

Reflections about Campion Center
by Ginny Harris, LICSW

In May of 1994 when I initially applied for a social work position at Campion, I did not realize that it was a home for Jesuit priests till I arrived for the interview. Having being raised as a Catholic and attending Catholic schools through college, I had a stereotyped image of men of the cloth as pious, authoritative guardians of the faith. I wondered if I was good enough, holy enough to work in such a hallowed place. Fortunately, I overcame my initial queasiness, accepted the job and soon learned that Jesuits, Ph. Ds and all, were firstly, human beings, dealing with all of the same life issues that lay people face. Rather than authoritative and judging, I found Jesuits to be kind, warm, open, and humorous and some even a little quirky, eccentric and entertaining. The men defied any stereotyped image I wanted to lump them into. Diversity was amazingly alive and well in this Jesuit community and soon I felt right at home.

No matter what our educational or religious background, we all have to cross the turbulent river than spans the hectic years of education and work to the distant bank of retirement years, where life is less predictable and less structured, clutching in our hands only a sketchy road map. As staff members we do all we can to help our Jesuits make as smooth a passage to the opposite bank as possible.

“Quality of life” is mantra we all utter in the face of this daunting passage, but the concept is not easily grasped or defined. It can only be lived and experienced moment to moment and it can be vastly different for each person. That’s where staff members can make a real difference. As we get to know our Jesuits as real people, learning about not only their past lives, but their current interests and dreams, we can help to smooth the way to a new life phase, moored by a sense of continuity, meaningful activities.

Allow me to diverge for a bit to say that a Jesuit nursing home is very different from a public nursing home where large numbers of total strangers are randomly assigned to live together, and expected to adapt, and get along. At Campion, almost all of the men have long histories together starting when this building was Weston College. So when a Jesuit arrives here for a permanent stay, early memories as young seminarian may wash over him. Some of these are positive and nostalgic, and some are painful, recalling the rigidity and regimentation of pre-Vatican style education. I

sometimes try to imagine what it might be like for me at the age of 80 to enter a nursing facility which was once my college, where I will live with my fellow students, professors, mentors, college administrators and superiors. This seems a strange idea, yet that is what each Jesuit experiences when he comes to Campion. The obvious advantage of living in a Jesuit facility is that there is an immediate sense of community and a strong spiritual structure, including daily Mass. The challenge comes in adjusting to seeing your once young and healthy fellow seminarians and colleagues and even students, now as aging men who daily endure the ever changing nature of their bodies and minds.

As for me, what do I get out of working as a social worker at Campion? I am learning daily by example, what will help me as I cross the river into more advanced age. What I feel are the most important things that help one make the passage to old age are: flexibility, the ability to let go, to forgive oneself and others, a sense of spirituality, sense of community, persistent hope, the support and love of family and friends and of God. Will I be able to remember and put these ideas into practice? I certainly hope so ---if I remember!