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## MercyFirst Earns Prestigious Sanctuary Certification

*by Elena Perri, Communications Specialist, Mid-Atlantic Community*

MercyFirst, the largest sponsored ministry of the Sisters of Mercy Mid-Atlantic Community, recently implemented the Sanctuary Model, an innovative training program that teaches individuals and organizations the skills for creating and sustaining nonviolence in their lives.

The agency, which provides care for more than 4,000 traumatized and neglected children and teenagers in New York, is the largest organization in the country to receive this recognition from the Sanctuary Institute and the first to earn it for its residential and community-based programs. The Sanctuary Institute is a collaborative effort of Andrus Children's Center in New York and Dr. Sandra L. Bloom, one of the founders who created the Sanctuary Model.



*Sister Seton Agovino (center), vice president of mission integration at MercyFirst, talks with Omri (left) and Keith (right), residents at MercyFirst, about receiving the sacraments of initiation into the Catholic Church. (Photo by Jackie Walsh, RSM)*

MercyFirst celebrated this achievement at its Mission Awards Luncheon on March 18. Margaret Taylor, RSM, director of sponsorship for the

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# MercyFirst Earns Sanctuary Certification

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Sisters of Mercy Mid-Atlantic Community, and John Mattingly, Commissioner of New York City's Administration for Children's



Services, were guest speakers at the luncheon. "Achieving sanctuary status is quite an achievement that required a lot of creativity, dedication and imagination on the part of the staff," Sister Margaret said. "The Sanctuary Model will provide better service for the clients and a safer environment for those serving the clients."

*Receiving the Sanctuary Certification plaque at the Mission Awards Luncheon are (from left to right) Dr. Howie Traub, Sanctuary Model coordinator at MercyFirst, Sarah Yanosky, director of the Sanctuary Institute, Jerry McCaffery, MercyFirst chief executive officer, and Elizabeth McCarthy, MercyFirst chief operating officer.*

Staff members were also recognized during the luncheon for exemplifying the agency's core values of hospitality, compassion, respect, integrity, justice and excellence. The honorees were nominated by their co-workers and selected by the mission integration team, which is led by Mary Seton Agovino, RSM, a member of the Mid-Atlantic Community and vice president of mission integration at MercyFirst.

"The luncheon is an opportunity to celebrate the staff and all the hard work they do," Sister Seton said. "It's very difficult work, and they need to be recognized for their efforts. Anyone who's a giver needs to be given to, and this is a way of nurturing them."

In order to pursue the three-year sanctuary certification process, the agency applied for and received a grant from the state Office of Children and Family Services.

MercyFirst, headquartered in Syosset, New York, began the sanctuary certification process in the fall of 2006. Howie Traub, a psychologist and residential program director at MercyFirst, took on the role of sanctuary coordinator. He oversaw the leadership and core teams that helped guide the organization through the implementation of the Sanctuary Model.

*"MercyFirst is now regarded as a pioneer in implementing the Sanctuary Model in community-based programs," said Howie Traub, psychologist and Sanctuary Model coordinator at MercyFirst, which is headquartered in Syosset, NY.*

# Mercy First Earns Sanctuary Certification

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Howie explained that the model was designed primarily for residential programs, but the agency also integrated it into their community-based programs. “We felt that in order for the agency to be certified, everybody needed to participate in the process,” he said. “It was a community effort that came to life at MercyFirst, and everyone can walk away with a sense of pride and accomplishment.”

“MercyFirst is now regarded as a pioneer in implementing the Sanctuary Model in community-based programs,” Howie said, “and other child welfare organizations have contacted the agency for guidance on how to implement it.”

Howie said the model has helped staff members to view the children they serve in a different way. “The model is designed to help us better understand the impact of trauma on children and families,” he said. “When you look at children and families from the approach of what happened to them, it changes in a positive way the level of empathy and compassion you have for them. Your perspective is that the child is not acting out because he or she is bad, but this is someone who’s been hurt and we need to help them heal.”

Sister Seton added that the Sanctuary Model focuses on rehabilitation of the child rather than the medical model of curing the child. “The goal is to help the children to heal and give them the tools they need to live in the community and have a productive life, even with the wounds they have,” she said.

Another benefit of implementing the model is the creation of a healthier work environment for employees. “The staff is included in decisions that are made, and they feel more empowered and more respected now,” Howie said. “In child welfare, when you’re working with the intensity of what we deal with, you have to take care of your staff. If you can take care of your staff better emotionally, that will have a positive effect on the direct work with children and families.”



*During the Sanctuary certification process, the staff at MercyFirst created a Sanctuary quilt, which represents their commitment to non-violence, emotional intelligence, social learning, shared governance, open communication, social responsibility, and growth and change.*

*“The goal is to help the children to heal and give them the tools they need to live in the community and have a productive life, even with the wounds they have,” said Sister Seton Agovino, a member of the Mid-Atlantic Community and vice president for mission integration at MercyFirst.*

# Mercy Associate Offers Spiritual Support at Mercy Center

*by Elena Perri, Communications Specialist, Mid-Atlantic Community*

Facilitating a women's spiritual support group was uncharted territory for Mercy associate Ann Harris-Jacobs, but she wanted to help the women at Mercy Center in the Bronx, New York.

