

SENIOR LIFESTYLES

German native helps others adjust to life in U.S.A.

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

Margot Nalleau has shown concern for others ever since she was a 4-year-old girl attending Mass in Germany with her parents. Nalleau said she thought that when the congregation prayed in German, "Lord, have mercy on us," that they were actually saying: "The rhubarb belongs to us," since the phrases sound somewhat similar when said rapidly.

"One day I shouted, 'Other people want rhubarb, too!,'" she said with a laugh.

Nalleau, 67, has brought this passion about the needs of others into her work as a volunteer interpreter for Rochester's Catholic Family Center, which has used her to help French-speaking African refugees resettle in Monroe County. For the past three years, she has worked with 18 refugees from Togo, Congo, Ivory Coast, Mali and Guinea. Among her proudest moments was shepherding one Congolese woman through the birth of her baby by translating for her at a local hospital.

She has also served on the social ministry and welcoming committees of her parish, Church of the Good Shepherd in Henrietta, and as a eucharistic minister and religious educator. Her volunteer efforts earned her two awards last year. Henrietta gave her the 19th annual Antoinette Brownell Woman of the Year Award — named for the first woman in the United States to be ordained a minister — and Eckerd Corp. named her one of its 2001 Salute to Women honorees. She donated her \$1,000 prize from Eckerd to CFC's refugee resettlement program.

Her neighbor and fellow parishioner, Helen Elam, nominated Nalleau for the Brownell Award.

"She goes beyond what a normal volun-



Karin von Volgtlander/Staff photographer

Catholic Family Center volunteer translator Margot Nalleau (right) helps Siraide Ba, a refugee from Mali, pick out produce at the Foodlink Farmers' Market in Rochester Sept. 4.

teer does," Elam said. "She doesn't think of herself first. She thinks of other people."

The road to such honors was paved early in her life by much suffering. In Nazi Germany, her father, Landolin Schlenk, was sent to a concentration camp in August 1944 after he gave a public speech denouncing the regime.

"He was against the Hitler regime from day one," Nalleau said. "There were always meetings at our house of people with the same mindset."

Then 9 years old, Nalleau was hit daily before class by a pro-Nazi teacher who knew of her father's imprisonment. One

day, the beatings made her cry, and the teacher had the class applaud the young girl in a mocking manner. To this day, she said, she is unable to cry in front of others.

After the allies liberated Dachau, the last concentration camp in which her father was imprisoned, a Red Cross official told her mother that her father was dead. However, Nalleau's mother insisted that her instincts told her he was alive — and she was proven right the next day when he came home on a train from Dachau.

"Here was someone crawling, and it was my father," Nalleau said, recalling his emaciated state brought on by starvation.

Eventually, her father recovered from his suffering, and the family built back their life. However, the war, with all its horrors, had one beneficial effect on Nalleau — it inspired her career as a translator and interpreter. She said one day before the Normandy invasion, she remembered an allied pilot whose plane was shot down,

and who parachuted down not far from her home. She ran to him and brought him some apples before the Nazi SS arrested him. In the brief time she was with him, she realized she wanted to talk to him, but couldn't. In that moment, she decided she wanted to learn other languages, and today she speaks English and French in addition to her native German. She can also translate written Spanish and Italian, and is a freelance translator by trade.

Nalleau came to America in 1968 with her husband, Octave, a Nazareth College professor who was offered a position teaching French at the Pittsford school that year. The couple has three children and two grandchildren, and met while Margot was serving as a translator at a French Air Force base in Germany in the late 1950s. Octave was a French Air Force translator, and she liked the fact that he seemed more mature and mannerly than many of the other Frenchmen in the office. He courted her for a couple of years, and the couple fell in love over long hours of teaching each other French and German, she said.

Since coming to America, she's worked for such corporations as Kodak doing translation work, and for Champion Knitwear, which has donated to her charitable work. But she reserves her highest praise for the people of Good Shepherd, who have time and again rallied to her side when she's solicited everything from sewing machines to baby cribs to help refugees.

"These people always come through; I can't thank them enough," she said of her fellow parishioners.

Her refugee work occupies her six to eight hours a week, she said, and she noted that she enjoys helping strangers from other lands find their way in their new homeland. She's done everything from take them to doctor's appointments to explain what apples are, she said.

"It's making me much more aware that we are not an island unto ourselves," she said of her church work and refugee service. "We are a community, and we have to help each other and be there for each other."

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