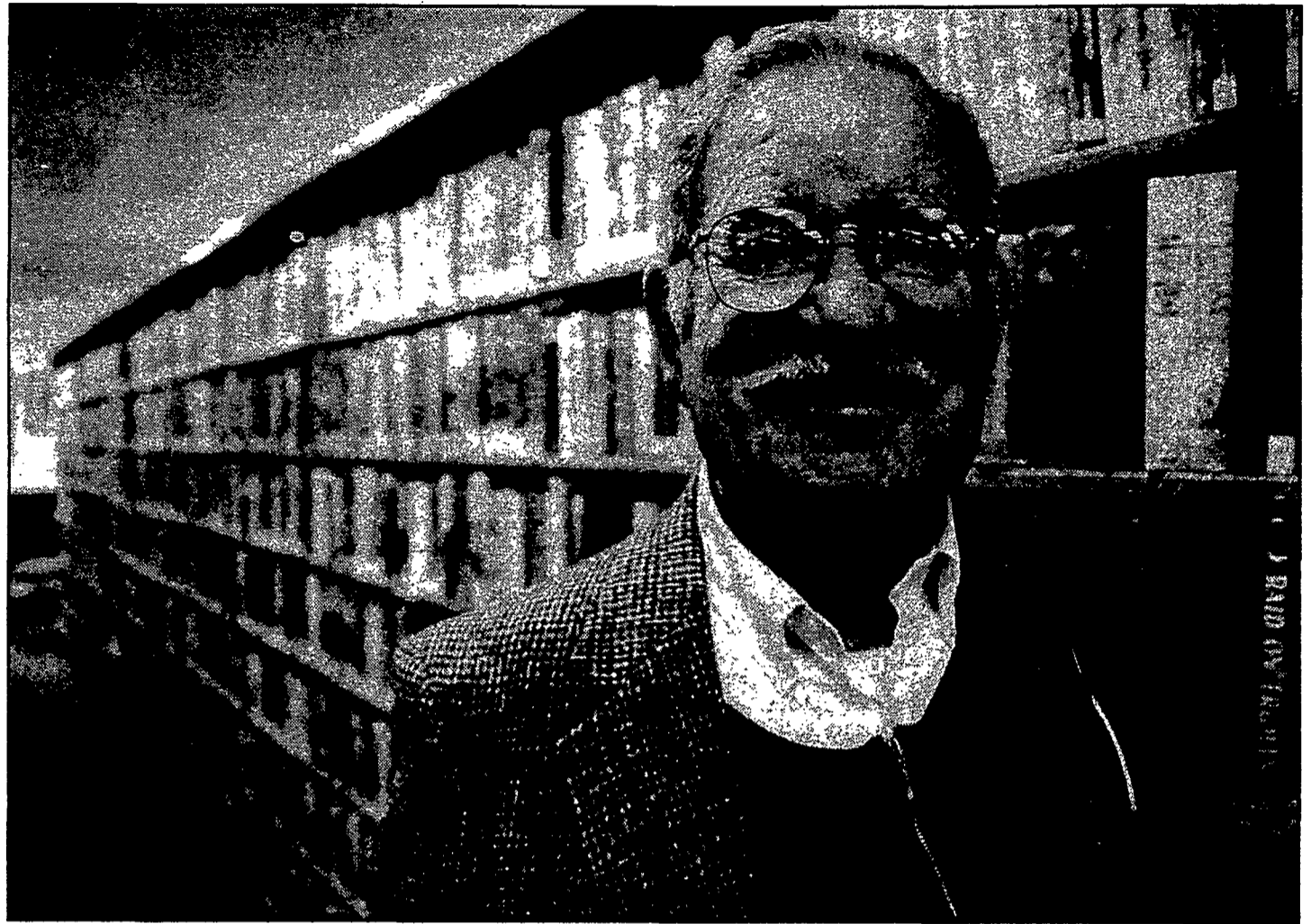
A parishioner at St. Theodore's Church, Palma serves as a eucharistic minister and lector, and also works on the parish's bingo committee.

"I preach, teach and make money to warm the buildings," he said with a smile.

Married to his wife, Doris, for 52 years, Palma has three children and three grandchildren. One of his kids is Deacon David Palma, director of the Office of Deacon Personnel. His son's vocation came as no surprise, Palma said.

"David was always an altar boy, from when he was seven-years-old till high school," Palma said. "We're very proud of him."

