

A TRUE HUMANITARIAN

# A HALF-CENTURY OF CARING FOR KIDS

## PORTAGE SENIOR CITIZEN NAMED MICHIGAN'S FOSTER PARENT OF THE YEAR

BY PHYLLIS ROSE  
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

**P**ORTAGE — More than 500 children could call Portage's Elaine Van Leeuwen "mom."

That's the number of children she has foster-parented during the past 50 years. And, today, at age 79, she's still at it — foster-parenting three teenagers.

Until his death seven years ago, her husband, Alan, was a foster father to these children as well.

Because of her many years of service, Michigan's Foster Care Review Board recently honored Van Leeuwen with the 2010 Child Welfare Award, in particular naming her the Foster Parent of the Year.

"I like to believe I'm being recognized for the service I've given rather than for the amount of years," she said.

The Van Leeuwens started foster-parenting in 1961 when they had four children of their own, with the youngest being 4 years old.

"I had a friend who was doing a little bit of foster care, and I thought I need to get involved," she said. "My husband and I have always had great affection for children with needs. That's how we started."

Their first foster child was a newborn who was being given up for adoption, she said. Before long, they had two newborns, which they kept until they were placed for adoption. Throughout the years, they've had 250 newborns.

They also parented older children, sometimes taking them on a temporary basis, but then the children stayed for years.

She recalls one little boy with muscular dystrophy who needed total care. She was concerned she might not be able to do all the lifting he required. But she cared for him for seven years until he passed away.

"That's hard," she said, recalling his death.

"It's hard to give up children, too. When my husband and I first became foster parents, we had to sign an agreement that we would not pursue the adoption of these children. That has all changed today. Today, the goal is — if they don't go home — for the foster parents to adopt. It wasn't back when I was young enough to adopt."

**'Make a better life'**

She wistfully recalled one child they wanted to adopt, an 8-year-old African-American boy, but instead he was placed in an African-American home.



COURTESY PHOTOS/FAMILY & CHILDREN SERVICES

**Honored guests:** Foster Parent of the Year Elaine Van Leeuwen, of Portage, and her biological son, Steve, left, and daughter, Cathy, right, attended the Nov. 3 dedication of a new Foster Parent Commemorative Walk on the grounds of Family & Children Services, at 1608 Lake St. in Kalamazoo.

"I always knew and my husband, too, why we were foster parents — that it was our goal to be able to help these children move on to a better life."

— Elaine Van Leeuwen, 79,  
Michigan Foster Parent of the Year

"There are a lot of hurts in foster care, but you have to decide what you are doing it for," she said. "I always knew and my husband, too, why we were foster parents — that it was

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**For all foster parents do:** Benches and colorful flowers beautify the Foster Parent Commemorative Walk located at Family & Children Services in Kalamazoo. On Nov. 3, the walk was dedicated and a reception held afterward recognized foster parents with 20 or more years of service.

# Ceremony marks new Bethany House

Women's shelter reopens under local mental-health agency, counseling added

GAZETTE STAFF REPORTS

KALAMAZOO — Bethany House, founded 25 years ago as a shelter for abused and homeless women, is back in operation after tight finances and a shrinking staff led to its closure a year ago.

Now this transitional home that reopened on Oct. 1 in Kalamazoo primarily serves women recovering from substance abuse.

It offers on-site psychological services to its residents, which is new. An additional change is that those who live there are permitted to bring their children to live with them.

Recently, the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph transferred ownership of the home, at 722 S. Rose St., to Kalamazoo Community Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services.

The transfer was celebrated at a ribbon-cutting ceremony held Oct. 28 attended by mental-health agency officials and many of the sisters who have maintained the home over the years.

Also present were representatives from the Kalamazoo County Public Housing Commission, KCMHSAS



COURTESY PHOTO

**Ownership transfer:** From left, Patricia Guenther, vice chairwoman of Kalamazoo Community Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, known as KCMHSAS; Sister Rose Cadaret, of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph and former Bethany House director; and David Anderson, housing director for KCMHSAS, participate in a ribbon-cutting ceremony at Bethany House on Oct. 28.

board and staff, the Bethany nonprofit organization and University Substance Abuse Clinic.

Clinical services at Bethany House will be provided by Tom Blackmon, director of the University Substance Abuse Clinic.

For more than 30 years, KCMHSAS has served adults with mental

illness, youth with severe emotional disturbances, persons with developmental disabilities and persons with substance use disorders.

Annually, the agency helps more than 10,000 people in the Kalamazoo community find treatment.

For more about Bethany House, call Tracy Barber at 269-373-6900.

### HONORS AND AWARDS

## Judge's assistant earns kudos for aiding the attorneyless

GAZETTE STAFF REPORTS

KALAMAZOO — Local attorneys Paul and Nick Vlachos presented Lori Rumsey, longtime secretary to St. Joseph County Circuit Judge William Welty, with the 2010 John N. Vlachos Award.

It is named in honor of their father, a Kalamazoo lawyer dedicated to community service and public interest law who died in 1995.

The award is given annually in partnership with Legal Aid of Western Michigan to a person who has made a special contribution to the civil justice community.

Rumsey was honored for her lengthy career in many areas of the legal system at an Oct. 21 reception at the Kalamazoo Country Club.

Among her accomplishments is the creation of a "how-to" packet to help the rising number of those without attorneys seeking a divorce. It details navigating the legal process in the St. Joseph court system.

Rumsey was the recipient of the St. Joseph County Bar Association's Liberty Bell award earlier this year. This particular honor is for outstanding service to the community performed by a nonlawyer citizen or organization.



Lori Rumsey

### CLASS REUNION

#### KALAMAZOO CLASS OF 1961

If you are member of the Class of 1961 at either Loy Norrix High School or Kalamazoo Central High School, reunion organizers need your updated contact information. The next joint gathering is planned for Oct. 14-16 in 2011. Material should be e-mailed to Giant/Knight2011@aol.com. For further information or questions, call 269-345-2678 or 269-381-8808.

E-mails are preferred. Forward reunion notices of 100 words or less to news@kalamazoogazette.com at least three weeks before the event and put "Saturday Today" in the subject line. No exceptions; also no fliers.