

# In HARMONY

*Sisters of Mercy, New York, Pennsylvania, Pacific West Community*

## Rochester ministry provides literacy training, hope

Told by her mother to leave the home they shared, Beth (not her real name) was only a teenager – pregnant, alone and confused.

Caring grandparents took her in and helped her through the pregnancy.

Beth, who gave birth to a baby girl, had a dream of working as a nursing assistant, but lacked the reading skills necessary to be accepted into a program. Her grandmother steered her to Sister Edwardine Weaver and Mercy Bridges, a Sisters of Mercy adult literacy program in Rochester.

Beth was a student in the Mercy Bridges program for some time when her grandfather died. In planning the funeral, the grandmother suggested that Beth proclaim one of the readings at the Mass. The girl's mother protested saying, "She can't read!"

But thanks to Mercy Bridges, Beth had learned much and after working with her tutor to review the reading, she stood proudly to read at the Mass for the grandfather with whom she was so close.

"She read beautifully and, for those who knew her story, there wasn't a dry eye in the church," Edwardine says.

Beth is just one of so many touched by Mercy Bridges.

"It's more than teaching our clients reading, writing and speaking," says Edwardine, who spent 50 years as a teacher, principal and superintendent of Catholic schools for the Rochester Diocese. She was also a professor at the University of Rochester. "Much has to do with building self-esteem and making a difference in the lives of people."

Three years ago, Rochester Mayor Robert Duffy held a summit to address the high illiteracy rates in the area, which he and others believed contributed to crime and violence. There, Edwardine and Mercy Sister Nancy Whitley shared the idea of a literacy program and sought to work with other literacy agencies.

"We wanted to be collaborative, not competitive," she says.



**Sister Edwardine Weaver, left, enjoys a moment with Lawan Buffum, a learner in the Mercy Bridges adult literacy program**

Agencies approved and supported the idea for the program, and in August 2006 Mercy Bridges was selected as a "jubilee ministry" for the Rochester Sisters of Mercy as they celebrated their 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

"We didn't have so much as a paper clip," says Edwardine of the early days.

With Dorothy Lindsay, a Mercy Associate and longtime educator, Edwardine established the structure for Mercy Bridges. A \$22,000 Mercy Action Grant provided funds to help train tutors and establish a Resource Material Center at the Mercy Center mother-

house, which offers instructional materials and computer software programs.

Today, Sister Pat Black, former NyPPaW director of information technology, is administrative assistant for Mercy Bridges and has created a website ([www.mercybridges.org](http://www.mercybridges.org)) and a newsletter.

Edwardine explains that volunteer tutors came from all walks of life, particularly that of education. Tutors take 21 hours of training that is spread out over three, seven-hour sessions in collaboration with Literacy Volunteers of Rochester. Mercy Bridges provides for each tutor a profile of each learner that includes educational

background, language and reading assessment, study habits and learning style.

The first tutors were trained in January 2007. In April 2007, tutors began working with learners who were employees of the motherhouse. Later, the learner list also included referrals from Mercy ministries and public agencies. Of the 101 tutor volunteers interviewed in the past two-and-a-half years, 65 are currently active, Edwardine says.

According to Edwardine, some learners are like Lawan Buffum, who came to the United States from Thailand in 1994. Buffum worked in food services at Mercy Center and did not speak English well. She entered the program two years ago and continues to meet with a tutor to improve her speaking and reading skills.

“Now that I can read better, I have a lot of confidence,” says Buffum, a married mother of a six-year-old boy.

As she continues to learn, Buffum says she can communicate better with fellow employees and others. In fact, she was promoted to manager of Our Lady of Mercy High School’s cafeteria. But her

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*Sr. Edwardine Weaver*

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real delight is at home, where she can help her son with homework and read to him at night.

“He really likes it,” she says.

Buffum, an immigrant, represents one group of learners. Another group consists of people who did not finish their U.S. education. But according to Edwardine, nearly half of the learners are refugees from Cuba, Burma, Ethiopia, Puerto Rico, Russia, Somalia, Sudan, Ukraine and 19 other countries. Twenty-five languages in all are represented.

In the Mercy Bridges program all learners are assessed initially to ascertain their basic reading skills and whether the learner needs to participate in an English as a Second Language program. Those who are working to improve their English must become proficient enough to enter a basic reading program. All learners are

assessed quarterly and annually to determine what they have learned.

She says Mercy Bridges is unique in that the program is taken to the learners, with tutors meeting individually with them for two hours each week in public libraries, church facilities and agencies in Monroe County. Each of the 127 learners who has entered the program signs a commitment to stay in the program for a year.

Edwardine indicates the retention rate is 70 percent. Grants and donations keep Mercy Bridges running. Peggy Wegman, wife of Robert Wegman who founded the Wegman’s grocery store chain, is among the many supporters

whose efforts helped to initiate the work of Mercy Bridges.

Unlike similar programs, Edwardine says Mercy Bridges takes no federal funds allowing it the freedom to serve many who cannot access other programs.

“We place a good deal of time in developing relationships, building self-esteem, helping people to be self-confident and able to set stable goals for their lives. We strive to be a community of learners,” she says.

She adds, “We are pleased to serve the needs of others and to open a new chapter in their lives.”

## **Beautiful America**

*Lazarus Fazal came to the United States from Pakistan seeking a better future for himself and his family. A student in the Mercy Bridges program, Fazal felt so strongly about his experience in America that he wrote this tribute:*

**Country of Broad Minded and Helpful People  
Country of Resources and Opportunity for Everyone  
Country of Freedom  
Country of Hope  
Country of Love and Smiles  
Country of My Second Mother Land  
Country of Attainable Dreams  
God Bless America!**