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Interesting people bring joy to others

SIMPLY FAITHFUL

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Sometimes people ask me to tell them about my most interesting interviews. They get really quiet, expecting to hear me rattle off a list of famous names that I've scratched down in my skinny reporter's notebook.

But the people who come to my mind first are the ones whose names you probably wouldn't recognize.

There's the boy in Oklahoma who donated bone marrow to save his little brother's life. If I remember correctly, he was about 9 when he became one of my heroes. And there's the woman here in Rochester who walks the streets helping prostitutes and the homeless get the medication they need as they battle AIDS and other diseases. What others turn away from, she looks squarely in the eyes.

Then there's the Rev. Elmer Schmidt, who died two years ago. When I met him five years ago, he was living at the Sisters of Mercy Motherhouse in Brighton. He had most recently served at St. Anne Church in Rochester. That is, until Parkinson's stole so much of his health.

By the time I met him, the disease had taken most of his voice. He spoke only in whispers — between long breaks for breath — as he told about his stiff and stubborn hands and his crumbling legs. His thoughts were still there, but it was hard to concentrate and bring them out in to the open.

I got the impression that he normally wouldn't have talked so much about his illness, except that I had asked. At the time, Pope John Paul II was suffering from the same disease and there were some who thought the pope should step aside. I was there to shake hands with the disease, so to speak, to be close enough to describe it to my readers. But what I shook hands with that day was life — a life altered, to be sure, but a life still adding others to his prayer list.

"It helps you to feel wanted, needed," he told me that day, still ministering from his wheelchair. "You have to feel needed or you fold up."

I often think of him, there in his simple room willing his facial muscles to let him smile. I never knew him at what others might consider his best, but I'd argue that I met a man that day determined to serve God and others regardless of his circumstances. When I pray for God to wrap his arms around those who are suffering, sometimes my mind drifts back to that interview. And I ask God to slip a little joy in with the comfort. Amen.
