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## Jean Leach: Social worker found vocation

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Floods were nothing new to Jean Leach, a 25-year-old who, in January 1937, was in her second year as a social worker for Family Service of the Cincinnati Area.

She had, after all, grown up in Portsmouth, Ohio, on the banks of the Ohio River, where the water would jump out of its banks nearly every spring.

And she had been a college student in Pittsburgh when the Three Rivers - the Ohio, the Allegheny and the Monongahela - engulfed that town.

But she had never had to deal with anything like this.

Family Service was one of the local agencies that lent its social workers, visiting nurses and other staff to the American Red Cross for flood relief.

Social workers like Leach were assigned to the dozens of shelters set up around the city - many of them in schools - that were temporary homes for thousands of flooded-out families.

Leach was sent first to Sands School in the West End.

Soon, though, Sands School was overtaken by the water, and the Red Cross picked up and moved a few blocks north to Heberle School, which was still on dry ground.

The shelter, she said, was set up dormitory-style, with one section for men, another for women and children.

Food was plentiful at Heberle School; and the Red Cross shipped in plenty of fresh water.

People brought along their family pets - dogs, cats, even caged song birds, turning the school into something of a Noah's ark.

But, as hard as the Red Cross workers tried to care for the families, it was not really home for any of the refugees. "Three or four weeks is a long time for a family to be thrown out of its home," Leach, 95, says.

"People were anxious about their homes, what they would find when they got back. They were worried about missing relatives."

Leach worked shifts in the Heberle School seven days a week for more than a month, going home to Hyde Park between shifts.

As a social worker, she would build a case file on every family she met at the shelter - a file that listed their needs, their plans for returning home, what they would need to put their lives back on track.

"It was the kind of social work I did for many years with many families," says Leach, who retired from Family Service in 1978.

"But we were doing it under the most extraordinary circumstances, with people who were cut off from the life they had known."

"For a young social worker, I can't imagine a better way to learn.

"I was very lucky to be a part of that."

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