

# The FISH Story

## A Suburban Tale

### Of People Helping People

By MARGARET MILLER

When fire gutted an apartment building in Canton Township this spring, many families were burned out of their apartments and left homeless and without food.

A representative of Plymouth FISH soon was on hand with emergency supplies of food, clothing and bedding.

In Farmington, an emphysema sufferer who has to spend most of her time in bed was in need of a breathing apparatus machine.

The public health nurse who visited her regularly called Farmington - Southfield FISH. A volunteer went to work with calls to her church and others affiliated with FISH.

Within two days, the machine had been delivered to the patient in her home, complete with a demonstrator to show her how it functioned.

A newcomer to Livonia found herself in desperate straits. She was just home from the hospital with her second baby, her husband was working long hours, and she and her toddler were ill. The only person she could think of to call was the Welcome Wagon representative who had visited recently. Pat Suman of Welcome Wagon called Livonia FISH, and the young mother soon had help.

The father was working, and two toddlers were left in the care of a grandmother so crippled by arthritis that she could not move from her chair. And the family spoke only Spanish.

The FISH volunteer moved in to do necessary things like washing diapers, but she couldn't communicate much. Her daughter, however, was studying high school Spanish, and she borrowed from the

school some Life magazines in Spanish.

Her mother took them to the home that evening and sat down with the grandmother, turning the pages so she could have her first look in many months at a Spanish-language publication.

These incidents are typical of FISH, an organization that has grown out of the realization that people have to find ways to offer help in today's much-organized society.

The four FISH groups in the Observer area number among the more than 100 across the nation.

The idea actually started in the Anglican church in England and was designed as means of bringing together individuals in need with those who could help.

The name comes from the fish, the ancient symbol of the Christian church, and the organization has taken as a guideline words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

"If we want to be a Christian, we must have a share in Christ's large-heartedness by acting with responsibility and in freedom and by showing a real sympathy that springs from the liberating and redeeming love of Christ for all who suffer."

The first American FISH chapter was organized nearly a decade ago in West Springfield, Mass.

In Observerland, the first call for FISH came from St. Andrew Episcopal Church in Livonia in March of 1971.

A meeting inviting those interested to discuss the possibilities of organizing a chapter drew persons from both Livonia and Redford Township, so two chapters were born.

Later came organization of a Farmington - Southfield chapter, with the impetus centered in the North Congregational Church of Southfield.

The youngest local FISH, the one in Plymouth, has just celebrated its first birthday.

In organization, the local groups have many similarities. Each has a chairman and volunteers. A telephone is manned 24 hours a day in the case of three of the chapters and five days a week from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. in the case of Redford.

Available at the end of each telephone line is the organization's "Fish of the Day," who takes the request for help and relays it to a volunteer.

Baby-sitting, transportation, emergency meals, housework, companionship and referral service are among the aids regularly in the FISH routine.

The organization aims at helping in emergency situations - it doesn't try to take on long-term projects, but does refer those asking to other agencies when that is indicated.

Although similar, the four Observerland FISH groups have developed their individuality.

The Redford FISH has for several months been operating a clothing closet in the Village Presbyterian Church, Six Mile west of Beech.

Mrs. Elizabeth Gray, in charge of the closet, said donations are accepted from all and that several families have been outfitted from the closet.

"We have enough adult clothing to offer it to persons outside of Redford Township," she said, "but children's clothing must be restricted to our own area."

Mrs. Rosemary Trapp, who first read about FISH in a Reader's Digest article, has been chairman of the Redford group since its organization. She said more volunteers in the area would enable the group to keep its telephone in service the full 24 hours a day.

Mrs. Barbara Peterson, Livonia FISH chairman beginning in the fall, said that group now has 150 volunteers, 60 of whom are drivers.

## FISH LINES

### In Observerland

Four FISH organizations now are operating in the Observer area, in Livonia, Redford Township, Plymouth and Farmington - Southfield.

All provide neighbor-to-neighbor service when it is needed on a short-term basis. Emergency baby-sitting, transportation to hospitals, hot meals in a crisis situation are some of the services provided.

Each FISH group has a telephone number, and a call to that number will bring referral to one of the volunteers in position to help.

If you need help, or would like to be a volunteer, call the FISH line in your area. These are the numbers:

LIVONIA	255-5225
REDFORD	341-3700
PLYMOUTH	453-1110
FARMINGTON-SOUTHFIELD	352-5470

Calls for transportation are among the most frequent, she said. Drivers take elderly Livonia residents to varying kinds of appointments or to visit hospitals.

About four calls a day are received by the Livonia FISH. Mrs. Peterson said, "I mostly take the phone calls and refer people," she added. "I frequently do not have a car available, and I like a volunteer service I can do in my home."

"I had reached the point where I felt I could not do any more meetings that were just talk. I wanted some action, and that's what FISH has offered."

In the Farmington - Southfield group, the accent has been on church participation, and to date there are 32 active congregations.

In its two-year history, said Mrs. Lindsay M. Chalmers of Farmington, one of the organizers, the Farmington - Southfield FISH has

logged more than 5,000 calls. Many have been for transportation, but the group also has received requests for security calls - to people who want to be called at specific times because of loneliness or fear of being forgotten.

Both food and clothing are stocked by several of the churches in this FISH group, and it now has added a new service - providing furniture.

A vacant home in Southfield serves as a storage area for good furniture and household appliances that are donated and Mr. and

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FURNITURE for needy families is one of the services offered by Farmington-Southfield FISH. Loading a donated chair are Tom Blatter, Bob Lange and Shirley Lange. (Evert photo)



A CHECK for more than \$300 for FISH work in Livonia is presented by the Livonia Welcome Wagon. From left are Pat Kelly, FISH treasurer; Sharon Clements, Welcome Wagon past president; and Janice Ralph, Welcome Wagon past treasurer. (Observer photo by Bob Woodring)

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