

SENIOR LIFESTYLES

Mercy sisters reflect on years in rural ministry

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

GENESEO — After many years of teaching in Catholic schools, Sisters Margaret Mattle and Lisette O'Brien opted to get out of the classroom.

Way out.

Sister O'Brien ministered along the Texas-Mexico border in 1979 and 1980, where she saw poverty unlike anything she had encountered in the Diocese of Rochester. And from 1991-94, Sister Mattle performed missionary duty in Chile. Both women performed their missionary service under the aegis of their religious order, the Sisters of Mercy.

"That was extreme," Sister O'Brien said of her experience.

"I'm a very protected middle-class lady, and being in Chile opens your eyes," Sister Mattle said, joking that after 3 1/2 years there she "had to go home so I could minister in English."

With their time in faraway places having planted the seed, each went on to make substantial contributions to rural ministries in the Southern Tier. Sister O'Brien served as director of the Tioga County Rural Ministry for eight years, and Sister Mattle spent six years as founder and director of the Mercy Rural Ministry in northern Steuben County. Both women retired from their positions on June 30.

Sister O'Brien, 72, entered the Sisters of Mercy in 1948 and spent three decades as an art teacher. She went to Texas during a year of renewal, saying she "just felt like I needed a change." After returning to the Rochester Diocese, she got her first taste of rural ministry while serving parishes in southern Cayuga County. She arrived at Tioga County Rural Ministry in 1994, and two years later became the director of the Owego-based outreach,



Karin von Volgtlander/Staff photographer

Mercy Sisters Lisette O'Brien (left) and Margaret Mattle get together in Sister O'Brien's parlor in Geneseo Aug. 23. In June, both women retired from rural ministries in the Southern Tier.

which covers the southwest portion of the Rochester Diocese. The ministry was formed in 1978.

Sister Mattle, 71, joined the Mercy order in 1949 and was a longtime music instructor. In 1996, not long after returning from Chile, she founded Mercy Rural Ministry in northern Steuben County. The ministry evolved into a collaborative effort between the Mercy sisters and three area parishes: St. Joseph, Wayland; Sacred Heart, Perkinsville; and St. Pius V, Cohocton.

Both ministries are noted for providing such key needs as transportation, emergency assistance and advocacy. More often than not, the beneficiaries are women and children. However, Sister O'Brien and Sister Mattle said the rural poor are

a complex community because they often don't seek relief, choosing instead to live by the simplest of means.

"It's a big temptation to try and redeem them when they don't need it. But they're unaware of some of the things that could help them health-wise and budget-wise," Sister O'Brien said.

Trying to walk this fine line, she added, "has opened me to a new way of looking at others."

"We want to be present to them, but not to do for them what they don't want done," Sister Mattle added.

Yet Sister Mattle also observed that many rural poor desire a helping hand but can't access services on their own.

"The poverty of rural ministry here is isolation," she commented.

The two sisters noted that they have not toiled alone in their service to the rural poor. Other Sisters of Mercy to engage in this ministry in recent years are Sister Susan Cain, director of Steuben County Rural Ministry in Canisteo; Sister Conleth Kennedy, longtime predecessor to Sister Cain and now a parish visitor in Hornell; Sister Noreen Grancy, who preceded Sister O'Brien as director of Tioga County Rural Ministry and is now the outreach coordinator for Mercy Residential Services in Rochester; Sister Phyllis McGuire, who has succeeded Sister O'Brien at Tioga County Rural Ministry; and Sister Nancy O'Brien (no relation to Sister Lisette), who performs rural outreach with Catholic Charities of Livingston County. All are Sisters of Mercy of Rochester with the exception of Sister McGuire, who belongs to a regional community from New Jersey.

Sister O'Brien, who recently moved to Geneseo, plans to continue in some sort of ministry while devoting more time to her artwork, especially drawing and painting. Sister Mattle has settled in Dansville and still volunteers with the outreach she founded. Her retirement means the end of Mercy Rural Ministry as it's known because the sisters will no longer be involved in its operation. It will now be run by an ecumenical collaboration of churches in the area.

"That's what the ministry's about as far as I'm concerned, because I was alone when I started," Sister Mattle pointed out.

Sister O'Brien agreed that it's more than the just the Mercy sisters who make rural ministries effective.

"You can't underestimate how other people help you, especially those volunteers," she said.

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