

**MOTHER**

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"commando" style. Over time, muscle weakness spread from their feet and legs upward, until they had trouble breathing and swallowing.

By the time each of the five turned 9, they were in wheelchairs. Dorothy recalled having to carry her sons, get them dressed in the morning and into their wheelchairs.

Because accommodations for people with disabilities weren't as common in the 1950s and 1960s, Dorothy would go to school with the boys and carry them up and down stairs or bring a urinal to school for them.

A small, thin woman, she found strength in the three things she says got her family through very trying times: faith, family togetherness and a sense of humor.

"Tim, for instance, was the 'lost child.' Twice, the family accidentally left him behind. "And you know it's three strikes and you're out," Dorothy said with a laugh.

When the Detroit Tigers won the World Series in 1968, the boys weren't able to attend the game, so the Livonia Kiwanis brought them caps and balloons and everyone watched the game at the Cencer house.

"Afterward, I loaded up the boys in the van and we drove around the neighborhood to celebrate," Dorothy said.

**THE ESSAY**

Some kids would shy away, unsure how to relate to children with disabilities. Steve Kowalski, who lived two doors down, remembers playing with Kenny years ago. Now 39 and a reporter for the *Oxford Eccentric*, Kowalski still feels the impact on his life of growing up around such an extraordinary family.

"Though Kenny couldn't run faster or jump higher than the rest of the boys on the block, just making these movements made him feel part of the gang," Kowalski recently wrote. "Even climbing basement stairs with Kenny was fun. Kenny's leg muscles started deteriorating and weren't strong enough to walk up so he'd crawl on all fours. I would imitate him - anything to turn stair climbing into an adventure."

As Kenny's leg muscles weakened, however, he wasn't able to keep up with his playmate. Kowalski admits he did what other 5-year-olds would probably do when a playmate couldn't keep up. He found



The seven Cencer boys (left to right, back): Dave, Steve, Rick (holding Kenny); (front): Ron, Tom and Tim.

other playmates.

"Well, while I was abandoning Kenny as a friend, his mother, Dorothy Cencer, never left his side," Kowalski wrote. "We live in an era in which women choose to abort babies who are considered an 'inconvenience.' The Cencers were open to life even though chances are their most offspring may not be perfect in man's eyes. They always trusted, however, that all babies are perfect in God's eyes."

His essay is the reason Dorothy will be honored at the May 6 Right to Life-Lifespan Mother's Day Award Dinner.

**COURAGE**

While she's looking forward to being reunited with the Kowalskis and other family and friends, Dorothy remains a very shy, modest person. While others might look upon her as a "super Mom," she sees her sons as the true heroes.

"They had courage with a capital 'C,'" she said proudly. "It was not one of the big tragedies. It was just part of it."

Rick, for instance, remained committed to attending college, even though he was gravely ill. He received his diploma from Franklin High School while in the Catholic St. Mary Mercy Hospital.

When David died, Rick asked his mother to bring one of his high school graduation photos, which he left in his brother's casket. The note he inscribed read: "Think of me often, Dave. Help me to go as far as I can."

Eight months later, just days after reminding his mother to make sure he was enrolled at Schoolcraft College, Rick followed his brother. Dorothy believes her boys took some comfort knowing they had family members waiting for them in heaven, including their grandfather, who passed

away in 1969.

The boys didn't bicker among themselves, and no one ever expressed resentment toward the two healthy children. While facing the prospect of death, their minds were sharp and their spirits remained high.

The toughest days happened just before each boy had to go from walking under his own power to wheelchairs. They'd adjust quickly, though; getting a new wheelchair got to be like getting a new car.

Dorothy has high praise for the Muscular Dystrophy Association. "Muscular Dystrophy was great to us. The only thing they didn't come up with was a cure, and they were working on that."

A mother who believes firmly that every child deserves a natural birth and a natural death, Dorothy was grateful her sons didn't have to endure the trauma of feeding tubes; each was able to feed himself until the last.

"I think the Lord was good to our sons," she said. "We thank God for allowing us to be their parents. I consider it a compliment we got to take care of them."

After Kenny passed away, Dorothy stayed caring for her ailing mother-in-law. The Cencers moved to North Carolina for nine years, where Tom enjoyed golfing and Dorothy raked up 6,300 volunteer hours and earned the North Carolina Governor's Award.

The couple moved back to Michigan, settling in Farmington Hills to be closer to their six grandchildren.

Since then, Dorothy's had some health problems, including several surgeries. She talks about them in matter-of-fact tones, always with a smile and a laugh, and wonders if God isn't somewhere shaking his head even as He

**Winning essay expresses admiration for Mom of the Year**

The following is the Right to Life-Lifespan's winning essay, written by Steve Kowalski:

Kenny was my buddy, a couple of houses away in our Livonia neighborhood.

He was just one of the guys. Though Kenny couldn't run faster or jump higher than the rest of the boys on the block, just making these movements made him feel part of the gang.

