

SENIOR LIFESTYLES

Webster woman a Hall of Famer in faith and life

EDITORS' NOTE: To avoid even the appearance of favoritism, the Catholic Courier typically does not publish articles about its employees' relatives. After Dolores Latona was inducted into the Webster Business and Professional Women's Hall of Fame and featured in a Webster Post article as well as an item in Carol Ritter's column in the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle, however, we decided it would be unfair to discriminate against Dolores and her husband, Peter, simply because Staff Writer Mike Latona is their nephew.

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

Dolores and Peter Latona, parishioners at Holy Trinity Church in Webster, have done some serious prison time. In fact, they've been in and out of prisons for years.

But the Latonas aren't the Bonnie and Clyde of their day; they're simply devoted to bringing Christ to those overlooked by society, including the incarcerated. Both retired Rochester school teachers, the Latonas have served for years as volunteers in prison ministry.

The couple credited the late Deacon Stan Zawacki, chaplain of the Monroe County Jail from 1982-94, for introducing them to prison ministry. Since they began working with inmates 15 years ago, Peter said he and his wife have hosted several weekend retreats in prisons such as those at Attica and Orleans. He added that he and his wife have been privileged to witness some incredible moments in their work. For example, the couple once made a birthday "cake" out of paper for an inmate because prison rules prohibited giving him a real cake.

Peter recalled the inmate's reaction. "He said, 'This is the first time in my life I've had a birthday party.'"

When asked if she ever feared or judged any of the inmates, Dolores pointed out that she patterns her behavior toward them on Christ's example of unconditional love for all.

"I always think of each (prisoner) as they were once a little baby, an innocent baby, and what happened?"

Prisoners haven't been the only beneficiaries of the Latonas' dedication to their faith. They have devoted their free time over the years to the homeless guests at Rochester's St. Joseph's House of Hospi-



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

Michael Kopolka and Nicole Whittum, both 9, raise their hands to answer Dolores Latona's question in an after-school religious-education class at Webster's Holy Trinity School Feb. 5.

ality, a Catholic Worker facility; to training volunteers for Stephen Ministry, a parish-based ministry to people in a crisis or other difficult situations; to the Cursillo Movement, which uses weekend retreats to enrich the Catholic faith; and to a variety of other church groups and activities, including the Knights of Columbus.

As Dolores and Peter see it, their faith is something to be shared with others, not kept to themselves.

"You can't hide your light under a bushel basket," Dolores said during an interview in the couple's home. "You've got to be a witness for God and a disciple for God."

The community certainly has acknowledged that light. On Dec. 2, which was declared "Dolores Latona Day" in Webster, she was inducted into the Webster Business and Professional Women's Hall of Fame for her dedication to both church and community.

Dolores said her desire to serve others, particularly children, was rooted in her upbringing. The oldest daughter of Albert and Genevieve Ranieri of Rochester, she was the third of 12 children.

"Being the oldest daughter, I was always taking care of kids," she said. "I knew that I was going to be a teacher ever since I was

in fourth grade. I just love being with children and helping them and seeing them achieve."

Ironically, she met Peter through an interest in one of his classmates at Brockport State College in the 1950s.

"She asked me, 'How can I get in your class?'" Peter recalled.

Eventually, she became more interested in Peter than in the other man, and asked him to a Sadie Hawkins dance. The two fell in love and were married Jan. 28, 1956. Peter was drafted into the Army shortly thereafter and was stationed in West Germany when Dolores delivered the first of their six children back home. After his discharge, he came home to New Jersey, where Dolores picked him up. They've been together ever since.

Both Latonas became teachers in Rochester, although Dolores stayed at home for a while to raise their children and ran a nursery school out of their home. She founded a nursery at St. Ambrose Parish in the 1960s, and fondly remembers her days as both a private nursery school teacher and public educator. She particularly recalled one boy who came into a class she taught one year for students who had been held back from first grade after kinder-

garten.

"I always remember this little boy coming in and saying, 'I'm dumb, I'm just dumb,'" she said. With pride, she noted that the boy improved dramatically under her tutelage, and grew up to become a special-education teacher.

Dolores still teaches to this day, as a fourth-grade catechetical instructor at her parish. She said that teaching was her "destination," and offered this insight on what makes a good teacher: "I think teachers are born. You can be the smartest kid in the class, but you have to be a people person. You've got to have a lot of patience."

She and her husband believe in reaching others not only through their minds, but through their stomachs. Since 1980, they have organized a number of St. Joseph's Tables both in their home, at their parish and at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality. The tables, which feature an array of meatless dishes, take place around March 19, St. Joseph's feast day, and are an Italian tradition. The couple organized their first one because they were asking God for the return of a son who had joined a Christian cult. They got their answer when he came home on Christmas Day that year and, eventually, decided to leave the cult, they said.

Bouts of illness have somewhat slowed Dolores and Peter in recent years, but they plan to keep busy with their many activities as long as possible. Their final comments pointed to the healthy blend of serious reflection and humor that seems to keep this couple going.

"When I look at the things I've done, they're all long-term," Dolores said. "We persevere. We're perseverant."

"Or," Peter added, "as some people would say, crazy."

Thumb changes name

Green Thumb, Inc., the nation's leading provider of training and employment services for older workers announced Jan. 1 that its name was changing to Experience Works.

"In the past 10 years, we have significantly expanded the services we offer to mature individuals," said Andrea Wooten, president and CEO. "We believe that our new name much better describes the wide range of these services."

Green Thumb was founded in 1965 as an outgrowth of the Beautify America program, which evolved into the Senior Community Service Employment Program, and helps low-income seniors secure meaningful employment. Experience Works works with more than 125,000 seniors throughout the United States, and has an office in Cortland, N.Y. For more information, readers may visit www.experienceworks.org.

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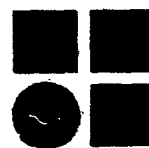
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