Doug George begins new ministry as retreat house staff member

By Mary Lou Kilian

Plattsburgh - Doug George is not afraid of a challenge. Five years in youth ministry and a stint as a missionary in Peru certainly prove that.

Still it took "a step of faith," he said, to leave his youth ministry position at the parishes in Ogdensburg without another job in sight.

After a summer of "searching out possibilities" and "taking a wonderful journey investigating other options," the doors to the Regina Maria Retreat House opened.

The Daughters of the Heart of Mary have operated the retreat house on Brinkerhoff Street since Bishop James J. Navighi invited the religious order to come to the diocese in 1959.

With declining number of vocations, the current staff members saw the need for bringing on a lay person to assist in their efforts to expand and enhance the programs at Regina Maria.

George accepted the position and began work in September. "Do we know what it totally means? No," he said. "This is uncharted territory for all of us."

The 38-year-old native of the Buffalo area has been working with three Daughters of the Heart of Mary religious order has operated the retreat center for nearly 40 years.

Brousseau who has staffed the retreat house for 14 years, Mary Curran, a nine-year veteran of the staff and Maureen Hallissey who arrived earlier this year.

Also helping the retreat house realize its potential are the board members who meet on a regular basis. The current members are Father St. Roger McGuinness, chair; Michael and Louise Oughlin, Pat and Eve McGill, Sister Theresa Martell, Mary Beth Engelbridge, Darcy Mousaw and John McGuealy.

George has no official job title yet but will be responsible for marketing, publicity and computer work at the retreat house. He will be contacting people on the retreat house mailing list as well as the general population. "You find out we're responding to the needs of people."

"We're trying to keep things going," he said, "and have a vision for what could be in place."

Busy schedule

Currently, the retreat house offers a schedule that includes weekly Bible study, a monthly support group for survivors of child sexual abuse and regular Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament.

Retreats are held once or twice a month, often for members of Alcoholics Anonymous and Alano. This year's schedule featured a weekend retreat "Seasons of the Heart," led by Sister Catherine Livers and Father Edward Bloody.

Other special programs held this fall included a full fling for couples, a workshop for clown ministry, a day of reflection on Franciscan prayer and a senior celebration.

The next scheduled retreat "Hope in the Midst of Darkness," Nov. 13-15, will be led by Father Michael Tobh for members of Alcoholics Anonymous.

December's offerings will include a presentation Dec. 5 by Dominican Sister Elizabeth Menard, "Mary, Mother and Model of Hope in the New Millennium."

The Retreat League, a group of volunteers who support the ministry of the retreat house, will hold its annual Christmas sale Nov. 19-21 from 10 a.m. to 5 at the Little White House on the Regina Maria property.

Curran pointed out that the Retreat League is a "strong arm of Regina Maria."

About 60 members of the league provide volunteer and financial support for the retreat house. "They are the backbone of Regina Maria," she said.

The Regina Maria Retreat Center also serves as a "house of hospitality" welcoming local altar rosary groups, the St. Vincent de Paul Society, Formation for Ministry classes, groups of catechists and others for prayer experiences.

Seeking growth

While thousands pass through Regina Maria during the year, the staff members hope to see a growth in the number of programs and participants at the retreat house.

Among the new ideas are ski retreat weekends during January and February traditionally slow months for the retreat house.

"Ski fanatics will drive through anything," George said, "and we'd like to help outdoor enthusiasts experience God through the elements."

There are also plans for workshops geared around creative arts such as pottery or basketweaving or gardening "to help people see God in the ordinary, not just through intellectual pursuits," he said.

Other plans for the future include a possible restoration of the carriage house to provide a resource center and larger gathering space.

The staff would also like to increase the number of individual and parish groups coming for private retreats and days of prayer.

George hopes to meet with parish groups in the area to brainstorm about how the retreat house could better meet the spiritual needs of their people.

A graduate of Wadhams Hall Seminary-College and familiar figure at diocesan youth and Christian Formation programs, George is excited about the newest ministry he has taken on.

His goal is to bring as many people as possible to the Regina Maria Retreat Center, so that they might also discover the "holy ground" he has found there.

Editor's note: Further information about programs at the retreat center is available at 518-561-3421.

Doug George, center, recently began work on the staff of the Regina Maria Retreat House in Plattsburgh. He is shown with Daughters of the Heart of Mary Ann Brousseau, left and Mary Curran. The Daughters of the Heart of Mary religious order has operated the retreat center for nearly 40 years.

(Kilian photo)