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Ministering

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Bishop James E. Kearney, alcohol gradually became a crutch.

"It got so I would take it at night; I could not unwind," he said. "Sometimes I was hung over when I got up. At Mass, I did function, but I am quite sure people could smell it under my breath."

He began to drink vodka, which he said did not leave such an odor. Then he began to enjoy martinis with a fellow priest. His weight — now 145 pounds — swelled to 212.

"I was quite stout in the middle," said Father Hafner, who's about 6 feet tall. He did try treatment in the 1970s, but said it didn't help. Later, the diocese sent him to a St. Luke Institute clinic. The institute was founded 20 years ago as a treatment center for alcohol and substance abuse by priests and religious. Now it addresses a range of psychological and spiritual problems.

Whenever someone new joined the house, there was an anointing of the sick. Alcoholism affects a person spiritually, emotionally and physically, he said.

"As a result of being there, I wanted to take better care of myself," he said. He began to watch his food and to exercise.

In fact, Father Hafner said, he signed a contract with the bishop vowing that he would go to a health spa and to support-group meetings. He does aerobics and step classes about three times a week.

He allows himself one vice: Friendly's chocolate fudge brownie frozen yogurt, usually two cartons a week, a habit supported with coupons from friends.

"Having overworked and been workaholic, I don't want to fall into what it was before, and I can see it's so easy to do," he said. "I'm reminded with priests my age having difficult problems now who don't seem to be coping and taking care of things that well."

"I am very grateful now, to God and people who helped in my intervention and have been supportive to me along the way. ... I can say now I am a grateful alcoholic."

He said he's also very happy with his assignment in Spencerport.

"I have been very careful about what I might consume at Mass," he said. "I take a speck (of wine) at Mass and it does not bother me."

More people today realize that alcoholism is a disease, "not anything immoral you've done wrong," Father Hafner said. "And I keep on adding a day every day I don't drink since March 1 of 1980." He prays the Serenity Prayer on his knees every morning.

When he considers six major influences on health, Bishop Clark said he realizes, first, that a person can't do much about his genes. As for stresses, he observed, "You can't really change what goes on out there. I guess the challenge is to deal with them." The bishop has not smoked in a long time, and drinks very little. So he concentrates now on exercising and eating right.

