



EL CENTRO CELEBRATES 25 YEARS of Strengthening the Latino Community

In 1997, Roberto Hernandez recognized the Hispanic population in the City of Trenton was grossly underserved, and struggling with poverty and violence in their neighborhoods. Hernandez, who was working as a Program Coordinator with the Family Growth Program, said he brought his concerns to his Director Ron Gering and Fran Dolan, the agency's Executive Director at the time. He may have mentioned it a few more times too.

With support from Catholic Charities and a \$50,000 pledge per year for three years from Board of Trustees Chair Dan Lundy, Hernandez was ready to begin providing family counseling, health care in partnership with the mobile care unit from St. Francis Hospital, anger management classes, legal services and child care.

"I had the funding, but we needed a place. So, I approached Monsignor Leonard Toomey because I knew there was space on the Sacred Heart Parish campus. It was an old settlement house built to accommodate Irish immigrants fleeing the potato famine. He said yes, we could rent it for \$1,000. My heart sank. I said, 'I can't afford \$1,000 a month.' And then Monsignor said no, that's for the year."

Hernandez cleaned up the space, painted and got everything ready within a month. In November of 1999, El Centro de Recursos Para Familias opened its doors. Then, Hernandez said he started getting scared.

"We'd made this big investment. What if no one comes? So we made fliers. And people started coming, but it was slow at first."

After operating for about a month, Hernandez organized a march to denounce the gang violence that was rapidly invading the community. The "We Believe in You — No More Violence" event was scheduled to start at 10:30 am. "That Saturday morning at 10 am, the street was empty. I thought this is it, we're doomed," said Hernandez. "But at 10:10, I looked outside and there were between 700 and 800 people in the street ready to go. That march baptized us in the community."

When the doors opened 25 years ago, the goal was to empower families, foster positive connections and strengthen the support system for Latinos in the community. "The most important thing we do is establish trust. We have food and clothing to offer our families, eye screenings and case management for victims of violence. There are ESL classes and citizenship classes. We also offer immigration services provided by Department of Justice accredited representatives," said Hernandez. "When people come here, they know we see the humanity in them — that's the piece that can bring us all closer together through trust, humanity and God. I am fortunate to work for Catholic Charities. I can live my faith and get paid at the same time."



A Message from the **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**



Dear Friends,

We were recently blessed to welcome Kerry Alys Robinson, President and CEO of Catholic Charities USA. During her visit, Kerry engaged with our team members and toured several of our programs. While speaking with our staff, she shared a sentiment that deeply resonated with me: “I stand in such admiration for what you do. Every piece of it matters.”

In that moment, in true servant leadership style, Kerry acknowledged our hard work and dedication. It was a profound and proud moment for me. Profound because it reaffirmed the significance of our mission and the impact we make in our community. Proud because the passion and commitment of our team, who go above and beyond for those we serve, was palpable and energizing.

Kerry’s visit made me think of a passage from Luke: “Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more.” Our gifted team truly embodies this principle, exceeding expectations because they recognize what has been bestowed upon them and they live our mission by helping others.

Our generous donors mirror this spirit. They know there’s no better way to count your blessings than to share. I am grateful to be part of this abundance, and my heart is filled with joy and hope — joy for the gifts we receive and hope for what lies ahead.

Wishing you and your family a very Merry Christmas and a Happy and Healthy New Year.

Marlene Laó-Collins
Executive Director

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EL CENTRO CELEBRATES 25 YEARS (cont.)



“While the array of services offered by El Centro has evolved over the years,” said Mary Pettrow, Director of Children and Family Services, “that goal remains consistent. Initiatives over

the years have included building coalitions, training law enforcement, establishing mentoring programs and holding vaccination clinics — all things to make a stronger, healthier community.”

Today, the team at El Centro provides services for citizens and non-citizens who are new to the country. Every January, they hold a Three Kings Celebration when the Wise Men bring toys to the children in the community. On Good Friday, El Centro stages Via Crucis, a procession through the streets of Trenton.

FOR INFORMATION on the services offered through El Centro, call 609-394-2056.

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FIX-IT MATCHES VOLUNTEERS WHO CARE

with Seniors Who Need Help

When Frank, Mary's husband of 47 years, was suffering from a brain tumor, they needed help maintaining their home in Brick. She said he had cared meticulously for everything around the house for years, and she was hesitant about calling just anyone. Then she saw an ad for Catholic Charities' Fix-It Program.

