

A Sister in Lawrence

BY BEN JACQUES

In the sewing room of Mary Immaculate Nursing and Restorative Center in Lawrence, MA, patients' clothes and blankets in need of mending pile up high on the counters. Spools of yellow and pink thread stand behind two old "black-head" Singers, which Sr. Yvonne Fortin, SGM, prefers over the modern Kenmore sewing machines in the corner.

As cramped as it is, this space is often a place of conversation as patients, family members, and friends stop by to visit with a woman known for her ability to empathize with others and encourage them through difficult times.

"Sometimes I ask my guests if it's all right if I continue sewing," says Sr. Yvonne, who has worked at Mary Immaculate since its days as an orphanage. "But I do that so they won't see my own tears."

Her guest might be a woman having to adjust to using a wheelchair, or a man struggling to accept that his wife with Alzheimer's disease no longer recognizes him.

As she listens, she works, repairing a torn sleeve, stitching on a label. With the ingenuity of someone who has lived through Lawrence's hard times, she turns worn-out bed blankets into lap blankets and shower robes, often bordering them with bright new ribbons.

But beyond the warmth of this Grey Nun, a member of a congregation founded

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in Montreal in 1737, guests seek her out for her stories. With good humor and sentiment she recalls her days at the Protectors of Mary Immaculate, the early name for Mary Immaculate Health Care/Services. Today, Mary Immaculate Health Care/Services is a model of integrated services for the elderly that includes the Nursing and Restorative Center, congregate housing, a clinic, and day care.

Founded by an Irish priest, Rev. James H. D. Taaffe, the Protectors opened in 1868 as a home for children made orphans by the Civil War, mill disasters, disease, and other hardships that plagued the boom-and-bust textile city. Some children, like Sr. Yvonne, had single parents whose long shifts in the mills prevented them from bringing up their own children.

Born in 1922, Yvonne was sent to live at St. Anne's, another orphanage and school in Lawrence, after her father died of diphtheria in 1926. She and her brother, also sent to St. Anne's, could return home to visit their mother only on Sundays.

One weekday before dawn, however, Yvonne and her brother ran away. On the streets of Lawrence they bumped into their mother, a twister in the Ayer Mill, hurrying to make the 6 AM shift. Grabbing them both by the hand, she took them to her apartment, gave them breakfast, called the foreman at the mill,

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then walked them back to St. Anne's. "Don't punish the children for running away," she told the nun who answered the door.

But Yvonne found life difficult at St. Anne's, where she attended school through the twelfth grade. Like so many with a French-Canadian background, she had difficulty saying the English "th" sound. With \$5 she saved bit by bit, Yvonne's mother arranged for a tutor to help her daughter with her English.

"I'm not a 'head' person," laughs Sr. Yvonne, recalling the embarrassment she felt because she could not pronounce English words perfectly. She knew she was a "heart" person, and she found herself attracted to the Grey Nuns, French-Canadian sisters who staffed the Protectorsy. Graduating at 16 from St. Anne's, she went to live and work at the Protectorsy. During the lean years of the Depression, she helped care for the younger boys.

"I was with the children all the time," she says. In the yard behind the Protectorsy, she played kickball with them. "I'd kick the ball, and they'd run for me." The children also helped her with the chores. When she brought in the freshly dried laundry, the boys would sort the socks.

"At night we'd play follow the leader, and they would end up in bed. They didn't like that game too much, because they hated going to bed."

Saturdays were special days for the children at the Protectorsy. "I'd bring goodies, and we'd go to the Saturday matinee, which was free for our children," she remembers. In the summer she would take the boys to the pool, and in the autumn they would climb Tower Hill to see the reservoir, or they would walk to Falls Bridge.

Although Lawrence was going through hard times, Sr. Yvonne remembers it as a city of lights and activity. "Everything was lit up. It was like New York, if you can believe it."

At the orphanage the Grey Nuns and staff treated the children as individuals. Boys and girls dressed in normal clothes, not uniforms, and ate at individual tables set with cloth and silver.

After school, play balanced chores. Before the children went out to play, "we'd give them bread with molasses so they'd have enough

energy," Sr. Yvonne remembers.

After several years at the Protectorsy, Yvonne Fortin left to study and begin her profession of vows, first in Cambridge, MA, then in Montreal. In doing so she followed the steps of Canada's first saint, an eighteenth-century French-Canadian woman named Marguerite d'Youville.

"In St. Marguerite, the simple flower, I admire those things that are unseen: patience, humility, greatness of soul, and joy," says Sr. Yvonne.

Before completing her profession, Sr. Yvonne returned twice to the Protectorsy to care for the children, girls as well as boys. She returned to Montreal in 1951 to take her final vows.

In the 1950s, as the demographics of Lawrence changed, the Protectorsy began serving primarily the elderly, many of whom had worked in the mills but now had no support. Sr. Yvonne's grandmother had lived at the Protectorsy, and when her mother retired, she too became a resident.

In 1954 the Protectorsy was licensed as a nursing home. In 1971 patients and staff moved into the new Protectorsy, a modern 250-bed facility. That year Sr. Yvonne was reassigned to the Protectorsy, this time to manage the laundry and assist in the care of the elderly.

The nursing home later expanded to include an array of elder services—housing, healthcare, social, and transportation.

As she once looked out for orphans in the Protectorsy who needed extra love and support, Sr. Yvonne now looks out for the patients of Mary Immaculate, which celebrated its 125th anniversary last year.

Two mornings a week Sr. Yvonne delivers clothing and blankets to patients, stopping to chat with them. She spends extra time with patients who do not have many visitors. A person who has known hard times and loneliness, Sr. Yvonne brings patients comfort and understanding.

Unpretentious, ready to listen, laugh, cry, or tell a story, this Grey Nun likes the words inscribed on a poster hung in the sewing room: "When God measures a person, a tape is put around the heart, not the head." □

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