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THE TIMMONSES



The Timmons family enjoys reading with their children at their home near Bismarck. Mom, Mary Timmons, sits with daughters Angela, 6, to her right, and Therese, 4, to her left. Dr. John Timmons, stands over sons Mark, 7, and Matt, 19, as they read together.

Peaceful place

Busy couple opens retreat center near Bismarck

STORY BY MARY KAY SWEIKAR • PHOTO BY SUSAN JOY MCKINNEY

retreat center near Bismarck

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Less than two years ago, Mary and John Timmons bought 230 acres of undeveloped land north of Danville, sold their home in a Chicago suburb and moved their family of five to Bismarck.

Their life has been a whirlwind ever since, with no promise of slowing down any time soon.

"We always wanted to buy a farm," said John, a native of Hoopston.

"And I'm a country girl at heart," added Mary, who grew up

FAMILY PORTRAIT

in the New Lenox area.

The Timmonses and their three small children are living in a mobile home until their new house, which they are building on their property, is completed. They expect to move in this summer.

For some people, designing and building a new home is enough to tackle — but not for the Timmons family. John and Mary also have

converted a 7,000-square-foot green-and-white barn that was already on the property. It is now the Ave Maria Retreat Center, which offers a peaceful setting for prayer and meditation.

They've added a loft to the barn to accommodate additional bedrooms and separate living quarters. The retreat house now has eight bedrooms, a kitchen, a chapel, a children's play area and informal meeting areas.

John and Mary have dedicated

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15 acres of a beautiful wooded area, including a 5-acre stocked pond, to further develop their retreat center. They already have several grottos and four cabins on the property, and they plan to add 10 additional cabins for retreat guests.

John has fashioned a 15-foot crucifix near the winding gravel road at the entrance to the retreat center property. The wood was cut in one of the abundant groves of oak trees found on their land.

Although groups from area Catholic churches and Schlarman High School already have used the retreat facility, the Timmonses are waiting formal approval of the center from Bishop Daniel Jenky of the Diocese of Peoria.

"Our Catholic faith is very important to us, and we've dedicated this retreat center to the

honor and glory of God," Mary said. "We get a lot of satisfaction out of helping other people."

The Timmonses' good work does not stop here.

John, who has been an emergency medicine physician for 20 years, oversees the emergency departments at Hoopston Regional Medical Center and Iroquois Memorial Hospital.

Mary is a full-time mother and home schools her three young children: Mark, 7, Angela, 6, and Mary Therese, 4.

"Home schooling gives us more involvement with our kids' education and character formation," John said.

The Timmons children are talkative and rambunctious. They love birthday parties and reading, as well as swimming and gymnastics at the YMCA, which they attend with other members of their home-school group.

The two older Timmons siblings are Nick, 21, a junior at Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio, and Matt, 19, a sophomore at the Universi-

ty of Illinois.

Matt, who comes home frequently to visit his family, said, "I think it's fabulous here. I'm really proud of the retreat center."

Faith re-ignited

Mary, who's a registered nurse, met her husband about 15 years ago when they both worked at Rush-Presbyterian-St. Luke's Medical Center in Chicago. Mary said both of them had fallen away from the Catholic faith, but they returned with even stronger convictions after they began dating.

Both John and Mary had been divorced. But because their first marriages were annulled, they were able to marry in the Catholic Church in 1997.

After leaving his Chicago job, John accepted a position downstate. For one year, he drove several times a week from their Chicago home to work in the emergency department at Iroquois Memorial Hospital in Watseka.

During that time, his father, the late Clyde Timmons, was 81 years old and in failing health, so his job's proximity to Hoopston allowed John to visit his Dad frequently.

Before long, however, the physical distance between his work and his home became too stressful for John and his family. That's when John started his own emergency physicians' group to serve the two downstate hospitals. The Timmons family then decided to move to Bismarck.

John said he and Mary were more than ready to leave the hustle and bustle of the Chicago area.

"I love it here in the Danville area," John said. "I feel so blessed. This is what we've always dreamed of."

"Our home is not filled with a lot of quiet, but there's a lot of peace and joy," Mary said.

"When you're practicing your faith you know that God is in control," she added, "and this gives meaning to the crosses you have to bear."