

# SENIOR LIFESTYLES

## Growing family of 78 marches in step on life

By Kathleen Schwar  
Assistant editor

HILTON - When tens of thousands of pro-lifers gather at the nation's annual March for Life Jan. 22 in Washington, D.C., Dick and Catherine "Kay" Flanagan again hope to be in their midst. And they may carry a sign.

But in the Hilton area, their family of 12 children and 52 grandchildren is all the sign they need.

"We've always been pro-life, as you can see," said Dick, 71, a retired construction worker, in an interview at the couple's home with many of the children and grandchildren present.

In the late 1960s Bishop Fulton J. Sheen was visiting their parish, St. Leo's, where the couple still attends daily Mass. During the recession, he caught a glimpse of a "very pregnant" Kay sitting with at least 10 children across a back pew.

"Stop everything," she remembers him saying. "He asked, 'Are these all your children?'" recalled Kay, now 70. "My face was probably beet red when he stopped."

He asked her out into the aisle to shake her hand.

Dick was sitting up front because he was a lector that morning. Kay had chosen the back in case the children became noisy. Had they been, however, chances were they'd be made to sit still at home with their hands folded for as long as Mass.

Kay said that "trusting in the Lord" helped the couple raise their family, as well as adhering to the proverb, "Spare the rod and spoil the child."

"A lot of people don't believe in that anymore. And it works," she said.

Another form of discipline was having to write passages from the Bible and explain them.

"We've still got some of Mary's writings," Dick said, as Mary laughed and her siblings kidded her.

One sibling, Susan Ver Wulst, is on her way to surpassing her mother's birthing record. She and her husband John, a farmer, are expecting their 11th child.

That will be one more for the clan's Christmas party - held this past year at the Hilton Fire Department Exempt Club. The fact the family was able to rent the hall didn't have much to do with Mary's husband, Mike Lissow, becoming Hilton's fire chief this year, Dick said, but "that didn't hurt."

Each family brought a dish to pass - make that "giant dishes to pass," according to daughter Pat, mother of six with husband Steve. "We all used to come here, but it was too much for them."

"Plus, Mike would never clean up," daughter Joan Hough ribbed her brother.

Besides traveling together to the March for Life, the family camps together, whether at Hamlin Beach or in Florida, creating huge campfires. Family members



Stacey Staibus

Dick and Kay Flanagan beside their homemade family tree of wooden rabbits at their home in Hilton Jan. 3. The Flanagans have 12 children and 52 grandchildren. Son Bob started the tree years ago.

caravan and keep in touch by CB.

The March for Life trips began about 15 years ago, when son Mike, of the Knights of Columbus Pope John XXIII Council 7707 of Spencerport, began going. Mike, who attends St. Jude's Church in Gates, is now president of the Knights' Finger Lakes Chapter and their New York State chairman for Decent Media.

Looking at his father, he said, "When you saw it was not going to be any big deal, then Mom started going. He didn't know if there would be counterprotesters."

Son Bob has gone, too, and noted, "One reason the March for Life is appealing, is it is peaceful." So are its prayer vigils and rallies, he noted.

"It's awe-inspiring," Dick said. "There are a lot of people you recognize year after year if you go. It's a very uplifting and encouraging thing to see, especially all the young people that go. Literally thousands and thousands from all over the country. They fill Pennsylvania Avenue for as far as you can see."

It's evident that nothing much seems to overwhelm Dick Flanagan. Until, as his visitor leaves, he stands in front of a shelf filled with his grandchildren's pictures.

He and Kay didn't plan to have such a huge family, he reflected. But God had other plans.

"I consider every one of these grandchildren a gift from God," he said.

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