

Grand Rapids Press

Area Migrant Workers Lose True Friend

By Michael Bologna

BANGOR — "I feel a great deal of reluctance about leaving this place," said E. Roberta Ryder. "There's so much of me here."

"Bobbi," as everyone seems so fond of calling her, has good reasons for feeling this way. Since graduating from Michigan State University in 1972, she has invested her expertise, energy and emotion in clinics throughout West Michigan.

For the past nine years, Ryder has worked for the Migrant and Rural Community Health Association (MARCHA), serving as the organization's executive director during the last five years.

MARCHA coordinates the operation of four health care facilities in Ottawa, Berrien and Allegan counties. The organization's efforts began with the needs of this area's 20,000 migrant workers but have expanded to meet the needs of low-income people throughout the three counties.

MARCHA assists these people by providing inexpensive, high-quality primary health care services. Ryder says the organization tries to deliver good health, beyond the treatment of disease, by dealing with its clients' social and environmental problems as well. MARCHA does this by promoting good nutrition, providing mobile medical/dental outreach and operating a small amount of migrant worker housing.

But Thursday was Ryder's last day in this office, and while her staff is sad to see her leave, they wish her the best in her new position as executive director of the National Migrant Referral Project in Austin, Texas.

During her years with MARCHA, Ryder has seen many changes and is proud of her accomplishments. She is most proud of getting the medical centers out of "storefront buildings" and into new, modern facilities.

Ryder can still remember when the Holland Migrant Health Center was only an examining room and a ladies bathroom. Those days are gone, with more modern equipment in all the centers and an experienced and concerned staff.

She is also proud of the fact that the project has been able to expand to deal with low-income residents throughout the area. This, says Ryder, has made the clinics more compatible with community needs as a whole.

Ryder is optimistic about MARCHA's future. "Now that we have appropriate facilities and excellent doctors, we need to do what we do better," she said.

Ryder has every confidence that this will continue under the leadership of Velma Hendershott, who has been serving as MARCHA's deputy director.



Press Photo by BETH ERHART

Bobbi Ryder is retiring after working for the Migrant and Rural Community Health Association for the past nine years.