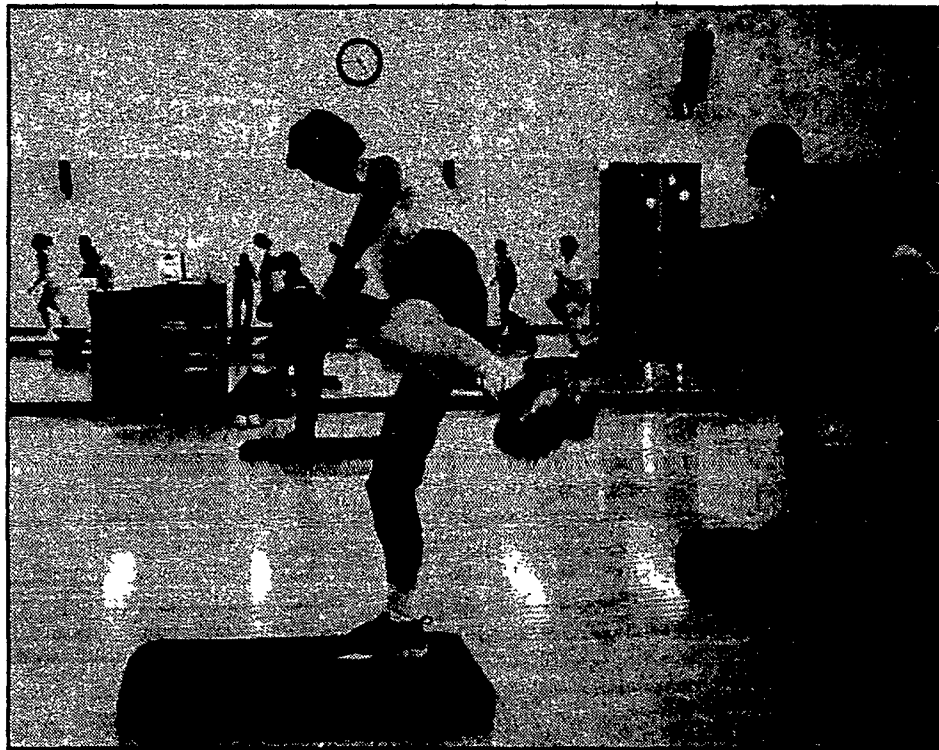
Fragile

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Speaking at diocesan Leadership Day in August, Owen, in her early 70s, arrived on stage in a wheelchair and holding a white cane. She began her talk with a question: "Was God out of his mind when he put our souls into such fragile earthen vessels?"

Owen's statistics show that 5.4 million U.S. Catholics have a physical disability; 800,000 have sight or hearing disabilities; 300,000 are mentally retarded; 500,000 are mentally ill; and 2.6 million have assorted problems limiting a daily living function.

A hereditary condition led to blindness for Owen 30 years ago while she was teaching at San Francisco State University. She has undergone corneal transplants, and can now discern vague forms. Later illness affected her hearing, and spinal injuries have impaired her mobility.



Father Jerry Hafner works out in a step aerobics class at Bally's Total Fitness in Greece Nov. 21.

"The point is you basically try to keep those key components in balance, and I think I'm doing reasonably well," he said. Meanwhile, "you grow older. ... On the one hand, you have a greater wisdom to keep things in perspective, on the other hand, your immune system weakens."

"It makes you the more aware of being rooted in prayer, out of faith. Under any circumstances a prayer life is very important. When you are dealing with a lot of issues, stress, it helps you deal with what's really important. It reminds you in whose hands these things really rest."

Bishop Clark usually walks a treadmill at home for 40-50 minutes five times a week, often holding and reading a book. He's also set up a Bowflex machine, on which he works for 10 to 35 minutes three times a week. He claims not to miss jogging or racquetball, and said he exercises as intensely as ever.

"I've often said these months I am grateful I enjoy physical work like that," he said. "I have friends who didn't enjoy it, and found it a burdensome thing when they'd rather be doing something else."

"I keep reading that the older you get, the more important it is to exercise your upper body, all the muscle groups, to combat deterioration that takes place over time," the bishop said. He said it would be "foolhardy" for him not to exercise, likening giving up the activity to "somebody with emphysema smoking again." In fact, while he understands coronary artery disease is chronic and that he will have to deal with it the rest of his life, he added, with a brief laugh, "I'm happy to do so."

Bishop Clark said that he appreciated people's spiritual support, as well as his colleagues' pitching in for him during the early days of his illness.

The levels of inflammation in his arter-

ies have normalized and he is on diminishing amounts of prednisone, and also takes Methotrexate, an anti-inflammatory medicine. While he recognizes the coronary artery disease and vasculitis are real concerns, "I also am very much aware of people coping with far greater burdens, and do so with heroic patience and keep a wonderful disposition toward life and people in their lives," he said. "It also makes me very aware of people who are uninsured or underinsured."

Father Dave Bonin, priest administrator of St. Margaret Mary Parish, Apalachin, since Oct. 30, has been through numerous ups and downs in the past 2½ years. Each time he's had eye surgery, his hopes rise; each time he suffers another eye problem, his hopes suffer.

He's had type II diabetes for 17 years, he noted, and has been on several oral medications for it. It isn't unusual for diabetics to develop certain eye problems. An alert doctor performed laser surgery on the priest's right eye, even before retinal changes affected his vision.

"The treatment went fine, I didn't have problems," Father Bonin said. Six months later he awoke one morning to find his vision in the same eye was black along the bottom. He underwent a vitrectomy and his vision began to recover. Then, suddenly, his left eye required an operation, and because it wasn't successful, another. Next thing he knew, he needed a cornea transplant in his left eye, and later surgery for glaucoma and a cataract. More surgery followed in summer. Today he is legally blind.