"The man who showed up to help was wonderful," said Mary. "He was sympathetic with my husband's difficulties getting up the stairs, and very patient. And, he did excellent work." When the volunteer left, Mary tried to offer him a few dollars for a cup of coffee and he refused. She recalled that he said, "This is what I need to do."

Funded in part through a grant from the Ocean County Board of Commissioners, the Fix-It Program provides volunteers who perform maintenance projects and yard clean-ups for residents 60 and older in Ocean County. Fix-It volunteers can install grab bars and safety rails, change storm windows and doors, replace light bulbs, smoke and carbon dioxide detectors and do minor electrical, carpentry and plumbing repairs.

Sadly, Frank passed away, and when Mary needed more help around the house and reached out to the Fix-It Program again. Volunteers trimmed her shrubs and painted her doors. "The people who came to do the work were happy to do it," she said. "They felt good because they know they helped."

Mary mentioned the Fix-It Program in a Bereavement Group facilitated by Deacon Mike at her parish, Church of the Epiphany. "Fix-It is an answer to a prayer," said Deacon Mike, who has been leading the group for 40 years. "I see widows who are alone and going through the bereavement process and sometimes they talk about a door that won't lock or a window that sticks... And how they have no one to fix the issue. It's the simplest things that can cause so much stress. When someone brings up a needed repair, I see the rest of the people in the group nodding in agreement. There is a need."



▲ Deacon Mike (from left), Mary and Judy Minetree strategize ways to get more people in the community aware of the Fix-It Program.

Deacon Mike met with Judy Minetree, Fix-It's Program Coordinator. Together, they sought volunteers from within the Church of the Epiphany Parish and five individuals joined the program. "Working with Judy has been a blessing," said Deacon Mike. "She vets all of the volunteers, coordinating the fingerprinting and background checks. She also matches the volunteers with the seniors and their requests."

"It is such a gift," said Judy, "meeting people who want to help others and seeing their beautiful hearts." She said she encourages the volunteers to spend a little time with the seniors, to lend an ear and to be on the lookout for signs that the individual may be struggling with other things.

Mary noted that it's not only the volunteers in the program who have beautiful hearts. "Every so often, Judy calls me just to check in. I really appreciate that."

FOR MORE INFORMATION about becoming a volunteer or receiving assistance from Fix-It, contact Judy Minetree at 732-363-5322 x3234. Individuals who are caring for a senior who needs assistance with maintenance projects can call as well.

FOR MY BABY AND ME OFFERS SUPPORT TO A MOM

Who Had Lost Her Way

The irony of how she lost her way is not lost on Nicole. At 37, she was living a normal life. She had a house and a good job. And then, her best friend died of an overdose.

Numb with grief and searching for a way to understand her friend's death, Nicole tried heroin. Before long, she was using regularly — heroin, fentanyl, crack cocaine, whatever she could find. Like so many who struggle with addiction, Nicole lost everything and found herself homeless in Camden.

"I was living on the streets for a couple of years, and then I got pregnant," said Nicole. She says her now two-year-old daughter is an absolute miracle. Nicole said she had had several miscarriages in the past. "But here I was, 41 years old, using drugs and homeless. I carried my daughter full term. And she was born a healthy weight — seven pounds."

When her baby was 21 days old, the NJ Department of Children and Families' Division of Child Protection and Permanency's took over her care. And that's the day Nicole started doing the work it would take to be reunited with her daughter. "I had to go through a lot to get her back," she said, hugging the energetic and happy toddler squirming in her lap.

THE JOURNEY BACK

First came rehab. There were several stints in rehabilitation facilities. Because not every program sets its participants up for success, Nicole said she experienced a few relapses. After a year, Nicole said she was in a program but didn't feel like her case worker was as invested in seeing her reunited with her daughter as she was. That's when Nicole did a Google search and discovered For My Baby and Me (FMBAM).

The program is a collaboration among Capital Health, Catholic Charities, HomeFront, Henry J. Austin Health Center, Rescue Mission of Trenton and Trenton



▲ After more than two years apart, Nicole and her daughter are together again, starting life fresh with the help of the For My Baby and Me Program.

Health Team that helps pregnant and postpartum women recover from their addiction by providing medication-assisted treatment and counseling, in addition to wraparound services.

"I didn't know what to expect. I thought I was going to another rehab facility. I actually tried to postpone going. When Miss Thomasine called to say she was on her way to pick me up, I told her I needed to go out for cigarettes. But she said, I'll get your cigarettes..." Thomasine Gaines is a certified peer recovery specialist with FMBAM who has shepherded many women through the program.