Even climbing basement stairs with Kenny was fun. Kenny's leg muscles started deteriorating and weren't strong enough to walk up so he'd crawl on all fours. I would imitate him - anything to turn stair climbing into an adventure.

In a family afflicted by muscular dystrophy, perhaps Kenny knew the inevitable, even in pre-school.

I am sorry to say a wheelchair replaced me as a constant companion of Kenny's. Rather than stay Kenny's friend, as my parents prodded, I did what many 5-year-olds would do: Find someone else to run, jump and throw a ball with.

What does Kenny have to do with my 2003 Right to Life Lifespan Mother of the Year nomination?

Well, while I was abandoning Kenny as a friend, his mother, Dorothy Cencer, never left his side. Dorothy had lots of practice.

Of the seven children - all sons - born to Tom and Dorothy Cencer, five had MD and spent many of their years in wheelchairs. Kenny was the youngest of the bunch.

God called the five boys home before they were out of their teens. For several decades now, Dorothy and Tom and their surviving sons, Steve and Tom Jr., haven't had to go outside the family to find a Communion of Saints in Heaven: Richard, David, Timothy, Ronald and Kenneth.

We live in an era in which women choose to abort babies who are considered an "inconvenience." The Cencers were open to life even though chances were their

next offspring may not be perfect in man's eyes. They always trusted, however, that all babies are perfect in God's eyes.

Many parents look forward to the day they can take photographs or videotape their children attending the high school prom and making the long-awaited walk across the graduation stage. For five of the Cencer children, dancing was out of the question in their teens, let alone walking.

The boys couldn't play organized sports but they loved their hometown teams, especially the Red Wings - before it was fashionable to call Detroit "Hockeytown."

Through it all, Dorothy never lost her Catholic faith. She never got mad at God. Despite all her responsibilities at home, she was always a regular at church functions.

Dorothy wanted a Catholic education for her children, including the boys with MD. It wasn't uncommon to see her carry her children up the three flights of stairs at St. Michael School before their special needs, and lack of an elevator and ramp, made attendance there impossible.

Jesus said pick up your cross and follow me. Dorothy, a tiny woman with a heart as big as any, knew that also meant pick up your sons.

And to think, sometimes we dread changing our baby's next diaper. Many parents push their children to church. Dorothy was no different, but she did it literally and her boys grew to love the sacraments just like her.

Fortunately the boys grew up in an era when doctors still made house calls. Their spiritual doctors at St. Michael, Fathers Forish and Partensky, also made regular visits.

Dorothy was a leader in the St. Michael Women's Guild and a joy for other members to be around. She loved the camaraderie of monthly Friday Night Pinoche Parties at Guild members' homes. Dorothy

didn't win every hand, of course. It was the only place you'd hear her complain about the cards she was dealt.

Dorothy could have taken it easy in her retirement from "motherhood," but her mothering nature extended to nursing homes in the western suburbs where she volunteered many hours for the sick and elderly long after her last child with MD passed away.

When Tom and Dorothy bought a retirement home in North Carolina she was very active in her church's Christian Service activities.

The Cencers returned to the Detroit area in recent years where it's easier to see their sons, Steve and Tom, and grandchildren. Father Meehill, the priest at their current parish, St. Gerald in Farmington, lights up when he hears Dorothy's name, knowing the trials she has experienced and the witness she is to her faith.

Dorothy attended daily Mass at St. Gerald until a fall in the winter put her in the hospital. Father Meehill said. Not as mobile, but back at home after the hospital stay, she usually makes it to St. Gerald for Sunday Mass.

Father Meehill brings her Communion from time to time and Dorothy proudly pulls out the family photo album, showing pictures of the children, living and deceased.

Her love of life, like the photos, is also on display. "She keeps her smile and sense of humor, she's good with puns," Father Meehill said of Dorothy. "To have such a good spirit despite the tragedies in her life, she is a real fighter."

People call her "Dot" for short but she made a much larger mark than that on everyone she touched, especially her five deceased sons who no doubt are smiling down on her.

Though her boys had their share of suffering, God blessed them with a Saint for a mother.

has supported her through trying times.

In no way, shape or form does Dorothy take on the demeanor of someone who feels sorry about a past filled

with challenges, loss and no small measure of sadness. On the contrary, she considers herself a full seven times blessed by children who filled her life and heart with love.

"It was great," she said, smiling broadly. "It just didn't last long enough."

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**Library offers seminar**

Farmington Community Library and the Michigan Small Business & Technology Development Center will offer a free small business workshop at 7 p.m. Tuesday, April 29 at the Farmington Hills Library, 32737 W. 12 Mile. The program will highlight resources available through the U.S. Small Business Administration and the Michigan Small Business & Technology Development Center, the State of Michigan and through the Farmington

Community Library. Librarian Sharon Vincent will share a variety of resources available on the Internet, in addition to sharing a selection of the many "how to" books on setting up and running a business. She will also demonstrate how to use ReferenceUSA, which offers access to 12 million businesses and 120 million households in the U.S. This database is available free through the Library. To sign up, call (248) 553-0300.

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