And the community of Gates is apparently quite proud of Palma, who was selected Citizen of the Year by the Gates Lion Club in 1985. One of the biggest reasons he's so valued in his town is his dedication to its public library, which he has served in various volunteer capacities since the 1960s. Among the services he's rendered to the library are advocating for its expansion in the '60s; serving as president of its board of trustees from 1976-85;



Karin von Voigtlander/Photo Intern

Sam Palma volunteers at the Gates Public Library.

working to improve the pay scale of its employees as well as securing an endowment fund from the Gates Amita Club; and serving since 1985 with the Friends of the Gates Public Library Board, which orga-

nizes three to four book sales each year to benefit the library.

The retired General Motors employee volunteers at the library once a week, often sorting donated books, and is a familiar face to library patrons.

"People think I work here, but I don't," he said with a sheepish grin.

Palma recently was honored for his work by the board of trustees for the Monroe County Library System, which gave him a Certificate of Appreciation for Service Beyond Measure. Palma was nominated for the award by Sue Swanton, director of the Gates library.

"He's super, just absolutely super," she said. "I want to be like Sam when I grow up."

The book sales Palma has organized have raised more than \$60,000 for the library, she said, noting that the proceeds have helped the library purchase equipment and offer programs that would not have been possible otherwise. She credited Palma's religious belief in helping others for motivating his tireless service.

"This is a person who lives his faith in action daily," she said. "You don't get any better than that."

Judy MacKnight, the library's assistant director and volunteer coordinator, pointed out that Palma is an inspiring example to the library's 24 other volunteers.

"We wouldn't know how to run the book sales without him," she said.

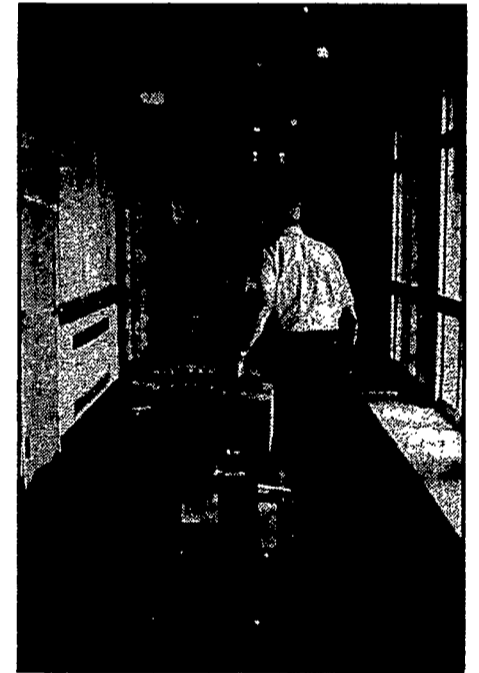
Palma said his great love of reading is something he likes to share with others. He fancies travel books, science fiction, and self-help books with a spiritual flavor. He added that one librarian told him when he was growing up that he must have read every book in her library.

"I read quite a bit, and I've always been a good reader, and I think it's very important for a community to have a good library," he said.

Indeed, Deacon Palma said his father always encouraged his children to read.

"Memories of my father and books go back as far as I can remember," the deacon said. "I can't remember a time when I wasn't visiting a library with my father."

The Gates library isn't the only beneficiary of his love, the elder Palma noted, adding that he's also helped some churches, hospitals and other not-for-profit groups improve their library collections.



Sam Palma takes books to a storage room at the Gates Public Library.

He's passionate when he talks about inspiring children to read, and offers this advice to those who design libraries.

"It's got to be kid-friendly," he said. "There should be plenty of space for kids to sit and read."

Children who learn to use libraries at an early age find high school much easier than those who don't, he added.

What's most remarkable about Palma is that he has retained his zeal for volunteering despite his battles with myasthenia gravis, a neuromuscular disease characterized by fatigue and weakness. Palma said the disease can make his eyes "go out" and give him difficulty swallowing. Fortunately, Palma said, his disease is currently in remission, and among his many activities, he has served as a volunteer assistant to the director of the Western New York Chapter of Myasthenia Gravis Foundation, which is currently known as the Myasthenia Gravis Alliance.

While other seniors might find his commitment to volunteer work daunting, Palma sees it as the logical outcome of a life he said was blessed.

"After I retired, I figured it's payback time," he said. "You have to give back to your community and your church."



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