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Franciscan Sisters retiring from Two Rivers foster home

By charlie mathews

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TWO RIVERS ? After nearly 30 years in their foster home on Martin Lane, Sister Irmina and Sister Edmund are retiring to their home convent in Stevens Point in a few weeks.

Mary Jo, 37, whom Sister Edmund calls a "beautiful child of God," will go with the two members of the religious order Sisters of St. Joseph.

On Wednesday, Sister Irmina, 85, suctioned phlegm from the throat of Mary Jo, who is confined to a wheelchair with severe mental and physical disabilities, and Sister Edmund, 86, fed her liquid food supplements through an abdominal feeding tube.

"We feel that when Mary Jo goes to heaven ? she's been on that brink many times ? that is when we will be able to say, 'Now, Lord, you may dismiss your servants,'" Sister Edmund said.

The two religious women who have served their Franciscan Order for a combined 124 years have had, between them in the past few years, a heart attack, back surgery and stroke that have robbed them of the energy needed to care around-the-clock for people with intense needs.

Since 1982 in Two Rivers, and in Manitowoc for several years before that, the sisters have cared for 84 foster children.

Initially, the sisters had several with behavioral problems, and one special needs child with mental challenges.

After demonstrating they could take care of that child, they were asked by Manitowoc County Human Services to care for others, Sister Irmina said.

They have been assisted by occupational, speech, physical and music therapists, as well as certified nurse assistants.

Sister Edmund said their ministry has benefited from divine providence, following their religious order's blessing of their ministry, including donation of spare beds from Holy Family Memorial when they established their initial foster home.

'Terrific how she responds'

Mary Jo has been in the sisters' care since she was just 5 days old. She cannot feed herself, go to the bathroom or talk.

"But it is just terrific how she responds ... with her left hand she holds your hand very tight ... it comforts her," Sister Edmund said.

"She looks at us when we are talking with her," Sister Irmina said, noting Mary Jo makes movements that guide the sisters and let them know how she is feeling.

The two women will not be solely responsible for Mary Jo when they retire to Stevens Point. "All of the sisters love her," Sister Irmina said.

Several children—adults who had been in the sisters' care have been placed in foster homes or have died.

"We lost Melinda last year," Sister Edmund said of a 34-year-old woman they had cared for since she was 18 months old.

"She had many severe medical anomalies. She loved music," Sister Edmund said. "Now, she's probably running and dancing all over heaven."

Reunited some day

The two sisters believe they will be reunited in heaven with all the individuals they have cared for through the decades ... except they won't have any of their earthly disabilities.

"I was a naughty teenager and have been making up for it ever since," Sister Edmund said with a smile. "If they don't let me in heaven's front door, I'll be going through the side door."

"Jesus Is Love" reads an oversized sticker on a closet door near the kitchen. A framed copy of 1st Corinthians Ch. 13 ? the "Love Chapter" ? is on a wall, along with photographs of many of their children and adults under their care, including sometimes as many as 10 at a time.

They often were visited by biological family members, as well as siblings and other relatives of Sister Edmund and Sister Irmina.

"I'm a mothering type person," Sister Irmina said. "We are Mary Jo's family and our natural families are her families."

The two sisters said they are prayerfully grateful to countless benefactors in Two Rivers and beyond who have been supportive of their ministry of love to their special children.

"It is the Lord who has accomplished all we have done," Sister Edmund said.

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'God's love flowing'

In 2008, the two Sisters received a special "Franciscan Peacemakers" award from their religious community that declared:

"Two quietly dedicated women, in a quiet corner of Wisconsin called Two Rivers, you created a home that sheltered the most dependent.

"And you mothered them into a life that saved them and inspired us all.

"You loved your work and in that powerful witness, work and living became but one single expression of God's love flowing through you.

"We celebrate your courage and commitment and the legacy of the Sisters' Treatment Home."