

MU fund to continue man's good works

By William Janz

The voice she has left is a strong whisper.

"I love talking about Steve," she said.

With a glass of water nearby, Mary Ellen Kearney, of Oshkosh, whispered about this mischievous, poor, wildly Irish kid who grew up in Brooklyn and didn't finish high school until he was in the Navy. Talking about him, her voice tires, but she doesn't.

Recently Kearney, 44, and an anonymous donor established a \$100,000 student aid fund at Marquette University, in memory of her husband, Stephen.

"When he went into the service, an officer said that most of the people there were running away from something," she said. "Steve decided he wanted to run toward something."

He had been in a number of high schools, but never finished. So he finished while a sailor. While in Hong Kong with the Navy, he worked with nuns in a hospital on his off hours. While in Japan, he worked with a priest in a leper colony.

Not a saint, she wanted everyone to know. Just a sinner who cared.

After he was discharged in 1964, he and a friend came to Milwaukee because the friend said Milwaukee was a good place to live. That's when he met his future wife, who challenged him to finish an education that had started poorly. He had never had much money. The most he ever had was when he was in the basement of a Milwaukee bank and his job was counting it for the bank.

"Some of the people who worked there were Marquette students," Kearney said. "They said one of the reasons they worked at First Wisconsin was its policy of reimbursing people for tuition."

Despite his lack of academic achievement, Marquette accepted him in night school, which, she said, changed his life. After the Kearneys were married in 1966, and she achieved her master's degree in social work at the University of Wis-



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consin — Milwaukee, he became a full-time student at Marquette. He attended class during the day and worked at night.

"He loved Marquette," Kearney said. "He loved the way they made you think, and taught you to think, and encouraged you to express yourself."

Laughing, she said, "If he had an audience of one, he could give you a great speech." After graduating in 1970, he accepted a fellowship at the University of Wisconsin — Oshkosh and earned his master's degree. Later he became the director of education at the Winnebago Mental Health Institute and was elected to the Winnebago County Board.

The anonymous donor who helped set up the fund at Marquette said, "He gave me so much and I loved him. He was my friend. He helped a lot of people and (with the Marquette fund) I hope we can help a lot of other people."

Steve helped the donor's son when the young man was "chemically dependent," the donor said.

Another friend, Jane Dwyre Garton, wrote, "This was a man who fought for the poor and who was an advocate for the ill."

Garton said his work was "missionary-like (and) his missions were many."

Not long before the accident, he was being "courted for state office," Garton said. Just before the accident, something else happened, too, something that wouldn't have bothered most of us as much as it bothered him. But for a poor kid from Brooklyn, his Marquette class ring was a symbol.

"He lost his ring," Kearney said. "Getting that had meant so much to him. . . . He was devastated."

The accident occurred in December 1985. A milk truck struck the Kearney car, killing her husband, 43, her mother-in-law, Mary Temple, 84, and nearly killing her. Kearney's aorta ruptured, and she lost part of her voice.

Those who came to her husband's funeral included many who called him their best friend. Parents or spouses of people who were mentally ill paid their respects. And so did county and state officials and people with whom he had worked closely in his duties with the Mental Health Association of Winnebago County.

"Steve left such a void," Kearney said.

But she has a lot to remember him by, including a gift she received last year from Father John P. Raynor, president of Marquette.

"It represented everything Steve had worked for," she said. "I was overwhelmed."

Raynor gave her another class ring.