

## Empowered by Her Own Domestic Violence Recovery **AN ADVOCATE AIMS TO INSPIRE OTHERS**

Beauty pageant contestants competing for the upcoming New Jersey International crown have chosen all sorts of worthy advocacy platforms, from childhood hunger to autism awareness to human trafficking.

Christen didn't need even 10 seconds to decide the cause she would champion - ending domestic violence.

"My daughter and I are alive today because of Providence House," Christen said. "To try to advocate on anything else would be totally inauthentic for me."

It's been 14 years since Christen reached out to Catholic Charities' Providence House Domestic Violence Services in Ocean County for help, after leaving an abusive fiancé. But she found the support she got at Providence House so transformative that she began giving back to the program in recent years and even put it in her will.

"When I say Providence House saved my life, that's a fact. I literally went in a completely different direction," she said. "The education I received there, I still use today."

### **A HIDDEN EPIDEMIC**

Christen was in her 20s when she fell in love in California and decided to get married and start a family. Within months, her fiancé began abusing her, verbally, mentally, physically and financially. Pregnant, Christen fled home to New Jersey and went to Providence House for help.

"I can still remember two exercises my counselor had me do, where I had to document the abuse on a timeline and circle, on a silhouette of a body, every part of my body that had been hurt," Christen said. "Those two exercises resonated so much with me, because it was right there on paper for me to absorb. What I learned at Providence House gave me the courage to leave, for good."

Christen especially found the support groups enlightening.



▲ A domestic abuse survivor, Christen now is active in advocacy and fundraising to support Providence House and end domestic violence.

"I remember feeling so terrible, but realizing that so many other women experience this, and many of them have it so much worse," she said. "The silence about abuse is astounding. The group sessions at Providence House opened my eyes to the level of abuse out there that people don't know about because nobody talks about their personal business. You never know what people are going through. I think about that every day."

She also learned at Providence House how to distinguish between healthy and abusive relationships, as well as how people who grew up with violence, as her former fiancé did, are more likely to become a perpetrator or victim of domestic violence.



## A Message from the **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

Here we are at 2021 Lent, 40 days set aside for intense prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Some would say 2020 was a year long Lenten season sliding into 2021. COVID-19 changed us in so many ways as a society and as an organization. We dug deep to find the courage and strength to carry on, to continue to be present for those who rely on us in the community, and to provide a safe environment for our essential employees in order to fulfill our mission.

We learned that especially through horrible events such as a pandemic, which posed major risks to ourselves, we come together for the greater good. We always find a way. We were heartened by the immediate response and generosity of our donors and volunteers. You are an integral part of all that we do and are able to achieve. I see the light and hope emerging as the vaccine slowly gets out.

Our focus continues to be assisting the many neighbors in our communities who, as a result of the pandemic, have lost jobs or their businesses and are struggling financially, facing evictions (there are over 80,000 eviction complaints filed in New Jersey) or utility shutoffs, or struggling with substance use, mental illness or domestic violence. Please continue your prayers, fasting and almsgiving! Together, we will rise above the ashes of the pandemic. Spring is near!

*With warm regards,*

**Marlene Laó-Collins,  
Executive Director**



*The Spirit* is published quarterly by Catholic Charities, Diocese of Trenton's Development and Marketing department.

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## EMPOWERED BY HER OWN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE RECOVERY

“Such knowledge is key to breaking the cycle of violence,” Providence House-Ocean Program Director Danielle Meyer said. “It is common for those experiencing domestic violence to feel isolated. Attending groups and/or individual counseling helps them understand they are not alone and there are options available to them.”

The services provided by Providence House are free and confidential. Besides counseling, Providence House also has 24/7 hotlines and safe houses in Burlington and Ocean counties, as well as legal advocacy staff and specialized creative arts therapy to help children heal from the trauma of witnessing violence. Because Ocean County has so many retirement communities,

Providence House also has staff specially trained to help domestic violence survivors age 60 and older.

### **PANDEMIC INCREASED NEED**

Since the pandemic started, the number of individuals and families seeking shelter at Providence House has tripled, as social isolation and stress created powder-keg conditions at home and domestic violence spiked. With the safe houses full, Providence House has placed some of the people it serves in area motels, creating unexpected new costs and challenges. So Christen now is raising money to help cover those costs, as well as collecting donations of motel-friendly foods like microwaveable meals and snacks.

