

# The News-Review

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## 2006 People of the Year

By John Stefans

### Overall Person of the Year: Sister Margaret Smyth

All it takes is a visit to Sister Margaret Smyth's office on Roanoke Avenue to get an idea of her importance to the local Hispanic community and to understand her selection as The News-Review's overall Person of the Year for 2006. Known as the North Fork Spanish Apostolate, a special ministry sponsored by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rockville Centre, the place can be a madhouse. Phones ring incessantly. Babies cry. Single men and young couples stop by unannounced with all manner of questions, problems and concerns. In the corner of the cramped waiting room, you might see people trying on used clothes or rummaging through boxes of toys that someone has donated. It's generally a happy scene, but with an underlying purpose that grew all the more vital over the past year. Calls for tough immigration reform and a crackdown on overcrowded housing by both the county and the town further increased the need for a place to turn for guidance, and Sister Margaret was there. By all accounts she remained pleasant, caring and unflappable, but excuses were never her thing and probably never will be. "People sometimes think that an advocate is somebody who's going to let things slide by, but that's not me," says Sister Margaret, who on New Year's Day marked the 10th anniversary of her coming to Riverhead and who in September will celebrate 50 years as a Dominican nun. "Part of my mission is to provide a voice for the voiceless," she says. "But another part is to help people to gain their own voice and to take personal responsibility." She says she's particularly proud of the way young Hispanic mothers and fathers are now taking an active role in the education of their children, visiting with teachers and looking to see that their homework gets done. The glue that holds her ministry together are weekly masses in Spanish, held Saturday evenings at St. Agnes in Greenport and Sunday evenings at St. John the Evangelist in Riverhead. There were no such services when she first arrived, but now attendance has swelled to the many hundreds. It is after these masses, conducted by Vincentian priests stationed in Southampton, that Sister Margaret delivers her own brand of tough love. One night she might lecture young men in her audience, who are away from their families for the first time, on the need to keep their living quarters clean and to keep down the noise at night so as not to disturb neighbors. Or she'll admonish them about alcohol and sexual promiscuity. Or she'll press the issue of civic responsibility. In November, she became alarmed when the Town of Riverhead launched its campaign against overcrowded housing by shutting down a home full of immigrants. It wasn't the fact that the house was closed that bothered her, she says, but the manner in which it was done. So she met with Supervisor Phil Cardinale to ask if she could be informed ahead of time before any other raids take place to see if any remedial action might be taken. That's happened and, in the process, she's also developed a close relationship with Kevin Maccabee, the town's senior code enforcement officer. "She's the epitome of what it means to be an effective community activist because she is so intimately plugged into the needs of the Hispanic community and so trusted by all," says Mr. Cardinale, who points to her contributions as a member of the town's anti-bias task force. Sister Margaret's achievements in Riverhead are among many accomplishments. Born in Woodside, Queens, to Irish immigrant parents, she holds a bachelor's degree from St. John's University and two master's degrees from Fordham. She's been the principal of two major elementary schools — St. Catherine of Sienna in St. Albans, Queens, and Our Lady of Solace, in the shadow of the parachute jump at Coney island. And for 11 years, she served as associate pastor of St. John Cantius parish in East New York, Brooklyn, which at the time had the highest homicide rate in the city. "We used to go to bed every night to the sound of gunfire in the streets," she says. It was a wild ride, she explains, but one that made her tough. She recalls a recent conversation with a local businessman who wasn't paying his Hispanic help.