

Woman lives life to help homeless

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

Growing up in Webster, Donna M. Ecker showed early signs of her future vocation working with homeless women and children.

"She was always good with the kids in the neighborhood," said Ecker's mother, Shirley Requa, as she and her husband, Don, sat in the kitchen of Rochester's Bethany House, a Catholic Worker home for women and children. "She kind of took them under her wing and took them for walks in the woods."

To date, Ecker has walked hundreds of women and children through the dark woods of poverty

and despair as co-director of Bethany House. The house provides food, clothing and temporary housing for women and children suffering from unemployment, substance addiction, domestic abuse and a host of other ills.

"What we're trying to do here is create an atmosphere where everyone who comes here feels cared for and supported," Ecker said. The house operates solely on private donations that come from such sources as parish tithing committees and individuals, she added.

Ecker, a lay associate of the Sisters of Mercy of Rochester, was given the order's 2003 Mercy Action Cunningham Award Dec. 11 in Rochester. The national award recognized Ecker for her 18 years of work at Bethany House, which also received a \$5,000 donation from the congregation as part of the award.

"Donna's (unpaid) position has called her to staff an eight-bed facility with volunteer, round-the-clock unpaid help," according to a statement from the Sisters of Mercy. "It has also required her to shelter, feed and clothe women who come from experiences of eviction, rape, abuse, imprisonment, abandonment and illness."

One such woman was Philomena Allen, who came to Bethany House through a series of chance happenings.

In 1989, Amy Dorscheid, a Catholic pro-life activist, was sentenced to 30 days in Monroe County Jail for participating in an anti-abortion "rescue," or blockade, at a Rochester hospital. In jail, she met Allen, a Utica native who had been on the streets for years abusing drugs. Allen said she had lived in 35 foster homes since she was 10, and had little self-worth along with a history of run-ins with the law. The mother of two children by age 18, Allen had fled Utica for the streets of Rochester away from "bad relationships," she said.

She and Dorscheid became friends in jail, and Dorscheid stayed in contact with Allen after her release. A pregnant Allen found herself in jail again in 1993, and called Dorscheid for help. At the time, Dorscheid and Ecker both attended St. Joseph's Church in Penfield, and Dorscheid was familiar with Bethany House and Ecker's work there. Dorscheid helped Allen get into Bethany House after her release, and while she was there, Allen gave birth to her daughter, Bena. The



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

Donna Ecker, co-director of Rochester's Bethany House, a Catholic Worker home for women and children, smiles Dec. 20 as she talks with volunteers at St. Bridget Church in Rochester and unpacks presents for the Bethany House Christmas party.

Bethany House staff also helped find Allen an apartment.

"They gave me unconditional love," Allen said of the staff. "That to me was a basic need at that time because I'd never had it before."

She noted that both Dorscheid and Ecker are godmothers to two of her children. She has been clean and sober for a decade, and now works in family support for the mentally ill through Monroe County's Mental Health office. In addition to Dorscheid and the Bethany House staff and volunteers, Allen credits Ecker as being instrumental in turning her life around.

"She just is very welcoming and non-judgmental," she said of Ecker. Allen said that even if a Bethany House resident relapses into bad habits, Ecker "still welcomes you, and looks at you with the same eyes."

The wife of Deacon Thomas R. Ecker of St. Jerome's Parish in East Rochester, Ecker said she was a lector active in a Bible study group as well as a family ministry program at St. Joseph's in Penfield when she learned about the Bethany House position. Despite being active in her parish, she said, "I felt there was someplace else that I had to be that I hadn't gotten to yet."

She decided to try volunteering at the house for a week.

"I would say that by the second day that I was here I knew that there was where I needed to be."

Deacon Ecker said he and his wife had to "simplify" their lives in order for her to leave her job at the time and go to Bethany House.

"We don't live the high life or fast life," he said. "(But) I don't really feel that we gave up anything."

Ecker credits her husband for sustaining her ministry. The deacon has assisted the house's ministry in nu-

merous ways, including leading weekly prayer services there.

"There's no way this could have happened if he wasn't as supportive as he is," Ecker said of her husband.

She added that she became a lay associate of the Mercy sisters in order to have a community of prayerful women supporting her. She noted that some sisters volunteer at the house, and that the Mercy congregation is known for its devotion to the poor, a devotion shared by the Catholic Worker movement.

Ecker said that working at Bethany House has changed her views about homelessness and success. When she began working there, she said she thought homelessness would be eradicated by society in a few years, but she is far less optimistic now. She added, however, that she has come to more broadly define what constitutes success for many poor women than she did when she started. For some residents, success might mean three months of living free from drug use, she said, while for others it might mean emotionally reconnecting with their children.

"What brings me back every day is the women and children here," Ecker said. "Watching them in their struggles to do better, to love their children, to get on their feet. It takes a lot of courage and tenacity."

She added that Bethany House has made her rich in ways that can't be measured by looking at her bank account. The assets she possesses are measured in the many lives she's been able to touch, she noted, and the little moments of joy her guests experience in her presence.

"That's something a lot of people don't get to see in their lives on a regular basis, and I get to see it regularly," she said. "Why wouldn't I come back?"

Thoughts to Consider



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