

A paradise marred by poverty

Adirondacks ministry makes inroads in meeting needs



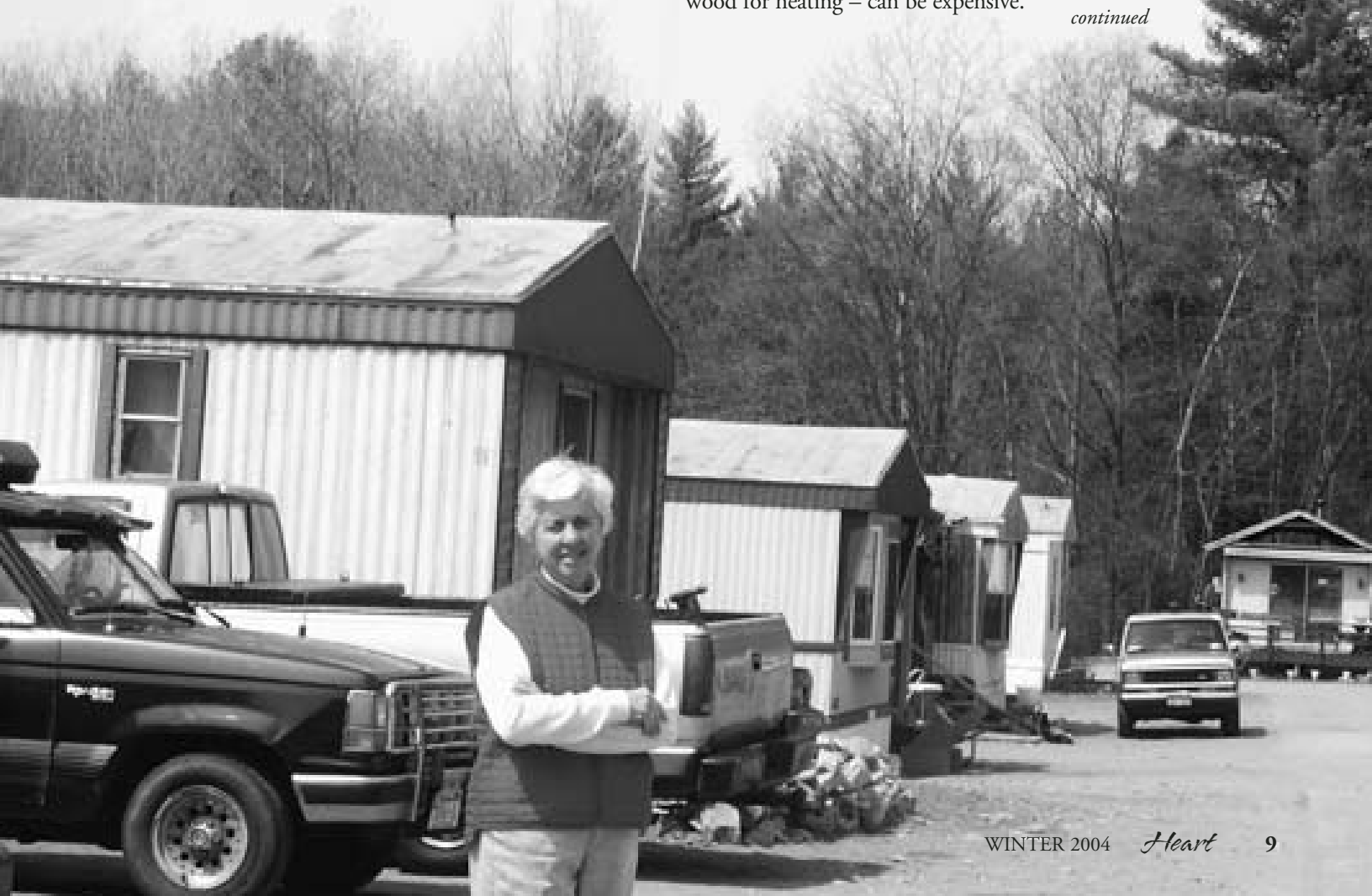
Client Kay Culver, left, holds toys she has gathered for her child as Sister Mary Brady talks with her about her family's needs. Below, Sylvia Rosell poses in dilapidated trailer park.

