

AREA NEWS

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LifeWorks chief retires

Breathed life into agency that was down for the count

By Devon Lash
STAFF WRITER

STAMFORD — The Rev. Richard Shuster is not certain how a three-day long assessment of the St. Luke's LifeWorks in 1986 turned into 22-year tenure marked by vision, education and hope.

"I accepted on April Fools Day in 1987," Shuster said. "Some must have viewed my decision as very foolish, but it has become a saint's day in my book."

Shuster retired this week as the executive director of the organization he shepherded into the new century.

When he arrived at St. Luke's LifeWorks, then known as the Community of St. Luke's, in 1986, the chair of the advisory council wanted Shuster, the assistant director of Episcopal Social Services, to determine whether the downtrodden not-for-profit had a future in the Stamford community.

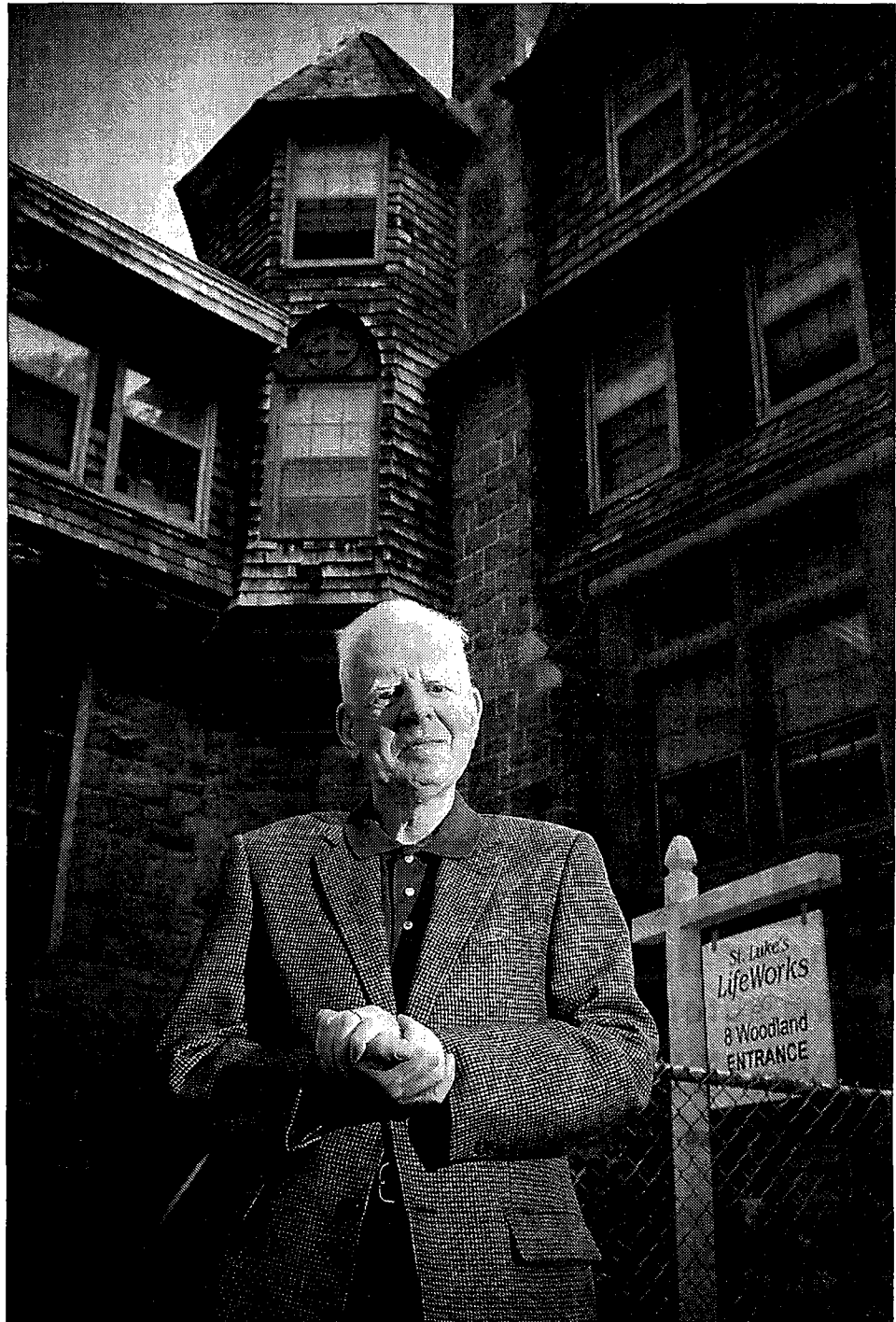
"It had some major economic problems," Shuster said. "The organization was near collapse, and it was having great difficulty surviving."

The three-day assessment turned into three months, then he accepted an offer to be the new executive director.

Shuster said he saw potential in the early St. Luke's LifeWorks, which served fewer than 50 clients in those days, and he saw a matching need in the community.

The organization provides educational opportunities as well as emergency, transitional and permanent housing to families and in-

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KATHLEEN O'ROURKE/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The Rev. Richard Shuster is retiring as executive director of St. Luke's LifeWorks. Shuster started with the organization 22 years ago in the church on Woodland Place.

Shuster

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dividuals, including those living with mental illness and HIV/AIDS.

Now with an annual operating budget of \$4 million and more than 400 annual clients, St. Luke's LifeWorks is a fixture in Stamford, said Dana Low, president of LifeWorks' board of directors.

Low, who is acting as the interim director until new candidates emerge, said Shuster "is a guy who always was, somehow, able to look at the positive side of things."

"He communicated to oth-

ers that anything is possible," he said.

Shuster said some of his greatest accomplishments were rooted in reorganizing services — something he called "no wrong door" — measuring outcomes, gaining maximum effect and cost efficiency.

These efforts, according to his colleague Phil McCain, president and chief executive officer for CTE, a non-profit agency that provides financial education and savings programs, led to collaboration among social service agencies and better service

to their clients.

After working with Shuster for 12 years, Johnnie Malloy, the chief learning officer, said that for the families and the individuals he aided, his tenure took on a more personal meaning.

"He gave people a place where they could feel they came home," Malloy said, "A home is a place where someone can live, raise children and be successful — it's not just building and that was his vision."

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