



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

Mercy Sister Mary Leon Gilman, 94, makes Easter candies March 13 in a kitchen at the Sisters of Mercy Motherhouse in Brighton. At right are some of her concoctions.

Life is sweet for Sr. Gilman

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

When Sister Mary Leon Gilman, 94, entered the Sisters of Mercy in 1931, she thought she might become a cook. However, she had to wait several decades before working in the kitchen became her primary service to her order.

The energetic woman religious taught until she was 80 years old, and in retirement devotes herself to mending clothes for a senior center and making candy for the holidays. Last week, she began making candy for Easter. Mint white chocolate Easter bunnies, chocolate candies with peanut butter centers and

chocolate candies with raisins are among her specialties.

"You know, I make a 'Peanut Delite' that everyone loves," she said, explaining that's the name for her chocolate-caramel-covered peanut clusters.

Sister Gilman is the Mercy sisters' eldest nun still active in a ministry. While she used to concentrate on making candies to be sold by the Sisters of Mercy, she now primarily makes them for friends, she said. Sister Gilman still makes a supply of candies to be sold by the congregation during Christmastime to raise funds for the order's ministries. Additionally, she likes doing puzzles, reading and praying, and said more free time is the greatest benefit of

being retired.

"You have more time to pray," she said. "You have time to visit with the sick, more time to do for others, which I like to do. Time is unlimited."

Doing for others has been the major concern of Sister Gilman's life, which began in Rochester where she grew up attending the former St. Mary's Church on South Clinton Avenue. The third daughter in a family of seven children born to Sidney and Catherine Gilman, Sister Gilman said a parish priest thought she was being called to a religious vocation at an early age since he saw her visiting the church often. The priest encouraged a Mercy sister teaching Sister Gilman to educate her about the religious life, which Sister Gilman said she found attractive.

"I loved every minute," she said of her novitiate. "I would do it all over again."

Her mother was a Catholic and her father was a Lutheran, she said, and her parents had different reactions to her entrance into the congregation.

"My mother was happy because, as a young girl, she wanted to enter but she didn't know any sisters," she said. "I don't know whether (my fa-



ther) was happy, but he did come out to see me when I was received."

Sister Gilman had to postpone her dreams of being a cook to teach at her order's request, she said, and taught at St. Thomas the Apostle School in Irondequoit for the first 30 years of her career. For two of those years, she also served as superior of the parish convent, she said.

She then taught at Catholic schools in Elmira, Corning, Bath and Pittsford for varying lengths of time until she was sent to St. Andrew's in Rochester, where she spent 18 years.

"I loved every minute of teaching," she said. "I had a lot of fun with (the students)."

In particular, she had fond memories of playing handball with the children during recess, and teaching them how to roll snowballs. However, she stressed she did not teach the students to use the snowballs for fighting purposes, but only to make snow men. She also had these words of advice for anyone embarking on a teaching career.

"Be patient, and be kind," she said. "Those are the only two things that they need to know."

Gifted with a strong and healthy constitution, Sister Gilman said she was forced to leave teaching only because she injured a kneecap while gardening, and had to have it removed. Although she still can walk with the aid of a walker, she often uses a scooter to get around, she said.

Sister Gilman said she has enjoyed her life as a religious because it's been "a life with God." When asked what she'll be doing to mark her 95th birthday on May 16, she noted that it was no big deal to her.

"I'll be working," she said.

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