When Mary Galeone, RSM, co-executive director of Mercy Center, approached Ann about leading the group, Ann was a little skeptical because she hadn't done anything like that before. "I didn't know whether I could do it, but it turned out that it was something I very much enjoyed doing," she said.

With her background in psychology and counseling, the facilitator role turned out to be an ideal fit. "I like listening to people," said Ann, who has been a Mercy associate in the Mid-Atlantic Community since 2002. "I like hearing the women's stories and affirming their own good feelings about themselves and assuring them we all have weaknesses that we don't like talking about."

The spiritual support group meets primarily during Advent and Lent, and Ann will often pick a book that the women can read and discuss during their weekly gatherings. They have used books written by Sister Joyce Rupp, OSM, and Virginia Ann Froehle, RSM.

Sister Mary, who met Ann through her parish, St. Francis Xavier in New York City, said the spiritual and corporal works of mercy are second nature to Ann, who reaches out to people with a welcoming hospitality and respect. "Ann is an extraordinarily sensitive and generous woman, and she is able to be with our women and meet



*Mercy associate Ann Harris-Jacobs has facilitated a spiritual support group for the past 10 years at Mercy Center in the Bronx, New York.*

*"I like hearing the women's stories and affirming their own good feelings about themselves and assuring them we all have weaknesses that we don't like talking about," said Ann Harris-Jacobs, Mercy associate and volunteer at Mercy Center in the Bronx.*

# Associate Offers Spiritual Support

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them right where they are,” Sister Mary added. “She helps them become more spiritually aware, grow in self-acceptance and self-esteem, and see that God is active in their lives in a tangible way.”

The spiritual support group is comprised of women of African and Caribbean descent as well as several Latin women who are bilingual. “We have a wonderful cross-pollination, and we’ve found out the similarities among us are much stronger than those things which make us different,” Ann said.

While Ann has served as the facilitator for 10 years, she said any of the women can run the group. “I act as facilitator because that’s what I’ve been asked to do,” she said. “When I go there, I recognize that if I’m five minutes late, and they’ve started to talk, that’s fine with me.”

As a Mercy associate, Ann enjoys her connection with the women at Mercy Center and knowing that she is a part of the work that Catherine McAuley started years ago.

“Mercy Center is such a sacred space in an area of our city and country that is so devastated by all kinds of poverty, not just financial poverty, that it really stands as a beacon to anybody who comes into that area,” Ann said. “To be connected to that is like working in sacred territory and it brings me closer to Catherine’s work.”

In addition to her volunteer work at Mercy Center, Ann also is member of the parish choir. “I enjoy my music ministry as much as I enjoy everything else because I pray best when I sing,” she said. “It’s been part of me for such a long time, I can’t imagine not being able to sing prayer.”

Ten years after starting her volunteer work at Mercy Center, Ann said it has been a pleasure for her to serve the women there. “It’s the most gratifying part of my life,” she added. “I feel very blessed to have the opportunity to be of service to the women of Mercy Center.”

*“Mercy Center is such a sacred space in an area of our city and country that is so devastated by all kinds of poverty, not just financial poverty, that it really stands as a beacon to anybody who comes into that area,” said Ann Harris-Jacobs, Mercy Associate.*



# Mercy Volunteer Helps the Homeless at Project H.O.M.E.

*by Elena Perri, Communications Specialist, Mid-Atlantic Community*

Not only is Mike Barga, a current Mercy Corps volunteer, right at home in his work as a case aide/outreach worker at Project H.O.M.E. (Housing, Opportunities for Employment, Medical Care, Education) in Philadelphia, he also helps people find a home and a hot meal.

The agency helps people break the cycle of homelessness, address

the structural causes of poverty, and attain their fullest potential as members of society.



*Mercy Corps volunteer Mike Barga helps Craig Barbour, a formerly homeless client at Project H.O.M.E. in Philadelphia, complete paperwork. Mike has served as a case aide/outreach worker at Project H.O.M.E. for the past eight months. (Photo by Elena Perri)*

Mike, who graduated in 2009 from Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg, Maryland, helps homeless clients find shelter, refers them to drug and alcohol and mental health treatment centers or assists them with basic

needs such as directing them to where they can get a free meal.

A Maryland resident, Mike chose Mercy Volunteer Corps because he wanted to work with the homeless, and Project H.O.M.E. was the best match for his volunteer interests.

During his time with the agency, Mike has gained valuable experience while serving homeless clients. "When I first came here, I didn't know anything about homelessness and how the system worked," he said. "I've learned how to be fair and kind at the same time. Sometimes people are going to ask for something you can't give them, but I always try to offer as many resources as possible

*"Sometimes people are going to ask for something you can't give them, but I always try to offer as many resources as possible and do it in a kind way," says Mike Barga, Mercy Corps volunteer.*

# Mercy Volunteer Helps the Homeless

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and do it in a kind way.”

