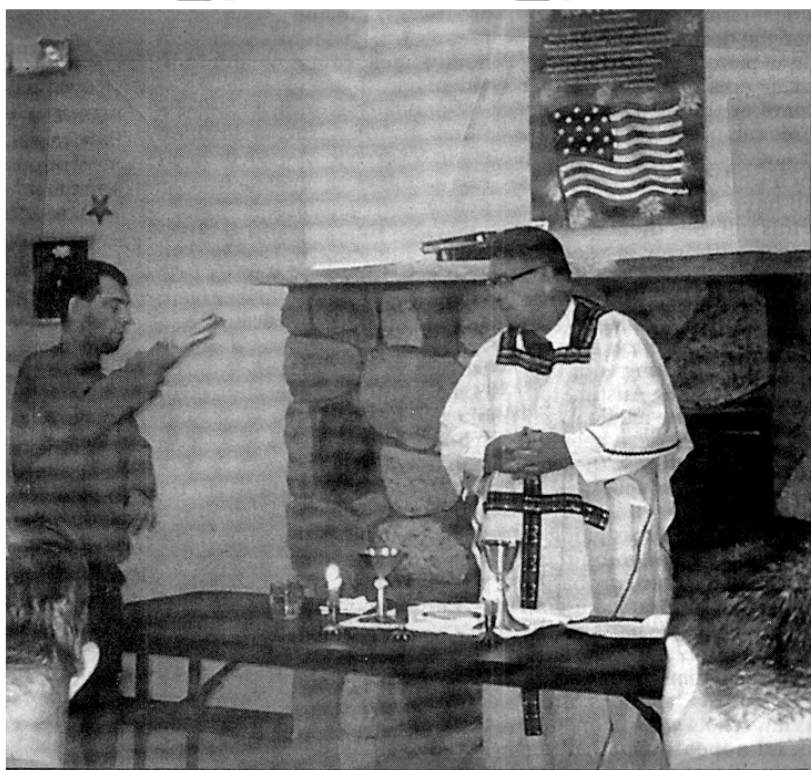


A special place



Father Dennis Blaney celebrates Mass at Sharing Meadows.

BY JULIA VERSAU
Times Correspondent

For mentally disabled adults in Lake, Porter and LaPorte counties, Sharing Meadows Farm is like a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. A peaceful green oasis on 184 acres in rural LaPorte county near Michigan City, Sharing Meadows is now in session with one-week summer camps. In addition, construction of group housing villages where these adults can live permanently has begun.

The Share Foundation, established 15 years ago, had as its mission the creation of a place where mentally retarded adults could live in a specially designed environment that meets their needs. Father Dennis Blaney of Sacred Heart Church in Michigan City was a prime mover in the plan to build a place for these adults. The land for Sharing Meadows was purchased in 1991. Today, the camp building is complete and so is one trio of family-style housing units, the Village of St. John.

"Here, retarded adults can be with their peers and enjoy life to the fullest," said Kathleen Wolf, executive director of the Share Foundation. "For too many, life is something that goes on around them. These people thrive when they can live in community."

Non-denominational but Christian, Sharing Meadows has been set up to offer group housing, meals, arts and crafts, outings, classes and church services for the mentally retarded adults who thrive in this unique setting.

Sharing Meadows could not survive without the commitment of board members and the volunteer spirit of the full-time camp directors and staffers who give their time and energy to the project. For Bill and Anne

Franz, the camp and villages are a labor of love.

"You can see the value of this just by looking at the faces of the people here," Anne Franz said. "Every time I come here, I marvel at just how much this means to them."

Tony Pohlen is another committed helper. A 1997 graduate of the University of Notre Dame from Eden Prairie, Minn., Pohlen decided to spend his summer at Sharing Meadows because he feels strongly that people should give time to others.

A sociology and theology major at Notre Dame, Pohlen had volunteered in high school and college and had previous experience with mentally retarded adults.

"This is a very worthwhile experience for me," he said. "It teaches patience, it teaches you to roll with the punches and to see what's important."

Before Sharing Meadows was started, the Share Foundation used to rent Girl Scout camps in the summer to give retarded adults and their families a respite. Now, the expansive farm will allow construction of numerous villages for long-term housing. It features rolling hills, a fish-stocked pond and garden areas.

To support the ongoing work at Sharing Meadows, the foundation conducts four major fund-raisers, including the annual Leprechaun Hunt (see above). The hunt, as well as the annual golf outing, spring luncheon and fall gala dinner dance, bring in funds that augment donations from individuals and churches throughout the area.

"This place looks like an oasis and it really is," Wolf said. "For the people who live here or come for camp, it's a little slice of heaven on earth."