Nicole found herself in an Intensive Outpatient Program. She was living at Homefront's Ewing Campus with all the time and support she needed to detox, become sober and get her life back on track.

SUPPORT FACING LEGAL CHALLENGES

Nicole's case to regain custody of her daughter was based in Camden and she was wary of switching jurisdictions, afraid she'd lose the connection she had with the judge and the court would dismiss any

HEAD OF CCUSA

Finds a Team Joyful in Its Mission



Since taking the helm of Catholic Charities USA a year and a half ago, Kerry Alys Robinson has been traveling around the country visiting the network of agencies making up the CCUSA family. In October, her travels brought her to Catholic Charities, Diocese of Trenton, where she toured several programs, and spoke with members of the team.

From the Children and Family Services team, she heard about the work being done to support survivors of domestic violence through Providence House. She also learned about the stabilization and crisis work being done by Mobile Response and how the Family Growth Program supports children who have been neglected or abused.

At El Centro, Robinson was deeply moved by all the care offered to individuals and families who are new to the country and by the broad scope of services available to them. Touring Integrated Behavioral Health Services' Mercer Campus, she heard about the different mental health and substance use programs offered.

progress she had made. The fact that the judge was unfamiliar with the Mercer County based FMBAM program was a bit of a hurdle. But Nicole said Stacey Negrón, Care Manager and Project Evaluator for FMBAM, and Miss Thomasine made sure she got to Camden County every time she needed to be there. She made every weekly drug screening. Never missed a scheduled visit with her daughter. And, one of them accompanied her to every court date she had. They also wrote letters on her behalf, detailing her progress and explaining the program. Finally, on August 23, 2024, Nicole and her daughter were reunited.

One important aspect of the program is housing. This October, the pair moved into their own apartment, temporary housing made possible through HomeFront. "With other programs, when you are done with rehab you have no place to go." Nicole said when you realize you're going to be homeless again, you get depressed and start using. The cycle ends up repeating itself. "To get



▲ Members of the CCDoT team (from left) Marlene Laó-Collins, Yesenia Perez, Roberto Hernandez and Mary Pettrow welcomed CCUSA's CEO and President Kerry Alys Robinson during a visit to El Centro.

For Robinson, the visit was about deep listening and learning. One of the questions she posed to staff, "How do you care for your hearts when you are witness to so much human trauma?" Service Area Director Mary Pettrow assured her that as a trauma-informed agency, systems are in place to care for employees who process the suffering of others every day.

At the end of her visit, Robinson said she was impressed with the compassionate way the work of Catholic Charities is carried out. "People are coming to you in their darkest days, and they find mercy, help and guidance. My job," she said, "is to proclaim that and to express what a valuable resource Catholic Charities is to the country."

an apartment today, you need a credit score of at least 600 and need to earn three times the rent. For someone whose been homeless for five years, that's unrealistic."

Currently, Nicole is working with the Trenton Rescue Mission and taking classes to become a Certified Peer Recovery Specialist. She likes her job and feels like she has plenty of insight to offer other young women who are looking to be reunified with their children. "I feel like, if they see me and know my story, they'll know it's possible for them too," she said.

"For My Baby and Me is a really good program. I wish I had found it sooner. They help you with everything — childcare, legal issues, a place to live, clothes, transportation. They cover it all."

If you or a loved one are pregnant or a new mother and using drugs, For My Baby and Me can help. Call 609-414-3704 and we will provide transportation from wherever you are.



LEADING WITH PURPOSE

An Interview with J. George Reilly

For over 30 years, J. George Reilly has prioritized philanthropy at Catholic Charities, Diocese of Trenton (CCDoT). As he concluded his tenure as Board Chair in June, George reflected on his time in the role and the significance of supporting CCDoT.

Q George, we are truly grateful for your time and participation in this interview. Your dedication and contributions to Catholic Charities as a valued member of the Board of Trustees (BoT) are greatly appreciated. We would like to begin by asking what initially inspired you to become involved with Catholic Charities over 30 years ago?

A Thank you! It's truly an honor to have played a small part in the mission of Catholic Charities. I first learned about Catholic Charities while working at MetLife, where I could donate through United Way from my paycheck. My uncle, a Catholic priest, inspired me to check out Catholic Charities. Instead of mailing my donation, I felt compelled to deliver it in person—I'm sure it was the Holy Spirit guiding me. That led to my joining the Development Committee of the Board of Trustees, and here we are, 30 years later!

