

Walking 'travelers' to new life

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

Grace Coley has traveled a long way from the day she cursed a judge to the day she was applauded in his courtroom for becoming a model citizen recovering from years of substance abuse.



A few years back, Coley was about to be judged fit for a prison sentence. But the judge instead gave her the option of living at Liberty Manor, a Rochester Catholic Family Center residential program for women trying to overcome their addictions.

"I struggled with that decision," she said, noting she was tempted to do the jail time so she could return to drug use once she got out. However, when she realized that she actually



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

Grace Coley (left) paints the nails of Phyllis Long Oct. 22 at Heather Heights, an assisted-living community in Pittsford. Coley is a client of Catholic Family Center's Walk with You program, which helps individuals and families in transitional situations.

preferred the idea of going to jail rather than dealing with her bad habits, she woke up from the sleep of addiction, she said.

"I truly believe the Lord said to me

it's time for me to quit," she said. "I was just really tired of it."

So she spent six months at Liberty Manor, and then worked with the Rochester Women's Bean Project, a CFC adjunct service that helps women in early recovery learn work skills. Coley has been clean and sober for three years now, and said she has left her former "aggravated, agitated" self behind. She recently finished working at an assisted-living facility for seniors in Pittsford, and has taken a new job.

Coley, 38, is currently a beneficiary of CFC's Walk with You program, which is partially funded by the Thanks Giving Appeal, the largest source of revenue in the Diocese of Rochester's annual operating budget. Walk with You pairs families or individuals in transitional situations with teams of concerned church members who maintain regular contact with program clients in order to encourage them on their journey to a better life. Clients include people moving from welfare to work, recovering from chemical dependency, reuniting with loved ones or raising the children of other family members. Volunteers are asked to commit a minimum of two hours a month to a person in transition.

Coley has been paired with a volunteer team from Fairport's Assumption of Our Lady Parish since August 2001. The team members — Rhonda Carter, Ann Humphrey, Mary Sweeney and team organizer Sandra Burke — take turns calling Coley on a weekly basis and occasionally have lunch with her or join her in other social activities.

"They have been a great means of

support for me, being able to have someone in my life to talk to without being judged," Coley said.

In turn, Burke said Coley's Walk with You team members also have benefited from the relationship they formed with her.

"(In life) sometimes you're on the receiving end, sometimes you're on the giving end," Burke said. "Just to see Grace doing so well is great — and I enjoy her company."

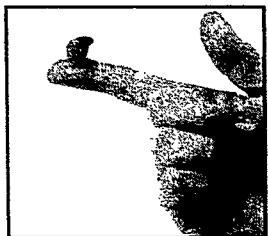
Marv Mich, who recently turned the reins of Walk with You over to Ellen O'Connor of CFC, said the program grew out of discussions in 1998 among members of the Greater Rochester Community of Churches, an ecumenical organization. Mich, who heads CFC's department of social policy and research, said Walk with You now is jointly sponsored by GRCC and CFC. Walk with You asks volunteers for a one-year commitment, he said.

"We find that 80 percent of the (volunteers) sign up for the second year," he said, something Coley's team did. Mich said many volunteers become close to the person in transition and don't want to sever the ties. For Burke, it's a matter of friendship with Coley.

"You can see she's a really gregarious person," Burke said. "She really likes what she's doing."

EDITOR'S NOTE: Walk with You will hold an orientation session for volunteers on Saturday, Nov. 16, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, 1000 N. Winton Road, Rochester. For information, call Ellen O'Connor at 585/262-7022.

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