



NEIL STEINBERG

A slice of heaven

At Misericordia, generous human gestures are performed every day, every hour

Opening shot . . .

He is here every day. Maybe not *every* day. But five or six days a week. Close enough to every day.

"I've been doing it for 10 years," says Chris Patarzzi, as he gently massages the curled arms of his younger brother, Michael. "I do it because he needs it."

The Heliocentrics play on a boom box.

"I always bring music," Patarzzi says. "He likes music."

How can he tell? Michael, 25, has cerebral palsy and can't talk.

"He can't speak," says Chris, 40. "But he'll sing, he'll make baby sounds. I know he's enjoying it."

'Mercy of the heart'

In an often profane city, in a city in flux, the brothers meet, almost every day, on sacred, stable ground — a 31-acre campus on the North Side that, for the past 142 years, has offered sanctuary to Chicago's neediest, first as Angel Guardian Orphanage, now as simply Misericordia.

Misericordia is at the corner of two busy roads — Devon and Ridge — but my guess is most drivers blasting by never reflect on what goes on here.

Part of the blame might go to the name — "Misericordia," with its echo of "misery." When I first heard the word, I thought it was a disease, perhaps afflicting the tendons.

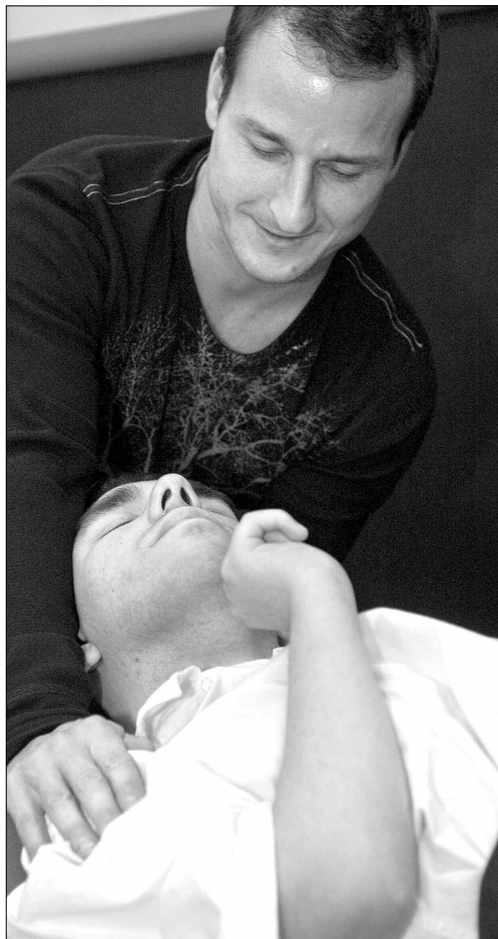
It actually means "compassion" — "mercy of the heart" in Latin — and represents an aspect of the Catholic Church that gets overlooked lately, as headlines are dominated by

starker church matters.

There are 550 residents on the main campus — people with Down syndrome, with cerebral palsy or a range of brain injuries and conditions that conspire to toss a basket over the flame of their humanity. It is the job of the 836 full-time employees and thousands of volunteers to puff on that spark, no matter how faint or flickering.

There are massage therapy rooms and art rooms, pools and gyms, an actual greenhouse and a public restaurant called the Greenhouse Inn, staffed by residents — who take your lunch order with a proud singularity of purpose — plus a full bakery, sweets being the informal ambassadors of Misericordia; if there is an air of powdered sugar clinging to this column, that's why.

In keeping with the trend toward independence, Misericordia has opened six as-



Chris Patarzzi, 40, massages his brother, Michael, 25, who has cerebral palsy. "He's a blessing," Chris says of Michael.

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sisted living facilities in residential neighborhoods — photos of the group homes are proudly displayed in the halls.

"I bet the neighbors go crazy when you try to open one of those," I observed.

"We work really hard at making them not crazy," said Lois Gates, assistant executive director. "Some did give us a hard time and we give

them bakery goods."

The sensory room is a dimly lit space, glowing with color from sprays of fiberoptic cables and bubbles rising in a tube of liquid. Here, severely handicapped residents play. The room is calm and elegant; if you saw it at the Museum of Contemporary Art, you wouldn't think twice.

"There are very few of them in the United States,"

said Diane Almer, a therapist working there.

Misericordia, particularly its new McAuley Center, has the air of a resort, and an expensive resort at that, with lovely woodwork and freshly painted gold and blue walls.

All of this costs money — a million dollars a week — and finding the grease to keep the machinery turning is a constant challenge.

"People are wonderful," said Sister Rosemary Connelly, RSM, who has guided Misericordia since 1969. "Every time there's a need, a door opens to meet that need."

No small credit goes to Sister Connelly, according to Misericordia's well-connected supporters.

"There are 550 families, and they raise an incredible amount of money," said Jay Doherty, president of the City Club of Chicago. "If Sister Rosemary says 'Jump,' they ask, 'How high?'"

The right thing to do

The downside to Misericordia is that there is only one. State-of-the-art, yes, but also in a state where the majority of institutionalized people must make do with something between inadequate and awful. No doubt part of the explanation for the generous donations and vigorous volunteers is sheer gratitude that a loved one has a coveted place in this slice of heaven.

Yes, "heaven."

It was in Classroom Three when the epiphany struck — and I use that word in not only its common meaning, as a sudden realization, but in its classic sense, as a manifestation of Christ.

Several children in complex wheelchairs were there, ventilators loudly breathing for them. Robert and Kelly and others, some at computers, others immobile, almost frozen. I gazed hard at them, trying to detect the spark

within.

And something occurred to me. The sanctity of human life, as a concept, is usually viewed as motivating protesters screaming in the faces of young women trying to get into abortion clinics. But isn't that philosophy also in action here? Isn't it the same idea that motivates these therapists and volunteers to shower attention on those who may never return it? A miraculously generous human gesture — misericordia, pity of the heart — performed here every day, every hour, every minute, squeezing a hand that might never squeeze back, just because it's the right thing to do.

'He's a blessing'

When I ask Chris Patarzzi what benefit comes from his daily visits to Michael, I mean what benefit to his brother.

But that's not how Chris takes the question — he assumes I mean what benefit to *himself*.

"It has brought me closer to him in ways that never would have happened," he says. "Little parts of his personality that I pick up on that I'd miss if I visited once a month. I can tell when he's happy, I can tell when he's sad."

His brother isn't a burden, he says. He's a blessing.

"He's helping the family," he says. "Our family was really close, before, but Michael has brought us closer. The last 10 years of my life would not have happened without him."