To vacationers and retirees who gravitate to Adirondack State Park for its outdoor pleasures, this six-million-acre preserve must seem a bit like Eden. Its heavily forested hills offer scenic beauty, fresh air, an abundance of ponds and lakes, four-star resorts, year-round sports and a thriving arts community.

To an uncounted number of locals, though – the isolated, rugged, often-proud people who grind out a living in difficult circumstances day by day, year by year, often generation after generation – the area speaks more of paradise lost. Unemployment is high, work minimum-wage and seasonal, living costs often well beyond the means of the marginally employed.

Hard-to-find housing for the region's poor is frequently substandard; services and basic commodities – ironically in these heavily forested mountains, even wood for heating – can be expensive.

continued



Homelessness in the region defies traditional definitions, as people move from one rundown trailer park to another, crowd into ramshackle houses with relatives or friends, sleep in lean-tos or their cars. Tales of exploitative landlords abound.

Mary Lamphier Brady, RSCJ, talks knowledgeably about the underbelly of this land of contrasts as she drives a visitor along Route 87, “the Northway,” where postcard vistas unfold ahead and the Hudson River, here just a shallow rapids alongside the road, bubbles over a bed of rocks.

Three weeks a month, Sister Brady lives with two St. Joseph sisters in a parish rectory in Warrensburg, New York, just five miles from Lake George, while working for North Country Ministry, based in the tiny Adirondacks town of North Creek. The fourth week, she lives in Albany, New York, in her community of RSCJ.

North Country Ministry was founded a dozen years ago by Religious of the Sacred Heart and three other women’s religious orders – sisters of St. Joseph, Mercy and Holy Name – along with the Diocese of Albany and Catholic parishes in or near the Adirondacks.

Sister Brady was among those who helped set up the ministry, and five years ago she joined its staff. She and four other staff members struggle to meet a wide range of needs that emerge in a staggeringly large area, more than six hundred square miles. The other staffers are Holy Cross Brother James Posluszny; Thersa Dunkley and Jill Harrington, part-time administrative assistants; and two lay professionals, Caroline Sgranno and Susan Forrest, replacing Sylvia Rosell, a former employee who now works in an ARC program for handicapped men and women.

Headquarters for the ministry is Leaven House, a modest house originally sold through a Sears and Roebuck catalogue, in North Creek’s tiny commercial district. On the main level is The Baby’s Place, where new parents can come for supplies, support and advice; a food pantry; and a small living room, where a pull-out couch serves as the area’s only homeless shelter. Nearby, in a building refurbished by an area Methodist church, the ministry operates a “furniture barn” packed with donated furniture and household goods. These are free to any area resident in need.

“There are more and more demands as we get better known,” Sister Brady said. “We are usually the last resort, the place people come when all of their other options have failed.”



Disrepair is evident at this rental property in an Adirondacks town. Social workers say less visible interior problems are common, such as faulty wiring and malfunctioning heating systems.

Services of all kinds are in particularly high demand in winter, when tourist-driven jobs are on hold, heating bills are mounting, and firewood is reserved by sellers for the higher paying tourist trade. Hardships are common in summer months, too, when the locals often have to pay tourist prices for such everyday commodities as food and gas.

At the same time, Sister Brady said, it’s the “flatlanders” – the tourists and affluent retirees – who, along with the more economically stable locals, “make the ministry possible” through contributions of money and service.

“Life here is loaded with Catch-22s,” Posluszny said. “People work enough that they don’t qualify for welfare, but not enough to pay their

bills in winter.” Government subsidies for heat are allotted evenly across the state, though in the mountains of the North Country, the cold sets in much earlier than it does downstate.

