

Priest, disabled adults envision place for sharing

By Deborah Sederberg
News-Dispatch staff writer

This week the Rev. Dennis Blaney took seven disabled adults on an outing to the country. Their destination, a 184-acre parcel of land near U.S. 20, midway between Michigan City and South Bend, looked just about perfect to everyone.

When Blaney looks at the land, his active Irish imagination sees a whole working community. He sees homes and cabins sprinkled along the rolling countryside. He sees horses and barns, a conference center, a crafts shop. He sees a bakery and, even in the wilderness, he smells the bread baking.

Blaney's guests appreciate the land and its possibilities as well.

"All seven said they wanted to come and live here," Blaney said. While Blaney was smelling the bread baking then, his friends were seeing a home of their own.

Blaney, pastor of Sacred Heart Catholic Church, coordinator of the Catholic Diocese of Gary's Apostolate to the Handicapped and a founder of the Share Foundation with the Handicapped organization, would like nothing better than to move his seven friends into their new home tomorrow.

But even the Irish imagination is tempered by the reality of economics. Toward that end the Share Foundation has launched a \$100,000 fund drive. The optimistic priest, naturally, expects the drive to be a huge success.

If the first month of the effort is any indicator, Blaney has a sound foundation on which to base his confidence.

"Already, we've raised half the money in pledges," Blaney said. "What's more, half the pledges are already paid."

At this point, the Share Foundation has no plans for dances or raffles or car washes or spaghetti suppers. Members are simply approaching the community and ask



DENNIS BLANEY

... working community wanted

ing people to send donations or to make pledges.

"Guess who our first check came from," Blaney challenges, barely able to restrain himself from giving away the answer before anyone has a chance to guess. "Bishop Gaughan," Blaney says, referring to Bishop Norbert Gaughan, head of the Catholic Diocese of Gary.

Naturally, the bishop's check, like anyone's check, is valuable to the Share Foundation's work. But to Blaney, Gaughan's donation also served as a symbol of support for the priest's work with the disabled.

Blaney's special ministry began more than 30 years ago, when he realized that a parishioner affected by Down's Syndrome was receiving no religious instruction or spiritual guidance.

Everyone, Blaney says, whether able or disabled, "has a right to grow in faith, in a relationship with God."

Share Foundation is more than a decade old now. It provides Respite Care services and sign language interpreters, a summer camp for disabled adults and other services to the disabled. Its most ambitious goal is to build a com-

munity in which the disabled can live in safety, comfort and dignity.

Blaney says he knows there is a need for such a facility because the disabled regularly ask for it. The physically and mentally handicapped who presently live with parents look forward to a time when they will be able to live more independently, Blaney says. And parents are eager to have such a facility because they worry about what will happen to their sons and daughters when the parents are no longer able to care for them.

Blaney wants everyone to understand that the Share Foundation has no intention of shutting the disabled off from the world. Rather, he and other foundation members expect that residents will work either at the facility or in the larger community. He expects that residents will visit libraries and museums and stores in nearby communities and that their friends and families will visit them at the Share Foundation facility.

As for the actual housing, Blaney pictures 15 comfortable homes with two disabled people and a house manager in each building. He expects the facility to grow vegetables and to operate a conference center and a crafts shop as a way of helping to sustain itself.

Blaney also plans to move the summer camp, which now operates on rented property, to the new property. He suggests disabled people and their families might make weekend use of the cabins when camp is not in session.

Blaney knows the foundation's plans are optimistic. But Blaney is a man who lives in hope.

Dennis Blaney, after all, is a man who smells bread baking in the wilderness.

□

Those who desire more information about how to contribute to the Share Foundation fund drive may call 874-3491.