Bear ministry has seniors smiling

Kevin Kelly/CNS

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Sometimes, the simplest, most ridiculous ideas work best.

Last fall, Ursuline Sister Rita Klarer decided elderly residents of the nursing homes she visited needed teddy bears.

Pastoral care minister at St. Patrick Parish in Kansas City, Sister Klarer, 77, took her idea to the parish's Women and Men of a Certain Age Club, known as WAMOCA. At the time she thought it would be a nice, little Christmas project.

"The word got out, and soon people started bringing in teddy bears in droves," Sister Klarer told *The Catholic Key*, newspaper of the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph. "They came in all sizes and colors."

She not only supplied bears to every nursing home she visited, but also to clients of the parish's food pantry, parish support group members and any person who looked like they needed something to hug.

One woman's reaction will stay with Sister Klarer the rest of her life.

"She was in her 80s," the nun said. "Her eyes lit up like I never saw them before. She held her teddy bear and tears came into her eyes. She said, 'I never had a teddy bear before.'

"When you think about it for a while, teddy bears are just 100 years old this year," Sister Klarer noted. "She was born in poverty, then the Great Depression hit. She probably didn't have many toys when she was a child. The next time I came in to give her Communion, she was asleep with the teddy bear in her arms."

Sister Klarer said the thought behind the teddy bear counts most.

"They need something to cuddle," she said. "I can't explain it, but it is miraculous."

Sister Klarer has served hurting people all her 28 years in Kansas City. She worked with inmates for 14 years as social services director at the Municipal Corrections Institution. Then she moved to Children's Mercy Hospital, where she was often called to comfort parents — in the worst anguish — following the death of a child.

"Anybody who says, 'I know what you are going through' to them doesn't know what they are talking about," Sister Klarer said.

"People in jail, nursing homes, hospitals, food pantries — the world is full of hurting people," she said, "hurting in many ways."

She said her teddy bear ministry is ridiculously simple.

"We didn't do anything. It was just word of mouth around the parish," she said. "They continue coming in and they go out as fast as they come in. I still have people bringing them in by the sackful."

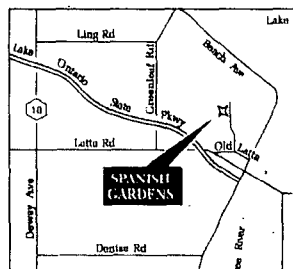She encouraged parishes with pastoral-care teams to try it.

"It doesn't cost a lot and it's such a simple thing," Sister Klarer said. "It's like that movie, 'Field of Dreams.' If anyone wants to get into this ministry, all they have to do is ask for teddy bears and they will come."

Sister Klarer, however, warned that anyone who gets involved in the ministry had better be prepared to receive more than they give.

"To see someone's eyes light up that haven't lit up for a long, long time, the giver gets a lot more than the receiver," she said. "It's pure joy."

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Ursuline Sister Rita Klarer embraces one of the many teddy bears she has helped distribute in Kansas City, Mo., to nursing homes, food pantry clients and parish support groups – anyone who needs something to hug.

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