

On the MOVE

Story by
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Photo by
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A shining star for the dying



Jill Reigelsperger, 17, says good night to Elaine (Brooks) Polobick, 74, at Vincent House in Wayland Dec. 14. The two had talked and sung songs together.

Why would an energetic teen volunteer at a home for the dying? It's a question that Jill Reigelsperger faced frequently after she began helping at Vincent House in Wayland, Steuben County.

"People really don't understand what they're missing," said Jill, 17. "It's a feeling inside that you just can't replicate in any other way. You don't go in there feeling sorry for people; it's not like everyone's really down."

Jill said that Vincent House strives to make patients "feel completely at ease, so you can win the battle with yourself and go peacefully."

She describes this battle in the following way: "When you're dying, you're faced with the unknown. It can be scary — all the things you didn't get done; what's going to happen to the people you leave behind; what's going to happen to you. Were you good enough? It makes you look at yourself."

As a result, Jill said she's heard many profound, personal reflections from patients. "It's happened many times, which is good for them. It just comes streaming out of them,"

she said. "People can live more in their last few weeks or months than at any other time in their lives."

Jill grew up in Perkinsville's Sacred Heart Parish, which became part of the Holy Family Catholic Community cluster in 1998. Since then, the former convent at Wayland's St. Joseph Church — also part of the cluster — has been converted into a home for the dying and is sponsored by area Catholic and non-Catholic churches.

When she first heard about the Vincent House project during a Mass, Jill knew instantly she wanted to volunteer. "I looked over at my mom and said, 'I have to do this,'" she said.

Jill was involved from the beginning, helping with preparation of the facility. After it opened in December 2000, she stopped there nearly every weekday after school to visit with patients.

Vincent House can accommodate two patients at a time. Jill said that Vincent House's nursing staff and volunteers strive to create a caring atmosphere not only for the patients, but for their family and friends as well.

"Nothing but good comes out of there," she stated. "It's not a 'house of death.' If I had a bad day, that place would cheer me up. It's just indescribable, really. I wish more people would give it a try."

Jill, who turns 18 on Jan. 29, graduated one year early from Wayland-Cohocton High School. She is completing her first semester at SUNY College at Geneseo, where she is studying education. Although she lives on campus, Jill plans to continue her involvement at Vincent House by volunteering over Christmas break as well as during the summer.

Jill's interest in community service predates her involvement at Vincent House. As an

eighth-grader, she recalled, she woke up one Sunday morning and decided she wanted to get involved at the local ARC.

"I went there and said 'Hi, I'm Jill; I'd like to be a volunteer,'" she said. There, Jill read books, sang and even painted fingernails for ARC's developmentally disabled clients.

Her dedication to volunteering stems from many years of intense prayer. "When I was younger I would say 'God, please send me in the right direction and I'll put my whole heart and whole soul into it, if that's what you want,'" Jill said.

Of the many people she's befriended through volunteering, the one who stood out the most was Gerald, a man in his mid-60s who came to Vincent House suffering from a brain tumor.

"He changed so many lives. In a hopeless situation, he had hope still — not hope to recover, but to keep living. He didn't die when he got there, he lived for four months," said Jill, explaining that Gerald enjoyed conversing and joking around.

Jill said that she gave Gerald her senior picture, and he had it taped to his bedside during his final days. At Gerald's funeral, the man's son told Jill that the picture had been placed inside Gerald's suit pocket — at his father's request. "I was literally in tears," she said.

Moments like these make Jill feel she's answering the call to do "something deeper."

"What was I doing during the day, in high school, that really mattered? Nothing," Jill said, explaining that most of her high-school activities served to benefit her, not others.

But with Vincent House, she remarked, "I could say 'I did this today; that's something substantial.' You feel like you're making a difference."

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