Through most of these difficulties he was pastor of St. Mary of the Lake in Watkins Glen, and St. Benedict, Odessa. "I met a woman in church who had similar problems," he recalled. "She said, 'I hope you are ready to be in this for the long haul; I've had eight surgeries.' I said, 'Holy smokes, do you really trust your doctor?'"

Now he is placing his trust in a retinopathologist, a cornea specialist and a glaucoma specialist.

And he has spent weeks at the Duke University Diet and Fitness Center, with the diocese's support. He's lost 60 pounds, going down to about 410.

"I learned more in an hour than I have known all the years I had diabetes," he said. He knew about possible complications, he said, but he learned that controlling his diet meant watching every carbohydrate, not just sweets, for example.

"I'm doing aerobic work, and personal training to strengthen my flexibility," he said, adding that the Duke program has helped him get off three medications.

The priest said parishioners have been extremely supportive. He has a list of parishioners he can call for rides. St. Mary's pastoral associate, Sister Cate Theiss, CSJ, has also been a big support.

Sister Theiss, who has been dealing since 1999 with leiomyosarcoma, a rare cancer that affects smooth muscles, joked that she is one of Father's Bonin's "disabilities."

Father Bonin gained diocesan permission to have lay people stand in the sanctuary with him to read the Gospel and opening prayer for him during Mass. He has memorized consecration and eucharistic prayers, and uses a railing installed next to the pulpit at St. Margaret Mary. He also says Mass at the Tioga County parishes of St. Patrick's, Owego; St. John the Evangelist, Newark Valley; St. Francis of Assisi, Catatonk; St. James, Waverly; and St. Pius X, Van Etten, Chemung County.

The ups and downs don't bother him as they once did. "I've plateaued," he said.

"I don't believe I've ever said this is something that God's cursed me with, or (asked) what did I do. I've felt all along and over the years been taught by both the disability and working with people that people struggle with a lot of things, and you need the basic belief that God loves you and cares for you and will see you through."

When she looks back, Sister Weider can recall suddenly collapsing as a youth on the dance floor and tennis court. In 1988 she began having vision problems that she was told were warning signs of MS.

"I probably should have understood it was just a matter of time," she said. "For seven years I was oblivious."

Then in 1995 she experienced weakness, numbness and tingling in her right leg. An MRI scan showed brain lesions symptomatic of multiple sclerosis.

Sister Weider had been campus minister since 1984 at Nazareth College, "and just loved my ministry." Staff and students supported her, but she finally chose to leave in May 2000.

"There are days I can't pass a dish," she said. "But I am still able to function pretty well and I am determined to continue to function as best I can. I have some bladder issues. My weakest muscles are in my neck and torso. ... Without the wheelchair I can't just go and sit at Mass. I'm not able to hold myself in that position."

Sister Weider lives in a roomy Rochester apartment designed for people with MS and owned by the Al Sigi Center. Part of the decor are prints bearing such messages as, "I get up, I walk, I fall down. Meanwhile I keep on dancing."

"I can focus on the good or on the hardships, the struggle of the illness," Sister Weider said. Yet she acknowledged the need to deal with various feelings.

She also knows she has lost cognitive ability, though it is still in the normal range. "I have a hard time maintaining focus," she said. "I made a call this morning and was waiting and waiting for the person to answer, and realized it was still the dial tone."

Yet Sister Weider has thrown herself into new ministries. She gets around with a van the Sisters of St. Joseph bought for her. It has a lift, and she learned to drive using hand controls.

Sister Weider serves on the boards of the Upstate MS Society Chapter and Hope Hall school, and on a Women's Workshop Committee, which holds workshops for women with chronic illness or disabilities.

After terrorists attacked the United States Sept. 11, Sister Weider said she felt helpless because she couldn't physically help in the recovery, nor could she donate blood. She began writing a book of prayers, meditation and reflections on responding selflessly to situations in life.

"I just thought, 'Well one thing we can all do is pray,'" she said. She also had to quickly revise the reflection she offered at an MS getaway weekend Sept. 15 and a congregational gathering Sept. 22.

"As I have slowed down, I look at and treasure the small miracles and beauty," she said. "The slower my life has become, the more time I have had for prayer. ... So my relationship with God, I feel, is much closer, much deeper."