

# SENIOR LIFESTYLES

## Dedicated administrator has logged 50-plus years

By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

ELMIRA — To Sister Marie Michael Miller, SSJ, the common touch is just as vital as the management roles she holds at the skilled nursing facility of St. Joseph's Hospital.

"I probably know each of the residents very well. I'm not a person who sits in the office," Sister Miller said. "I really believe in being out with the residents and staff. We're all a team."

This was evident on a recent Monday afternoon as Sister Miller moved from room to room at the facility, stopping repeatedly for greetings and friendly words.

"There's nobody nicer in this world that I know of — and I'm not buttering her up, either," observed resident Kenneth Weismann.

Her congeniality has been a fixture at St. Joseph's for some 51 years. In fact, Sister Miller — who will turn 74 in December — has logged more continuous service than any other current employee at the Elmira hospital.

Sister Miller grew up in Rochester's Holy Redeemer Parish and entered the Sisters of St. Joseph in 1948. After earning her bachelor's and master's degrees in nursing from Nazareth College and the Catholic University of America, respectively, she made her final profession of vows as a Sister of St. Joseph in 1956.

She began at St. Joseph's Hospital in

1950 where she has served as a nurse, administrator and educator. At one point, in fact, she simultaneously served as director of the nursing service and of the hospital's former School of Nursing.

Nearly 30 years after the great flood of 1972, Sister Miller vividly recalls how the hospital managed to evacuate patients and continue operating even as water rose around the building.

"The flood was certainly devastating in so many ways, but it was also a time for more esprit de corps and teamwork than I'd ever experienced," Sister Miller commented. She recalled that one doctor got to work in a boat, and that staffers rescued a dog seen swimming past the hospital.

Sister Miller took over as nursing-home administrator in 1978. Her responsibilities have actually increased since St. Joseph's added a 40-bed unit to its fifth floor in 1999, bringing the skilled nursing facility's overall capacity to 71 beds.

Noting that she worked in the hospital's pediatrics unit early in her career, Sister Miller quipped, "I've gone from pediatrics to geriatrics." Yet she said her bedside manner remains the same, regardless of her patients' age.

"They still need tender, loving care. People are people," she said. "That's what's important, is that they experience the same kind of kindness."

With such ideals, it's not surprising that Sister Miller was presented with the hospital's OPPY (Operation People) award



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer  
Sister Marie Michael Miller, SSJ, laughs during a poker game with Kenneth Weismann at St. Joseph's Hospital in Elmira Nov. 1.

earlier this year. This annual award honors a hospital member who exhibits friendly and courteous service, and fosters good will among patients, visitors, employees and the general public.

Sister Miller's caring ways apparently have long-lasting effects. Many patients and visitors to St. Joseph's Hospital remind her of the care she once gave them. Among them was the daughter of a nursing-facility resident who said she had been one of Sister Miller's pediatrics patients some 40 years earlier.

"She said, 'You gave me a holy card and

I still have it,'" Sister Miller said.

She continues her administrative work while traveling to Florida frequently to care for her 98-year-old mother, Florence. But she doesn't mind her busy lifestyle and plans to maintain it indefinitely.

"As long as God continues to give me good health, why would I not want to?" she asked.

Meanwhile, Sister Miller said she strives to walk with God by living this motto: "To know him, to love him, to serve him in this world — and to be happy with him forever in the next."

## Activist, 91, wins Lumen Christi

CHICAGO — "You can get angry at the things people do, but you can't hate any person," said Marie Wilkinson while grasping the torture whip she inherited from her father-in-law, an escaped slave. "I take this whip and I teach a lot of people not to hate."

Wilkinson, 91, is the recipient of the Catholic Church's highest honor for missionary work in America. The Lumen Christi ("Light of Christ") award is presented annually by Catholic Extension, the organization that distributes more than \$16 million each year to missionary efforts in poor Catholic dioceses throughout the United States and its territories.

Nominations, made by U.S. bishops, are judged by a prestigious panel of humanitarians that includes Ethel Kennedy, select bishops and actress Catherine Hicks of TV's "7th Heaven."

Aside from spending a lifetime speaking against hate, Wilkinson has developed child-care centers for single mothers, rescued Hispanic workers living in box cars, launched college funds for underprivileged children and enabled more than 60 charitable organizations.

After an Aurora, Ill. diner refused her a seat in the 1950s, Wilkinson sued and won her case before the Illinois Supreme Court.

Born Marie LeBeau in New Orleans,

Wilkinson studied business at now-defunct Straight College, visited Chicago at age 20 and settled in Aurora, Ill., where she was married to the late Charles Wilkinson for more than 60 years. She still lives by herself in her Aurora home.

"I've tried to be an advocate for the persecuted — those who just weren't getting a fair deal," said Wilkinson, who has the launch of many respected organizations to her credit.

"God points me in the right direction. I know it is God, because the things I felt passionate about were always 30 years ahead of their time."

She refers to her insight about the need for preschools for the children of single mothers, fair housing laws, Feed The Hungry Program, Breaking Free Drug Program, the Catholic Social Action Conference, Sci-Tech youth science museum, and the Urban League — to name a few that she helped start on the local or national level.

Catholic Extension honored Mrs. Wilkinson with the award and a gift of \$10,000 at a ceremony in her diocese of Rockford, Ill., on Oct. 24. Bishop Thomas Doran received \$25,000 as the nominating bishop.

**EDITORS' NOTE:** To learn more about Catholic Extension, call 1-888-473-2484 or visit [www.catholic-extension.org](http://www.catholic-extension.org).

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