

# Special needs ministries, blessings all around

BEL AIR - Lisa McGann believes that people with “different abilities” do not need charity as much as they need to feel a sense of worth.

Jane Wolfe talks of the joy she gets from her “guys.”

McGann has been involved in special-needs ministry at the parish level for four years, Wolfe for five decades, but they are bonded by the mercy that serves their guests and inspires fellow parishioners.

Inspired by her daughter, Claire, a quadriplegic who has cerebral palsy and a seizure disorder, McGann started the Play It Forward Ministry in 2012 at St. Margaret in Bel Air.

“Claire is the inspiration of my life,” McGann said. “It was important for us to fulfill her meaning and purpose in life, for people to look at her as someone valuable who can give back. With people of different abilities, it is usually us thinking, ‘What can we do for them?’ But really, it is ‘What can they do for us?’”

“There weren’t a lot of programs like this around,” said McGann, who, before starting the ministry, had retired from The Arc Baltimore, a nonprofit that supports adults and children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. “The thought of never seeing my friends again just broke my heart.”

She began with a handful of volunteers and now has a group of 15-20 regulars. Play

It Forward events are held the second Monday of every month, hosting approximately 60 guests she calls “very able players,” from agencies such as the Harford Center, The Arc and Unified Community Connections. They play games, mostly bingo and dice, and also hold special events such as a June 13 picnic.

“When I interact with people challenged by poverty or disabilities or loneliness, it fills me up,” McGann said. “Their courage, stamina and sheer joy in the face of huge challenges can lift my heavy heart. The Christ that lives in them heals me.”

She looks for volunteers who are lonely, bored or need direction in their lives so they too can be inspired.

“Play It Forward is unique in the sense that it isn’t an act of charity,” she said. “We help give their lives meaning and purpose by recognizing their gifts and talents and the impact they make by just being alive.

“God has great purpose for Claire (her daughter). I appreciate charitable acts done for her but nothing gives us more joy than to help her impact others’ lives.”

McGann is working to start another branch of Play It Forward.

While her ministry is relatively new, Exceptional Enterprises at St. Clement Mary Hofbauer in Rosedale has been around since 1965. Wolfe, the director, has been involved since day one, when her mother, Rosemary Janowich DiCrispino, started the program.

“Some neighbors wanted their children who had Down syndrome to receive the sacraments,” Wolfe said, “and they talked to my mother about it. That just wasn’t done back then, so my mother worked with our priest to create a program to make it happen.”

Wolfe, who retired from Baltimore County Public Schools in January after serving for decades as a language arts teacher in alternative education programs, became the director of Exceptional Enterprises in 1979 when her mother moved to the Eastern Shore.

Exceptional Enterprises has about 45 guests, most from Gallagher Services for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities, a Catholic Charities of Baltimore program. It relies on funding from two Knights of Columbus councils, Cardinal Gibbons Council 2521 and Father. A. Leo Abendschoen Council 11615. The donations help buy Bibles and supplies, and enable Exceptional Enterprises to send a couple of participants to Camp GLOW, which is sponsored by the Archdiocese of Baltimore's Office of Special Needs Ministry.

Guests range in age from 18 to 60. They meet weekly, fall through spring, for religious education, socialization and games - bingo is a favorite there as well. Wolfe often reads a Bible story and relates it to their jobs, as many are involved in work programs. They discuss topics such as how to be a good co-worker and group home resident.

"I love working with our clients," Wolfe said. "You get so much joy from these guys. There's no hatred. There's not a mean bone in their bodies."

"Some clients have been with us for more than 40 years," she added. "They just feel so good about themselves and have camaraderie with the other clients. No one judges them, and they feel at home there. They know they can be a vital part of the community."