

Seniors leave their grim days behind



Hilde Cernevicius, (center right), greets Sister Rose Wildenhaus, in the red sweater, in the lobby of the newly renovated Twin Towers Senior Complex. Dick McBride, (left), and Wildenhaus led the effort to create six senior apartment centers for low-income seniors. Staff photo by Jim Noelker

Affordable dream: Nonprofit turns hardships into distant memories

By Mary McCarty
Staff Writer

DAYTON — Joe Cernevicius grew up in wartime Lithuania where poverty was so dire — starvation his constant companion — that he fled to Hitler's Germany and signed up to fight with the Americans. "Eisenhower took us in," he said, beaming. "He wasn't Hitler, he wasn't Stalin. We had enough to eat. It was wonderful."

It's a decision he never regretted, especially since it led him to his wife, Hilde, a 17-year-old German girl he spotted playing in the forest with some children as he roared through in a U.S. Army truck.

He showed up at her doorstep later that evening. He fell in love not only with her beauty, but also with the fact "she was playing with children. There were no bombs."

Hilde faced her own hardships during the war. Her moth-

er bartered her beloved teddy bear — her only toy — for five potatoes. When there was nothing left to barter, they stole from neighboring farmers.

"That wasn't nice," Joe said, patting her hand and smiling affectionately as Hilde recounted her tale.

She replied, "When you're hungry, you do a lot of things you're not proud of."

After the extreme deprivation of their youth, the couple could hardly have imagined their life now. "Now we have too much to eat," Hilde said, chuckling. "Sometimes I throw things away."

They proudly show off their sunny new apartment in the recently remodeled Twin Towers Place, 250 Allen St. They owe much of this comfort and plenty to the vision of businessman Dick McBride and Sister Rose Wildenhaus, a Catholic nun. Twenty years ago, they

co-founded St. Mary Development Corp. with the dream of affordable housing for low- to moderate-income seniors. In the beginning they recycled every paper clip and ran their "empire" in a cramped old school building with two milk crates as office chairs.

Today, the nonprofit agency provides more than 2,400 housing units for moderate- to low-income seniors. It has created six senior apartment centers, built 137 homes for low-income families and created a new emergency housing facility for the Red Cross.

They have succeeded, in short, beyond their wildest ambitions. Observed Wildenhaus, "If there's a need, God will make it happen."

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