Robert Washington, a case aide and outreach worker at Project H.O.M.E., trained Mike when he began volunteering there last August. “He caught on right away,” Robert said. “Mike is such a good worker, and he can do what I do and then some. He is very fair and honest with the clients.”



*Mike Barga (right), Mercy Corps volunteer at Project H.O.M.E., and Robert Washington, case aide/outreach worker, review paperwork for vehicles that are used for outreach to homeless people living on the streets. Mike helped with street outreach as part of his volunteer service at Project H.O.M.E. (Photo by Elena Perri)*

Robert said Mike assists him with walk-in clients and with outreach on the streets on Wednesday nights. “Mike does it all,” Robert said. “I hate to see him go because he’s been a big help to me.”

Mike said he wasn’t familiar with the Sisters of Mercy before joining Mercy Volunteer Corps, but he is impressed with the work the sisters do to help people who are marginalized and oppressed. “I think it’s great that they are one of those (religious) orders committed to social justice,” Mike said. “It really shows what the Catholic Church is all about.”

After he completes his volunteer commitment in July, Mike is looking forward to continuing his work with homeless people either at Project H.O.M.E. or another organization that serves people who are homeless in Philadelphia.

Mike added that his volunteer service has been rewarding, especially when he works with a client who is motivated to get help and move into permanent housing.

“When you’re doing your job, then it seems like you’ve done a lot for the client, but the client really has done the work,” he said. “When you make the opportunities, and the client follows through, that’s always a good feeling.”

*“When you make the opportunities, and the client follows through, that’s always a good feeling,” said Mike Barga, Mercy Corps volunteer at Project H.O.M.E.*



# Mercy Associate Provides Support to Senior Sisters

by Elena Perri, Communications Specialist, Mid-Atlantic Community



*Mercy associate Theresa Doughty has served as the sisters' care coordinator in Dallas, PA, since 2005.*

Mercy is a common thread that runs through Theresa Doughty's personal and professional life.

As the sisters' care coordinator in Dallas, PA, she provides support to sisters, usually at times when they are experiencing health problems or when they need help getting to medical appointments.

"I enjoy my interactions with the sisters and having the privilege of companionship at a time that they may be

facing a health challenge or a transition," Theresa said. "That truly is what I enjoy the most. In that companionship, they share their own story and the story of the community, too."

A Mercy Associate for 12 years, Theresa first encountered the Sisters of Mercy while attending Misericordia University, where she earned a bachelor's degree in social work in 1979. "I think the Mercy charism is something that fits if you're in single life, married life or religious life," she said. "It's just a way of being in the world, and I was very touched by that."

Sister Marie Noel Keller, local coordinator of the Dallas associates, said Theresa brings a compassionate presence to her work with the sisters. "Theresa is filled with the spirit of mercy and Catherine McAuley," Sister Noel said. "She doesn't have an ego, and she's very hospitable, steadfast and loyal."

*"I enjoy my interactions with the sisters and having the privilege of companionship at a time that they may be facing a health challenge or a transition," said Mercy associate Theresa Doughty and sisters' care coordinator in Dallas, PA.*

# Mercy Associate Provides Support to Senior Sisters in Dallas

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Sister Noel added that Theresa exemplifies the phrase, “Mercy is God’s tenderness living in us” from *“Tender Courage,”* a book written by M. Joanna Regan, RSM, and Isabelle Keiss, RSM.

In addition to her work with the sisters, Sister Noel relies on Theresa to help her with associate retreats and activities in the Dallas area. “We’ve done retreats together in different locations,” Sister Noel said. “We’re a traveling retreat band.”

Two years ago, Theresa had the opportunity to travel with Sister Noel and other sisters and associates to Baggott Street in Ireland. “We retraced the steps of Catherine and visited the different places she lived,” Theresa said. “It was a graced time to walk in the same places she had been.”

She was especially impressed with Catherine’s unwavering commitment to serving people who are poor. “No matter what roadblocks were placed in her way, she found a way to continue to adhere to her desire to serve the poor and uneducated in Ireland at that time,” Theresa said.

As an associate, Theresa said she enjoys interacting with like-minded men and women who are “committed to the works of mercy and committed to that way of being in the world.”

A master seamstress, Theresa enjoys creating children’s clothes, heirloom christening gowns and other handmade items in her free time. She is in the process of using her sewing skills to create a replica of a Mercy chasuble, a vestment worn by priests at Mercy liturgies.

Theresa, who completed her master’s degree in pastoral care and counseling at Neumann University in 2003, also served as social service director at Mercy Center from 1999 to 2005.

She considers her work as care coordinator to be a privilege to help the sisters at a vulnerable time in their lives. “They’re great women, wonderful role models, just joyful women who continue to live mercifully,” Theresa said.

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