# THE FUTURE IS “FANTASTIC”

## Thanks to Treatment – And a Lot of Love



Sometimes, it seems like life dumps all its sorrows on you at once. For Roland Wright, tragedy first hit when his mother died in 2003. Not long after, the county placed his baby daughter in foster care. And soon after that, his house caught fire. He barely survived by jumping out a window, but the blaze killed his best friend, who had been living there too.

“It was just so much, right in a row,” Roland said. “I thought, ‘What else wrong can happen?’ and I started drinking.”

Alcohol and drugs numbed his grief for awhile. But addiction soon added to his sorrows. Before, he’d had a good job as a building maintenance supervisor in government offices in Trenton. He lost the job - and his home, friends and family - as he fell deeper into addiction.

“I was living on the streets. I didn’t have anything. I did wrong to so many people that no one wanted me around,” he said.

Twelve years ago, after trying unsuccessfully to recover at other programs, he reached out to Catholic Charities’ Delaware House in Westampton, where several mental health and addiction treatment programs are based. There, he learned his addiction was rooted in

undiagnosed mental illness, and he began recovering in Partial Care, a program that provides a wide range of psychiatric rehabilitation groups and activities for adults with mental illness who need more intensive care to reach their full potential.

“I was sick with mental issues, but I didn’t know that,” he said. “All I thought was that I was an alcoholic. But I learned it’s really a mental issue that’s drawing me to the alcohol.”

Roland drew strength from the support groups and said most of his friends today are people he met at Catholic Charities. He has been especially inspired by a case manager who long ago struggled with addiction before becoming the mental health professional she is today.

“She’s like a mentor to me,” he said. “I think ‘if she can do it, why can’t I?’ And the things she says inspire me, like if you run into a situation you can handle right then, handle it right then. Don’t wait until tomorrow, because it can get worse.”

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## AN ADVOCATE AIMS TO INSPIRE OTHERS (CONTINUED)

“We have continued providing vital services to our clients throughout the pandemic. While we have had to be creative in order to follow health and safety protocols, we never lost sight of the importance of being available to our clients. We rely on support from our community members, who have generously donated money, gift cards, food, cleaning supplies, personal hygiene products and more. We especially are grateful that during a time of such financial instability for many, our donors and volunteers remain dedicated to our program and clients,” Meyer said.

Christen is now thriving, working in Monmouth and Ocean counties as “New Jersey’s Real Estate Matchmaker.” She hopes her story will help others - especially her daughter, now 14.

“That’s what’s important to me - being a role model for my daughter. I want her to see me stand up for myself, to see this positivity,” she said. “When you’re in a domestic violence situation, all you see is darkness, obstacles, objections. If I can inspire other women to have positive thoughts or energy to know that they can overcome it, I feel like that is empowering. If I didn’t hit rock bottom the way I did, I wouldn’t be who I am today. We have to take every experience and try to do something positive with it.”

**FOR INFORMATION** about Providence House Domestic Violence Services, call (732) 244-8259 in Ocean County or (609) 871-7551 in Burlington County.



# THE FUTURE IS “FANTASTIC”

(CONTINUED)



## LOVE IS THE ANSWER

But it’s an intangible thing that kept him coming back to Catholic Charities.

“Really, I get love here,” Roland said. “When I was at rock bottom, if love walked up and smacked me in the face, I wouldn’t have known it. It took Delaware House to guide me in the right direction. The staff loves me. And I love them. If it wasn’t for them, I wouldn’t be sitting here now, I know that for a fact.”

He learned how to communicate at Catholic Charities, including advocating for his own needs.

“I used to think: ‘This is what people do when they have problems, they go get a drink.’ Now I know when I have problems, you go get help. You talk to someone who can help you,” Roland said. Such thoughts are music to Teresa Stroud’s ears. As a Partial Care case manager who counsels Roland, Stroud said his recovery and positivity are what the staff hopes for, when people come for help.

“Roland embodies the joy of recovery,” Stroud said.

At 73, Roland keeps a well-worn, county-issued identification card in his wallet with a photo taken when he was in the throes of addiction. At the time, he weighed barely 100 pounds. “I keep this to remind me what could happen if I went backwards,” he said.

