



She knew the need was far greater than she could meet, but Karen Bussey also knew she could at least help one person at a time when she opened a house for the dying in Lansing, Mich., in 1997.

Take, for instance, a truck driver named Jim, whose truck was his home — until he was dying of cancer and his boss persuaded him to go to Mother Teresa House to be cared for. He mostly slept the first few days, but was awake and alert for the annual Christmas feast at the house. When Bussey gave him a present — a pair of slippers to keep his feet warm — tears came to his eyes. It was the first gift he had received in years.

Jim's estranged children contacted their father when they learned where he was, and some healing occurred between them. Surrounded by the love of the Mother Teresa House staff and volunteers, he soon died peacefully, having reconciled with God, his children and himself.

"What brings peace to the soul is being loved and reassured," Bussey said. "If we are able to make a warm place for one person like Jim, it's worth it."

CARE FOR BODY AND SOUL

Mother Teresa House receives guests that have from three weeks to three months to live. A team of professional staff and 70 volunteers covers the house 24 hours a day, seven days a week. They do everything for the guests that a caregiver would do at home: get the mail, answer the phone, prepare meals and help with eating and personal functions. They are also present as companions and listeners. Nurses come in daily or when needed.

The guests' families are encouraged to take a turn at light-duty caregiving, especially on Sunday afternoons and holidays. "By involving them, the families are better supported to go through their loss," Bussey said.

Opposite page: Karen Bussey, founder and director of Mother Teresa House in Lansing, Mich., attends to one of the house's guests.

One of the first volunteers was Rick Kuhr, a member of East Lansing Council 7816 and a professional electrician. He offered to do the electrical work as Mother Teresa House was being renovated, but since there was already a contractor, Bussey asked him to be a caregiver.

Kuhr did not know what the job would involve, but agreed. At that time, Jack Kevorkian was making news for his role in helping people to kill themselves. "I figured the best way to counteract that was to make the sick person comfortable," Kuhr said. "The first person I cared for turned out to be an electrician, so we spent many hours talking."

Kuhr continued as a caregiver until accepting responsibilities as the house's maintenance man, a job for which he feels better suited. Still, he holds the Mother Teresa House caregivers in the highest esteem.

"They embody what Christianity should be. The guests pay nothing but get unconditional love until they die," he said.

Bussey, who has a master's degree in clinical social work, specializing in gerontology, believes Mother Teresa House is filling the unmet needs she encountered during her seven years as a home hospice social worker.

"People who are dying often don't have adequate care," she explained. "They may not have a family, or the family may have too many other problems. Our priority is to take those who have no other help and who also may not have any money."

In addition to physical care, there is also spiritual care at Mother Teresa House. When a new guest arrives, a staff member offers to pray with him or her, and the guest is introduced to Father Jeffrey Njus, the house chaplain. A member of St. Mary Cathedral Council 11694, Father Njus serves as parochial vicar for the diocese's cathedral, conveniently located across the street. The house also includes a second-floor chapel where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved and Mass is offered once a month.

Each afternoon at 3 p.m., the workers pray the Divine Mercy chaplet together for the guests and their needs. For in-

A house of Peace and LOVE

Through compassionate care, a Catholic home for the dying prepares souls for eternal life

by Bob Horning

dividual prayer, each guest has a card noting the type of prayer that is preferred. One might like to have a volunteer pray the rosary; another welcomes any type of prayer; and another might prefer hearing readings of Scripture. For those not inclined to pray, a blessing is posted on the door for the caregivers to offer silently.

Occasionally, someone will stabilize and become well while at Mother Teresa House. Bussey tells about one man, a tough guy, who said to them after being there awhile, “Why did I have to live this long before I met people like you?” He was able to leave, and lived for two and a half more years.

LEARNING TO RELY ON GOD

It was during times of prayer while working as a home hospice worker that Bussey understood that God was asking her to open a house for the dying. “For that to happen, I knew God would have to make my heart much larger in love,” Bussey said. “I began to learn how much he loves the poor and dependent, and to what extent he will go to get people to help them.”

Bussey communicated regularly with the coordinators of a volunteer hospice in North Carolina to learn how to proceed. Reading about Rose Hawthorne and her work with incurable cancer patients, as well as the 1971 Mother Teresa biography titled *Something Beautiful for God*, provided her with the vision and courage to begin.

“We started with one person; now we have three guests in the house at a time and care for about 30 throughout the year,” said Bussey. On the chapel walls are nameplates for all 200 who have lived and died at the house.

Most of the funding for Mother Teresa House comes from individuals, but it also receives donations from churches and organizations. The use of the house itself is donated by the Diocese of Lansing.

K of C councils are among those that pitch in. According to Kuhr, Council 7816 recently donated a dehumidifier to the house, and at least six area councils have provided money and volunteer assistance.

Phil Mondro, a member of Council 11694, also serves on the board of directors for the house. He is a former caregiver and is now involved in fundraising and long-term strategy.

“My two to three years as a caregiver were wonderful, rewarding and humbling to be able to help people at such a simple level,” he said. “I am proud of how many Knights from



Some of the 70 volunteer caregivers, along with staff, stand on the porch of Mother Teresa House.

the area quietly support the house through their time and money and helping with benefit breakfasts, dinners, golf outings, and other fundraisers.”

The house has always had enough resources to operate, but constantly relies on contributions to stay open, Bussey said. “It reminds me that we rely upon God, and that we are doing this together with him.”

The most difficult thing, according to Bussey, is turning people away when the house is full. Fortunately, others have perceived the need for more places like Mother Teresa House. Inspired by what the staff has accomplished, there are now six similar houses in Michigan. Two are homes for the elderly in Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti started by Sister Fran Depuydt of the Servants of God’s Love.

“The big thing I learned from Karen and watching what she was doing is that my dream was actually possible, that it could be done,” Sister Fran said. “What’s so good about Karen is that she is obviously disposed to the Lord and wants to give as much of him as possible to those she cares for before they die.”

“We try to provide a place of peace and love and care for the physical needs of our guests so they are free to focus on inner needs,” Bussey said. “It’s difficult to see a guest not in harmony with God and others at the end of their life. So we pray with them, and we tell them that God knows their fear, that he is the love they feel from us.”

Although Mother Teresa House is a home for the dying, it is far from a sad place. “In fact, there is great joy — the joy of giving to others and in the love that is shared,” Bussey said. “The love and giving can come from the guests, too, at times. We have had spiritual giants live here, guests who have loved others when they couldn’t even roll over in bed unaided. They have taught me how to live.” ♦

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The Order’s Catholic Information Service offers the booklet *Do No Harm: A Guide to Human Dignity and Morally Sound End-of-Life Care* by Dominican Father Christopher M. Salinga to help provide principles for caring for loved ones nearing the end of life. Obtain a free copy in PDF format from kofc.org/cis. You can request a free copy by writing to cis@kofc.org or CIS, PO Box 1971, New Haven, CT 06521-1971.