

Couple minister to truckers

Cheryl Kornburger/CNS

STURTEVANT, Wis. — The Iron Skillet Restaurant in Sturtevant is not a place that makes you think of prayer, nor one where you'd usually find chaplains

There is the constant clatter of dishes, the rapid movement of staff between tables, and the flurry of activity by customers serving themselves at the buffet, all accompanied by softly playing background music.

But Judy and Jim Francois don't find any of that a deterrent in their mission to reach out to the ever-changing population of truckers who come here to rest and relax on their long road trips away from home.

Most of the Francoises' 45 years of married life has been service-oriented. As they raised their 11 children, they continued to volunteer as CCD teachers, helping out on teenagers' retreats, and doing vocation talks for fifth- and sixth-graders. They also worked with engaged couples and at a homeless shelter — and continue to do so.

Amid all of this, Jim Francois was ordained a deacon in the Milwaukee Archdiocese and his wife became a pastoral minister.

During those busy years their faith was tested. Their daughter, Suzanne, died in 1969 of cancer at age 6. Their son, Peter, died of AIDS in 1993. Each death brought about a deeper sense of compassion toward others.

Reflecting back on those difficult times, Deacon Francois explained, "Our faith got us through it." That enduring faith also motivated them to take a deeper look at the truck-stop ministry after Jim's retirement in August 2001.

"The original idea of putting chaplains in truck stops was a decision made by the U.S. bishops' Committee on the Diaconate," he said. "There are chaplains in airports, hospitals, prisons and train stations; why not put one in a truck stop?"

Initially, the committee tried two Pennsylvania test sites. Response was so positive that the ministry has been expanded nationwide.

According to the brochure on the Catholic Truck Stop Ministry, "It is difficult for truckers to be part of a faith community where they can participate and worship with others due to their long road trips. By having deacons who volunteer to be chaplains at designated truck stops, church can be brought to (them)."

So, for over a year, every Thursday evening the couple has been offering to share their faith with the truckers who visit this oasis on Interstate 94 and Highway 20.

"We try to give them a sense of im-



Sam Lucero/CNS

Deacon Jim Francois and his wife, Judy, stand at a cafe table as they pray with Doug and Dianne Mead of Grand Rapids, Mich., in the Iron Skillet Restaurant at a truck stop in Sturtevant, Wis., in early January. The chaplain team visits the Petro Lube truck stop on Interstate 94 each Thursday.

portance by offering them a support system which includes a compassionate shoulder and a nonjudgmental attitude," said Judy Francois, affectionately referred to as the Trucker Babe.

As chaplains, the Francoises make themselves available to whomever wishes to speak with them. They wear name tags and/or shirts that say "chaplain." They greet people as they walk through the restaurant, adjoining gas station and mini-mart.

"We never push ourselves on people," Judy Francois said. "We just walk by the table and greet them. You can pretty much tell by how

they respond as to whether or not they are interested in talking. Some greet us and put their heads back down to finish reading their paper or eating their dinner while others will encourage us to sit down with them and talk."

According to Deacon Francois, once the couple sits down the truckers make their needs known.

"When we first started coming here, we were surprised at the number of truckers who carried Bibles with them and were willing to share their faith with us," he said. "Then there are those who ask us to pray with them or just need us to listen to their problems in life."

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