Since he found sobriety, his children have become one of his life’s joys. “They had given up on me. But we’re good now,” Roland said of his two children, now 24 and 21. “They just went to Walmart on Saturday. That’s why I’m broke now. But I don’t mind. I’ll give them all my money.” He added: “I didn’t know life had all these good things in it. But I’m enjoying life now. It’s fantastic.”

**FOR INFORMATION** contact Partial Care Operations Supervisor Kelli Madison at (609) 267-9339 ext. 5133.

# FINDING FOSTER CARE

## For a Very Full House

Rebecca has always wanted to adopt. Inspired by the selflessness of Mother Teresa, Rebecca took her famous words to heart: “There are no great things, only small things done with great love.”

“I try to live a life that helps others,” explained Rebecca, managing attorney of a statewide nonprofit that advocates for people with disabilities. “I can’t affect as many lives as she did, but even if I made a difference in the life of one child, that would be good.”

In 2013, she made the leap. With three sons already, she applied to be a foster parent to a baby girl. But the baby had a brother. So Rebecca and her husband Robert, of Toms River, took in both children, not wanting them to be separated. In the eight years since, the couple has taken in four more siblings from the same family. Altogether, they now have 10 children, ages 8 to 30, eight who live with them.

It all makes for one very crowded, chaotic house.

That’s why in 2019, Rebecca reached out to Catholic Charities for assistance. Catholic Charities offers an In-Home Foster Care Support program designed to stabilize the placement of at-risk children in the foster care system in Mercer, Monmouth and Ocean counties and minimize moves that can threaten their emotional wellbeing and cause further trauma. Catholic Charities also has a Family Growth Program in Monmouth County that offers specialized counseling for children recovering from trauma, abuse and neglect.

Through both programs, Rebecca and Robert were able to get the children the help they needed.

“The four children that came to us most recently came with histories and impairments that were beyond our control and that I needed training to address. They had experienced the sudden, traumatic loss of their biological father. They had been living in poor conditions. And in moving here, they had to switch to a new school district and make new friends,” Rebecca said of the four additional siblings, who were 11 to 17 when they joined her family in 2019 and 2020. “Catholic Charities helped

# SUPPORT

them cope with the trauma of their father's death and address all of these other overwhelming changes."

Her biological sons, meanwhile, had to adjust too.

## STRENGTHENING CHILDREN FOR LIFE

"That has been a bit of a challenge because one of my sons lost his bedroom - he's 17 and understandably, didn't want to share a room with an 11-year-old and an 8-year-old. So now he has a futon in the basement, and we're building an addition on our house," Rebecca said.

Because childhood trauma can have lifelong impact, helping children overcome challenges is critical to their long-term health and stability, said Cindy Lallier, a clinician and coordinator for the In-Home Foster Care Program.

The quarantine and community shutdowns necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic posed new problems. Imagine working and schooling from home when there are 10 people living under one roof. "The kids are not supposed to do school on their beds, so it's been a real challenge to find quiet spaces for everyone away from each other," Rebecca said. "I have to work at the same table as the smaller children to make sure they stay on task."

Adding six foster children to a family of six creates a new normal that often feels like, as Rebecca puts it, "a rollercoaster that you can't get off." That's why Rebecca especially appreciates Lallier's guidance not only with parenting challenges, but also self-care and the importance of alone time as a couple.

## SELF-CARE KEY

"We can't give what we don't have. It's so important that we take the time to care for ourselves, so we can continue to care for and support others," Lallier said.



▲ Rebecca and Robert have expanded their family since 2013 by taking in six foster children, all siblings from the same family.

Since 2013, the blended family is becoming more permanent: Rebecca and Robert adopted the two youngest siblings and now have kinship legal guardianship of two teenage siblings. Another has since turned 18 but still lives with them.

Despite the heightened hubbub her expanded family has created, Rebecca wouldn't have it any other way.

"That's why we're putting the addition on our home - because that's how permanent I see this. I see these kids being with us for years. I hope we are helping them to grow into stable adults who can have a happy family and a happy life," Rebecca said. "Over 20 years ago, when I found out I was expecting my second child, I asked a friend if it was possible to love the second child as much as the first. They said, 'Love is boundless.' Here I am, 10 kids later, and I can truly say, 'yes, love is boundless.'"

