

# She sees the hopes and dreams of the beautiful people no one else sees

By AMY BERMAR  
Tundra Times Correspondent

When Sister Dorothy Forest meets a group of people, she talks to the Natives first.

"If I see two or three people, I'll go up to the Native, because most of the time, they won't come forward," she says.

For more than a decade, this 50-year-old white woman has been a regular visitor to the jails, the hospitals and the detox centers.

Her weekly rounds include stops at both city jails, the Eagle River Correctional Institute, McLaughlin Youth Center, the women's Ridgeview Correctional Center and Nakoyia Nursing Home.

She knows Fourth Avenue in Anchorage and is as comfortable talking to a man leaning in a doorway of the Montana Club as she is conversing with the well-scrubbed worshippers who attend Sunday mass.

"Even if I see a drunk on the street, I'll always say hello, because if you reject them while they're drunk, you're rejecting

the entire person.

"And you can't help them when they're sober if you haven't helped them when they're drunk."

"Help" doesn't mean lending them a dollar for another drink. And it doesn't mean simple forgiveness.

For Sister Dorothy, help means listening. And talking. About what is important. About spirituality. About learning from experiences. And about becoming.

"I am an existentialist," she says. "We never simply are; we are always becoming."

So that no condition is impossible — and no one, no matter how miserable their situation, is impossible to love.

"The first time I meet a person, everything is blank. All of a sudden, when they talk, I pick things up.

"And after awhile, no matter how big their crime, I see a lot that nobody else sees. And I don't see it in a defensive way.

"I see their hopes, their aspirations and their hurts. Some have a lot of hurt. To me, they

are all beautiful people."

If someone can be more beautiful than others, then it is the Natives who, to Forest, are the loveliest.

"I just have a special part that goes out to the Natives," she says.

"The Eskimos, the Indians and the Native people really are bright, but we don't express it at the same level. As soon as they catch on, they can outdo us," said the woman who spent 20 years in Native and Sioux schools, and who still considers herself a teacher.

"It's just giving them the basics. It's like giving someone tools. Once you teach them to use them, they can make things better than you can."

Teaching, she says, is a matter of getting someone excited about learning. The rules come later.

"To me, it's important to know why. Seeing it. I don't need to know a whole lot of formulas. The formulas come afterwards, when you know how to do it."

Last week, the men in Eagle River Correctional Institute started asking her about geometry, another time, someone wanted to know about fractions.

Math happens to come easily — as does teaching.

"My father was good with math, and I caught on quickly. In school we had about 56 in our class, so I would teach the others."

Sister Dorothy grew up in the quarrying town of Fitchburg, Mass., and entered the order of St. Ann's when she turned 18.

She had already been enrolled in a local teacher's college, but changed her mind the summer before the semester started.

Her father didn't want her to enter — she says it's the only time she ever saw him cry — and an aunt already in the order didn't think she would last a week.

She spent her novitiate in Montreal, where she learned the French she still uses occasionally in conversation.

Her first assignment, at the age of 20, was teaching on an Iroquois reservation 10 miles outside of Montreal.

"It wasn't bad," she says. "We had running water and electricity." She was the first grade teacher.

"It was a real learning experience," she says. "I became a (Continued on Page Seven)

Sister Dorothy Forest

# Responsibilities were many

(Continued from Page Six)

teacher by watching the older sisters. They made us laugh at ourselves, and realize the world wasn't coming to an end.

"I remember people admiring us for how much we knew, but we were learning faster just by watching the world around us. We had books, alright, but the book stuff is easy by comparison."

Sister Dorothy was on firmer ground by the time she moved to Nulato, 10 years later.

She was responsible for six grades now, and was the village nurse in addition.

"Back then, we had no jets, no tv and no radio. The only signals we could get were from Japan or Russia."

As teacher, she saw an entire generation of Nulato youth, and recalls Roy Huhndorf and Audrey Armstrong as two of her more famous students.

And as the local nurse, she met everyone else.

"I would get called out of school, or during the night. In '59, we had a measles epidemic, and I had to go out morning and night giving shots.

"I didn't realize the extent of my responsibilities, and what I would do if something went wrong. I prayed a lot."

Sister Dorothy prays for a lot of people - and if someone asks, will always go with them to church. Any church.

She also will drive anyone who wants the ride to weekly services.

While she will do almost anything to help someone help themselves - she draws the line at offering pity.

"Compassion is all right if you're dying and sick, because I can't do anything to strengthen them. But I have to help these people get stronger and grow.

I don't want to be compassionate. I don't want to say "Ok people, you're in jail, and leave it at that.

"I'll say they have to accept the responsibility. They did something to be there, or they wouldn't be there. I'm not going to cry for them.

"I'll help the family, and I'll help them. But compassion is good when there is no hope. And sometimes these people have a lot more reason to help than I do."