



Julie Persla, 10, of Milford, concentrates on an art project at the Tuesday afternoon religious education class for the deaf.



For more than four years Richard Knapp a student at St. Mary's College, has been working with the special religious

education program. Here he offers a suggestion to 10 year old John Norton of Farmington.

'They want to know what happens when you die'

Handicapped receive religious training

By CORINNE ABATT

In many ways the religious education programs at the Church of St. Clare in Farmington are special.

They are designed to help 80 handicapped adults and children grasp the concept of God and love. There are few boundary lines. Those attending come once a week from Southfield, Farmington, Livonia, Milford, Birmingham, Redford Township, Detroit—from many parts of the metropolitan area. Type of religion in the home isn't a consideration either. The handicaps range from acute hearing loss to severe mental retardation.

Special religious education coordinator, Patricia Kenyon, of Livonia, says as she walks by the classrooms on Tuesday afternoon when the deaf children are there. "We live in a hearing world and Mass is a hearing service. These youngsters have so many frustrations."

On Thursday evenings teens with learning disabilities or mental retardation gather. On Fridays adults with the same problems come to the church. And on Saturdays, from morning to late afternoon, there are classes for handicapped children.

At 4 p.m. on Saturdays, there is a special interfaith worship service for mentally retarded adults. Because the program is ecumenical in structure, members of the Farmington clergy rotate in conducting the Saturday service.

NOT ONLY DOES the parish support the program, but it is one of the few, if not the only, church group to

have a paid full-time person in charge of its special religious education program—the pretty, vivacious Ms. Kenyon who has been in this field for 13 years.

Some 30 volunteers ranging from nuns with extensive professional credentials to high school and college students work on close to a one-to-one basis teaching religion.

"All of our teachers, even the professionals, go through a training session," Ms. Kenyon says.

She speaks of the deaf children. "By eight or nine, most of them are good readers, so we use a lot of reading material. And all of them are lip readers. Lip reading is like an art."

As she explains the different parts of the program, it is clear that it is really a number of programs grouped under one title. Each uses different techniques.

However, Ms. Kenyon makes one statement that covers all involved. "All of our kids love music, including the deaf. We do a lot of singing, especially songs like 'Day By Day' with gestures. One of our little girls insisted her mother sing 'Day By Day' as she rocked her to sleep at night."

In the training sessions the nuns, as well as the student volunteers from Mercy High School, Dura Scotus, Orchard Lake Seminary and colleges around Michigan, learn how to reach the handicapped and how to answer their needs.

For instance the Thursday evening program for teens with learning disabilities and mental retardation begins with conversation and fellowship. The young people bring records

and games to play. This is followed by a quiet period of prayer, song or gospel reading. After that, they break into small groups to talk about their feelings and what the gospel means to them.

Ms. Kenyon says of this program. "Even the parents of the most severely retarded have given me good feedback. I think our kids really enjoy coming."

Teachers are prepared for frequently asked questions on death.

"They are so afraid of death and so afraid of losing their parents," says Ms. Kenyon. "They want to know what happens when you die."

WITH OLDER youngsters, manners and sexuality are topics of conversation.

"I love the mentally retarded," the coordinator remarks warmly. "because they are so honest, so friendly and not the least conscious of what we call 'territorial imperative'." We have to teach them not to hug and kiss everybody. We have to explain that when you are little and cute it was all right, but our society says as a young adult you can't do that."

Stressing that teaching religion to all handicapped individuals requires great patience, she adds that it can be done and be a very enjoyable experience.

Through pictures, conversation, stories, all kinds of visual aids, crafts (everyone made Advent wreaths and understood the significance) and the patience of the many volunteers, the

program has become a very meaningful one for all involved.

Ms. Kenyon recalls the day a young, college-woman volunteer came triumphantly into the office to report about one of her students who was non-verbal. "Guess What?" she said. "He talked to me, he really talked to me."

As an honorary member of the

Farmington Clergy and the only woman attending, Ms. Kenyon says to a person they have been "just tremendous and I know I can call on any of them at any time."

The 800 families of St. Clare parish

support the project which reaches far beyond the borders of the immediate area.

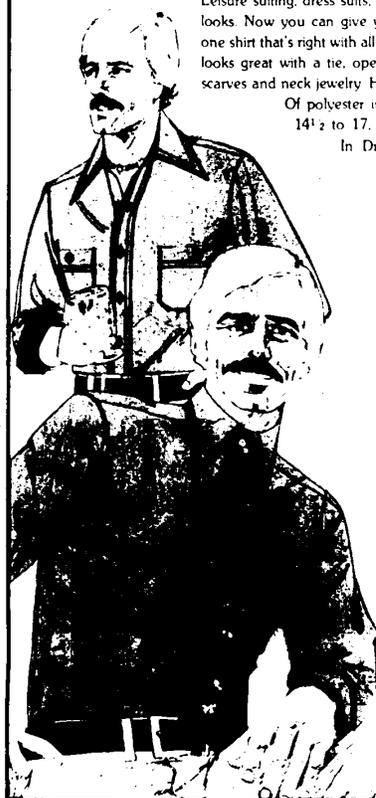
The student roster includes several denominations as well as the unaffiliated.

Staff photos by Harry Mauthe

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Sister Helene MHS and Jeffrey Simms of Farmington, 11, discuss a project which combines reading and art work.