

Honoring a 'Pace-setter'

ACS Dinner to Recognize Sister Mary Caritas and her Work in the Fight Against Cancer

Sister Mary Caritas of the Sisters of Providence Congregation is one of the lucky ones.

Diagnosed with colon cancer in the mid-1980s, she was able to win the battle when doctors detected the disease before it progressed. "They caught it early," she said. "I was fortunate."

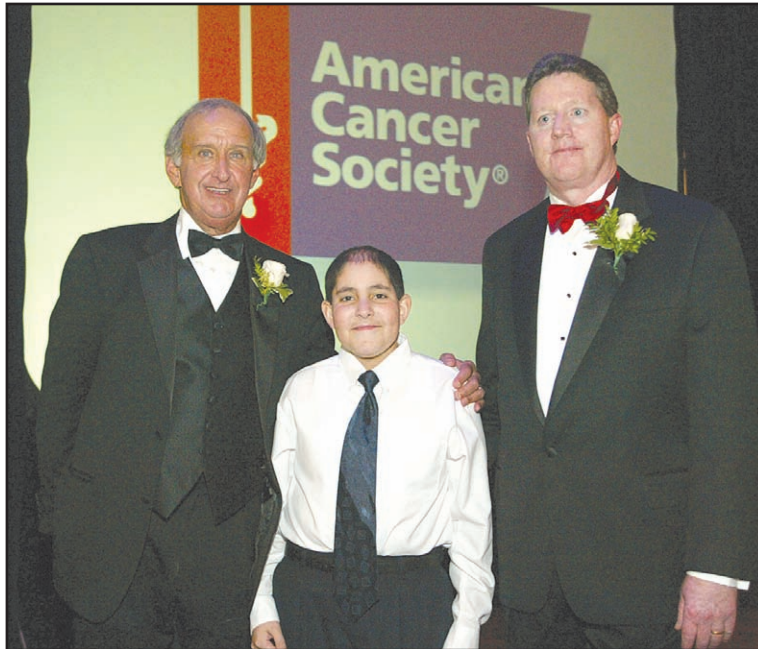
Not everyone is so lucky, though, which prompted the now retired hospital administrator to dedicate herself to the cause. 'Actively retired' since 1993 from her role as president of what is now Mercy Medical Center in Springfield, Sister Caritas is known throughout Western Mass. for her work in the ongoing fight against cancer.

"It's a cause that I care very deeply about," she told *The Healthcare News*.

In recognition of her tireless efforts, Sister Caritas will be presented with the prestigious Omar T. Pace, MD award at the American Cancer Society's annual recognition dinner on May 13 at the MassMutual Center in Springfield. Created 14 years ago by Gary Fialky, Esq., a partner with the Springfield law firm Bacon and Wilson, P.C., the award is named in honor of the late Dr. Omar T. Pace.

The renowned cancer surgeon and pioneer in his specialty gave more than 50 years of volunteer service to the American Cancer Society, and was a founding member of the organization's Western Mass. chapter.

According to Mary Howell director of the local ACS chapter, who assists co-chairs Fialky and Banknorth President David Glidden in planning the annual event, Pace served the organization at the national, state and



At top, the Omar T. Pace co-chairs, Gary Fialky (left) and David Glidden (right) along with Camp Rising Sun Camper Nick Reyna at last year's gala. Below, campers at Camp Rising Sun, a free summer camp for kids with cancer, show off their arts and crafts prowess.

local levels "in almost every way possible."

"He saved so many people," Fialky said. "He touched so many lives."

Embodiment of Honor

Created to recognize those who continue Pace's legacy of caring and commitment to the

ACS, the award honors those who are 'making a difference in the fight against cancer in Western Mass.," said Fialky.

Past recipients include U.S. Rep. Richard Neal and Mark Tolosky, president and CEO of Baystate Health. Fialky, a past award recipient himself, believes Sister Caritas is a fitting choice

for 2006.

"She gives countless hours to this cause," he explained. "She's just done so much to bring services and care to so many people; she's really a wonderful lady."

While an administrator at then Mercy Hospital, Sister Caritas was relentless in her pursuit to obtain radiation-treatment equipment and services there. At the time, she said, such services were only available at Baystate Medical Center, although the need continued to grow.

"I kept applying, and the state kept denying it," she said. "Persistence pays off."

Around the time Sister Caritas announced her plans to retire in 1993, the hospital learned that it would, indeed, receive the equipment she had tried for years to obtain. It is now the centerpiece of on-site cancer treatment center that bears her name.

But treatment of cancer goes well beyond mere technology and nuclear reactors, said Sister Caritas, noting that the Mercy facility takes a holistic approach to battling the disease.

"Of course the focus is to cure the person," she explained. "But you also need to understand what's going on with the person. Technology has to be state of the art, but to me, it's more about compassion and caring for the person who is battling this disease."

A past president of the Sisters of Providence, Sister Caritas has served as chair and board member of the Catholic Health Association as well as the American Hospital Assoc. and the Mass. Hospital Assoc. Additionally, she has been involved in numerous state and national task forces, including

panels dealing with issues such as health care for low-income residents and the 'ethics of health care rationing.'

Caritas is currently a member of the board for Providence Place, and president of Greater Springfield's Senior Services.

"Sister Caritas is the embodiment of what this honor stands for," Howell said. "She has been a tireless advocate for new treatment options and treatment opportunities."

Howell noted that Sister Caritas has also been instrumental in setting health care policies, and has played a role in obtaining grant funding for area health care services. Although being lauded for her many achievements in the fight against an all too common disease, Caritas said she can

think of so many other people who should be receiving such an award.

"I'm humbled by this honor, and I feel totally unworthy of it," she said. "I know there are many other people in the Pioneer Valley who do so many more things for this cause."

While receiving the award is an honor, she added that regardless of recognition, the work simply must be done. This is a passion she shared with her friend, Dr. Pace.

"There is still such a large need for these services," she said. "He and I had the same sense of how important this work is, and the impact cancer has on everyone from the patients to their families and friends."

Raising Fun

In addition to honoring Sister Caritas, this year's gala event will help raise money to send local youths to the American Cancer Society's Camp Rising Sun, a free summer camp for children battling the disease. Through pledges, last year's event raised \$17,400 for the camp. The goal this year, Howell said, is to raise enough money to send 24 campers to the program this summer.

Since its inception in 1992, the Omar T. Pace event has raised more than \$500,000, benefiting American Cancer Society programs, research, patient services, education, and advocacy.

Those who attend will be asked to put their 'hands up for

hope' by bidding in a silent auction. According to Howell, art work, jewelry, Boston Celtics tickets, a getaway to Cape Cod, and fine wines are among items to be auctioned off. After dinner, the locally renowned Floyd Patterson Band will provide entertainment for the evening.

Sarah Daigle, a cancer survivor, is among the featured guests who will share her story. A former camper at Rising Sun, the young woman is now a counselor there.

"We have a great evening planned," Howell said.

For tickets to the gala or for information about donating or participating, contact Howell at (413) 493-2122 or mary.howell@cancer.org.