

Backers of haven for mentally retarded adults continuing in quest for growth

By Deborah Sederberg
News-Dispatch staff writer

It isn't heaven and it isn't even Iowa. Nonetheless, the people who are building Sharing Meadows know about dreams, perhaps even about a "Field of Dreams."

Indeed, a portion of Sharing Meadows is given over to cornfields. No one, however, expects to see Shoeless Joe Jackson coming through the corn.

Rather, the dreamers and believers who have built — and are building still — Sharing Meadows, near Rolling Prairie, were expecting to serve mentally retarded adults.

And they are.

Six villagers — as residents are known — have come to live in three houses on the 184 acres of Sharing Meadows.

The adult summer camp program is another important part of the Sharing Meadows picture. Summer campers come to spend time in the sunshine and the fresh air, to learn a bit, to play a bit, to be together, to enjoy some time away from home, as many people do during summer vacation.

Sharing Meadows was the dream of the Share Foundation with the Handicapped organization and of its president, the Rev. Dennis Blaney.

Blaney, the pastor of Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church, also served as the first director of the Diocese of Gary's Apostolate for the Handicapped.

Although he has retired from the apostolate, Blaney continues to serve as president of the Share board, and as chief cheerleader for Sharing Meadows, for both the village and the summer camp.

Camp director Ben Clouse volunteered to work at Sharing Meadows between the time he finished work on his master's degree in accounting and the time he will start to work in his full-time job in September.

"When I realized I would have the summer free, I decided to do some volunteer work," Clouse said.

Blaney is impressed with Clouse's dedication and skill. He said all the camp volunteers — from the director to the counselors, cooks, nurses and craft teacher — are living examples of the generous spirit he sees in so many people who lend their time, talent and treasure to Sharing Meadows.

Campers bunk in the large



CLOUSE



KUEBEL

camp/craft building, and on rainy days spend a good part of the day in various activities in the big space.

Clouse said campers enjoyed working on a play, a musical version of the old fable, "The Tortoise and the Hare." A volunteer counselor, Mimi Kuebel, put the production together and directs rehearsals and performances for campers' families who call for them on Fridays.

Blaney said the Sunday-through-Friday camp experience provides a bit of respite for the families who care for the adult campers.

Some campers come from group homes, but others live with their families, often with aging parents, he said.

Clouse said campers usually begin their active day with a crafts session, followed by a teaching session, led by Kathleen Wolf, executive director of the Share Foundation. On a recent morning, for example, Wolf was presenting a discussion on Olympic athletes and others who strive to give their best performance in any endeavor.

Wolf's session is followed by play practice, lunch, rest and active outdoor recreation, perhaps rowing on the Sharing Meadows lake or a game of volleyball.

After dinner, campers often enjoy dancing or games, or, a couple of times a week, a bonfire.

As for villagers who live at Sharing Meadows, they contribute to upkeep of buildings and grounds, with direction and assistance from house stewards.

For the second annual Leprechaun Hunt Family Fun Day at Sharing Meadows, scheduled for noon to 6 p.m. Sunday, Aug. 4, villagers will be baking zucchini bread, which will be served with strawberries and blueberries.

Leprechaun Hunt?

Ah, but who would be about doubtin' the good word of the saintly pastor of Sacred Heart parish, His

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Reverence, Father Dennis Blaney, he of the smilin' Irish eyes and a natural-born faith in miracles?

And if he says there will be leprechauns, there will be leprechauns — even if the good priest has to plant every last one himself, which he will.

Those lucky folks who find one of the 23 leprechauns can win a big cash prize. One leprechaun will be worth \$1,000. Others will be worth up to \$500.

The leprechauns will be hidden within Sharing Meadows' 184 acres and finding them will require skill, effort — and perhaps a bit o' the luck o' the Irish.

Even those who won't be walking away with a pot o' gold can have a good time, Blaney believes. A ticket entitles participants to food and drink, including beer, wine and soft drinks, all day.

Chef Philippe Joseph of Innsbrook Country Club in Merrillville will prepare the food. The main buffet will include roasted sides of beef, lamb and corned beef. Joseph and his volunteer crew also will serve hamburgers, roast corn on the cob and other picnic treats, including snow cones and popcorn.

Boating, fishing, hay wagon rides and Irish entertainment on two stages will provide plenty of activities for both adults and children, Blaney said.

Jimmy Moore, who performs at Kitty O'Shea's, in Chicago, will be one of the featured performers.

Does Blaney believe in leprechauns?

The good priest smiles.

And he recounts stories of the good people who have been so generous to the Share Foundation.

"Someone has given us a loom for making rugs and someone has donated the equipment for making ceramics — including a kün," he says.

One especially generous donor is a recovering alcoholic, Blaney notes, and asks whether such gifts, including the donor's sobriety, aren't enough to convince a person of the possibility of miracles?

As for the leprechauns — Blaney knows they are mere ceramic statues.

But when he thinks about what they represent to the campers and the villagers of Sharing Meadows, about the opportunities they present to generous donors who want to share their own treasures with villagers and campers, he cannot keep from smiling.

"They are ceramic leprechauns," Blaney admits. "But when you get them all together, when you line them up together there, on a table, there is a kind of magic. A bit of magic."

Tickets to the Aug. 4 Leprechaun Hunt fund-raiser at Sharing Meadows are \$35 per adult. Children 17 and under will be admitted free. For more information or to make reservations, call 872-2866.

Sharing Meadows is near Rolling Prairie — take U.S. 20 to LaPorte County Road 300 East and go north two miles on 300 East.