

# —Christmas Appeal—

## Parish aids loyal member

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

Willie Mae Neal's family, and their dedication to church, are well known among the people at Rochester's Church of the Annunciation. The feeling is mutual: Neal says the parish has been dedicated to helping her when funds were tight at home.

Neal, 60, has relied on public assistance since 1980, when she left her job at Eastman Kodak Co. to care for her family. Two of her four children are afflicted with sickle-cell anemia, a blood disease characterized by sudden, sharp attacks of pain. Neal, a single mother, explained that Jolanda, now 28, and Jose, 22, were often in and out of school and hospitals over the years.

For the most part Neal prefers to not campaign for handouts, saying, "I still do for myself. I don't take pity on myself." But when people from Annunciation offer to help out, she gladly accepts food and other goods.

"They've been doing that for years. I think that's great," she said. "I think they know how hard I try."

Earlier this month a parishioner asked Neal if she'd gotten a Christmas tree yet. She had not, and quickly an artificial tree was provided for her. Neal, who has belonged to Annunciation since the 1970s, said she has often received food at holiday time, and this year is no exception. She received a turkey for Thanksgiving and will also get a food basket at Christmas, courtesy of the parish's social-ministry committee.

According to Christine Castronova, committee chair, the parish received an allocation of \$300 in



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

**Willie Mae Neal, a parishioner at Church of the Annunciation, decorates her Christmas tree Dec. 13 at her Rochester home. Neal received food for the holidays through funding from the Christmas Appeal.**

Christmas Appeal funds, which are being used to provide food for Neal and dozens of other families this holiday season. Castronova said many recipients are single mothers with young children; senior citizens; shut-ins; the disabled; and unemployed.

Neal moved earlier this fall to Norran Drive, just a few blocks from Annunciation. She lives in a compactly spaced upper half of a house with one of her two grandchildren, 13-year-old Maurice, for whom she has cared since his birth. All her children are grown; Jolanda got married two years ago and Jose recently moved out.

Neal maintains deep ties at Annunciation. Her kids have served as

musicians and altar servers, and even Maurice has gotten involved in music ministry. She, meanwhile, is a eucharistic minister at church and brings Eucharist to the homebound. Neal also represents the parish on the City East pastoral planning group.

"She's very sweet. It's wonderful, really, that she has such faith," Castronova said.

Currently, Neal is grappling with arthritis in her feet. It's been a tough life, she said, but she puts her family's medical and financial woes in the hands of God. As she noted, one way or another she has gotten by.

"It's by God's grace, always. God is good all the time," she said.

### Prior recipients

Caseworkers from Catholic Charities agencies and diocesan Urban Services submitted examples of how Christmas Appeal funds are used year-round:

★ A single mother who has AIDS needed to obtain birth certificates for each of her five children, ages 7 to 15. She needed the certificates so she could create a formal plan that will ensure what happens to her children when she passes away or is too ill to function in her parental role. She received \$50 to obtain the certificates.

★ In 1995, an adult with developmental disabilities came to live at a Catholic Charities Community Ser-

vices' community residence in suburban Rochester. A staff member there befriended the man, and the two remained friends even after the staff member moved on to another job. The developmentally disabled man died earlier this year, and since he had no close relatives, a collection was taken to purchase his grave marker. When the collection came up short, \$170 in Christmas Appeal funds were used to make up the difference.

★ A young Somalian woman with one 5-year-old child received \$35 to purchase food while she looked for work. So the woman could go to job interviews, \$12.50 was also used to purchase a 10-ride bus pass.

★ A cancer patient whose income

was drastically cut after she was diagnosed and could no longer work received \$308.41 for utility and mortgage assistance.

★ Four hundred dollars was used to help relocate a 57-year-old mentally disabled woman from a homeless shelter to an assisted-living apartment.

★ St. Michael Parish in Rochester used \$100 in Christmas Appeal funds to help a family who just moved to Rochester from another country set up their home.

★ The Hispanic Migrant Ministry's Brockport office used \$755 in Christmas Appeal funds to purchase food vouchers to distribute to migrant families staying in the area for the winter.

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