“There are no statistics on homelessness in the Adirondacks because people take each other in. What you do have is multiple generations living in substandard housing. So there’s a great need, but because there are no statistics, it’s hard for us to get government money to help improve the housing.”

Native Adirondackers are by nature self-reliant and reluctant to ask for help, he said. Often people will visit Leaven House on behalf of a neighbor or friend, or they will come in with a specific request and as they talk, a panorama of needs unfolds. “When people live under constant pressure, they come to you with the latest need, but when you start talking to them, they may say, ‘Oh, yeah. I haven’t had electricity for eight months. But that wasn’t the need they came in for.’”

The Society of the Sacred Heart has helped to support the ministry over the years, providing a total of \$51,000 for projects and planning since 1993 through its Fund for Ministry and Philippine Duchesne Fund. Recently, with seed money from the Philippine Duchesne Fund, the ministry moved into the housing arena with Project HOPE (Housing Ownership and People Equity). The program will link volunteer mentors with people who want to become home or small business owners.

A future dream is a revolving loan fund with \$200,000 in grants from area banks. “Most people here can’t qualify for traditional loans, and getting government housing assistance often requires making repairs that people can’t make without



In photo at left: Sister Brady points to a sign describing services offered at the new North Country Outreach Center in Johnsburg, New York. At right, Brother James Posluszny talks about North Country Ministry's programs.

help," Sister Brady said. Or, said Posluszny, "some people can pay on a loan during the summer months when they are working, but not every month. No bank would touch that."

Both Brother Posluszny and Sister Brady are former educators. He taught at his order's schools in the northeastern United States and Canada; she was a teacher and administrator in Sacred Heart schools in the Northeast until the mid-1970s, when she moved into the field of social work.

Between 1976 until 2000, the year Sister Brady began working in the North Country, she successively taught in a Sacred Heart school and worked in a psychiatric center in Buffalo, New York; did outreach for Buffalo Catholic Charities; earned a master's degree in social work at the University of Chicago; and worked in an alcoholism unit in a hospital in Evanston, Illinois. After earning her degree, she returned to upstate New York, where she worked in Schenectady in a diagnostic center attached to an emergency shelter for young children; in a residential treatment facility for troubled boys; for Catholic Charities, where, for ten years, she assisted families at risk of losing their children to foster care; and in an educational program, where, for two years, she worked with first-time mothers and their infants.

In those years she gained the experience, skills and knowledge that enable her to respond to the range of needs she now deals with every day.

North Country Ministry's most recent accomplishment is the North Country Outreach Center, which officially opened in July in a former restaurant. Sponsored by a variety of area organizations, religious and secular, the center's services range

***"We are usually the last resort,
the place people come when
all of their other options
have failed."***

— Sister Mary Brady

from a tax-preparation service for low-income adults to a literacy program provided by the area's Rotary Club. A thrift shop and food pantry, already serving three hundred families a month, are part of the complex. A large meeting room will accommodate community gatherings and small meeting rooms provide space for people to meet with social workers much closer to their homes. Formerly, people had to drive an hour south to Glens Falls in order to apply for food stamps or other government services.

As needs have grown, so has the generosity of donors and volunteers, Sister Brady said. For instance, volunteers spent thousands of hours renovating the building for the new center. The ministry's budget for direct cash support to meet critical needs has expanded from \$3,000 five years ago to nearly \$20,000 in 2004, largely through donations from more affluent area residents.

Among the joys of North Country Ministry, as Sister Brady sees it, is the opportunity to live out St. Madeleine Sophie Barat's vision by enabling people of means to help the poor, and, in working with the poor, "to show forth the love of God," which is the Society's mission.

"When people see what we do, they open their hearts and their pocketbooks; they give us their time, their money and their talents. The educational piece of it is that we are helping people to develop their own potential and to meet their basic needs so that they can live a truly human life."

At 78, Sister Brady is finding the work immensely satisfying. "This probably will be my last active ministry," she said. "I feel so extraordinarily grateful. It is as if God has saved the best wine until last." ❖