Q What keeps you invested in CCDoT after all these years?

A My wife, Ann and I remain committed to Catholic Charities because we are continually inspired by the staff, leadership and individuals they serve. While the faces may change, the mission remains steadfast: to help those who are less fortunate, particularly the poor, mentally ill and vulnerable.

Q In 2008, you received Light of Hope Award at the Guardian Angel Dinner Dance. Can you reflect on your reaction to receiving this award and your message to attendees?

A Receiving the award was a deeply humbling experience and one of the highlights of my life. I couldn't have achieved any of it without my

incredibly supportive wife, Ann, who has enabled me to build my career and contribute both financially and with our time. When Reilly Financial Group received the Corporate Citizen of the Year award in 2014, it was a significant moment for our entire team. I truly believe that our work is a gift from God, and it's essential to give back. My message to the attendees was a heartfelt reminder of the importance of our collective efforts in supporting those in need. Together, we can make a real difference in the lives of the vulnerable and marginalized in our community.

Q What have you witnessed during your time on the Board?

A I've witnessed remarkable teamwork and resilience from the leadership and staff at Catholic Charities. Marlene Laó-Collins, the Executive Director, has exemplified servant leadership throughout it all. Despite a global pandemic, economic downturns, and increased stress for many, Catholic Charities remained a beacon of hope, keeping its doors open and providing calm during the storm.

Q As you step down from Board Chair, what message would you like to share with donors supporting CCDoT?

A You are doing God's work. Your contributions ensure that nearly \$0.90 of every dollar goes directly to those in need, and you are supporting a team with exceptional leadership and expertise.

Q What advice did you offer Michael Herbert as the new Board Chair?

A Continue to be an outstanding leader, I have no doubt you will excel in this position, Michael.

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We rely on volunteers to help us achieve our mission. If you are interested in serving as a Catholic Charities' Ambassador, making an impact at the county level, please contact Hollis Painting at hpainting@cctrenton.org or 609-394-5181 x1159.

GUARDIAN ANGEL DINNER DANCE

Funding Our Mission

On September 25th, we celebrated the 35th anniversary of the Guardian Angel Dinner Dance (GADD) at the Merion in Cinnaminson. Over 200 guests joined us to commemorate this remarkable achievement. The event served as a tribute to our community partners and individuals who have thrived with the help of our services. Through this signature fundraiser, along with the support of our generous sponsors and donors, we can continue to be a light of hope for those in need.



▲ Facility Dog Surf gladly attended GADD to honor Debbie Riveros, an advocate instrumental in allowing him to work with the Monmouth County Prosecutor's Office.

Together, we raised over \$237,000 to support life-saving programs in Burlington, Mercer, Monmouth and Ocean counties. Our super 50/50 raffle generated plenty of buzz with a spectacular pot of over \$25,000. We would also like to express our gratitude to everyone who contributed to this year's Donate Now, our hope was to raise over \$7,000 to support our residential programs with basic home essentials of new appliances and furniture to bring a sense of normalcy to our resident's daily lives. With the generosity of donors that evening, we collected nearly \$10,000!

Cheers to 35 years of GADD and to another 35 years of making a difference in the lives of others.



▲ (from left) Board of Trustees Chair Michael W. Herbert, Client Achievement Awardee Jean, Corporate Citizen of the Year Seeds of Service Executive Director Christie Winters, Light of Hope Awardee Monsignor Thomas Gervasio of The Parish of Our Lady of Sorrows – St. Anthony, Richard J. Hughes Humanitarian Awardee Laurence M. Downes, Light of Hope Awardee Debbie Riveros and Executive Director Marlene Laó-Collins.



It is with deep sorrow that we announce the passing of our cherished friend, colleague and advocate, Jean, on October 15, 2024. Jean's remarkable journey through recovery and her unwavering commitment to helping others was an inspiration to all who knew her.

We were privileged to honor her with the Client Achievement Award at this year's event, celebrating her extraordinary contributions as a peer advocate on our Program of Assertive Community Treatment team in Burlington.

Jean's passion for behavioral health advocacy was undeniable. She bravely shared her personal story of mental illness with Catholic Charities USA and was featured in their nationwide marketing campaign, touching the lives of countless individuals and families across the country.

May we honor her memory by carrying forward her passion for advocacy and her belief in the power of recovery.



Scan to see Jean's
CCUSA video



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One person, one family at a time – we help people overcome adversity and trauma.