**FOR INFORMATION** on the In-Home Foster Care Program, call Supervisor Cindy Lallier at (609) 394-5157.

# SINGLE MOTHER DEFIES PANDEMIC PROBLEMS

## To Create a Safe Home for Her Family

Kristina Holt was already having a tough time before the COVID-19 outbreak. A single mother of four children, Kristina moved into a new apartment early last year with plans to split household costs with a roommate. But the roommate quit paying her share, and Kristina soon fell behind on the rent, utilities and other bills.

“We got evicted and had to move into a hotel, the week the pandemic started,” Kristina said. “Four weeks, we spent there. It was a hard time. I felt hopeless, and that’s not a very good feeling. You have your kids looking up to you, and they depend on everything that you do, and you as a mother, especially a single mother, have to be the one to figure it all out.”

She heard about Catholic Charities’ Rapid Re-Housing program through Burlington County’s Housing Hub, which provides housing advocacy and supportive services for people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Rapid Re-Housing is a nationally recognized “Housing First” model of rental assistance intended to move people out of homelessness permanently. Besides rental help, program staff teach clients how to budget, offer food assistance and work to connect them with other needed resources to ensure long-term stability. Catholic Charities provides Rapid Re-Housing in Burlington, Mercer and Ocean counties.

In March 2020 with Rapid Re-Housing’s help, Kristina and her kids moved into a nice apartment in Bordentown.

“I’m very thankful to have Catholic Charities by my side and know that I do have that support from them,” Kristina said. “Without Catholic Charities, in all honesty, I wouldn’t be here.”

### EVICTION CRISIS LOOMING

Life since then hasn’t been all smooth sailing. The pandemic created new challenges. Kristina had a good job in a podiatrist’s office, relying on public transit to get there because she has no car. But when schools closed and shifted to virtual learning, she suddenly had four children ages 6 to 17 schooling at home. Transportation posed new problems, because the health concerns and new restrictions that came with riding public transit during a pandemic meant she’d have to use costlier ride-sharing services like Uber or Lyft to get to work. As a single parent on a limited income, she had to make a tough choice.

“My boss basically told me it’s the job or your kids,” she said.

That’s a plight millions of people share. Census figures show there are nearly 14 million single parents - mostly mothers - raising 22 million children in the U.S. A recent national survey done by University of Oregon



## Considering Leaving a Legacy Gift?

Consider extending your generosity beyond your lifetime by naming Catholic Charities, Diocese of Trenton in your will. A bequest in any amount provides you the opportunity to match your philanthropic goals with Catholic Charities' needs.

To discuss leaving a legacy gift, contact Nancy Tompkins, Director of Development and Marketing, at (609) 394-5181, ext. 1161, or [ntompkins@cctrenton.org](mailto:ntompkins@cctrenton.org).



researchers found that single parent households are more likely than other households to be experiencing financial difficulties and to have become unemployed during the pandemic.

Many workers have lost their jobs or had pay cuts during the pandemic, making it tough to pay the bills. With government-mandated eviction protections expected to end soon, economists estimate up to 40 million people in America could be at risk for eviction. Indeed, phone calls to Rapid Re-Housing for assistance have more than doubled since the pandemic started, said Kristine Bodnar, a Rapid Re-Housing case manager.

### FINDING HOPE THROUGH FAITH

Kristina is now juggling job-hunting with parenting and home-schooling.

“Through everything, Kristina has remained hopeful,” Bodnar said. “She does always look forward to the future that things will get better.”

Kristina credits her faith with giving her strength when things get hard. “I do a lot of praying,” she said. “I talk to God a lot. That’s my go-to.”

She looks forward to getting a new job, hopefully in a hospital or the medical profession because she loves helping people. Like so many others, she is eager for the pandemic to end.

“I can’t wait for my kids to go back to school and everything to go back to normal, for their sake,” she said. “When you go through stuff, it’s not only you going through it. It’s your kids going through it as well. This pandemic has caused a lot of stress and depression for them and for me.”

But hardship - and how you handle it - can hold valuable lessons.

“Everything that I go through, my kids are well aware of,” she said. “There’s no beating around the bush with me, and this is life. This teaches them that nothing comes easy, and you have to work for what you want in life. I hope this helps them see me as a strong mother,



▲ After an eviction and four weeks of living in a hotel, Kristina Holt and her four children moved into a Bordentown apartment through Catholic Charities’ Rapid Re-Housing program. Kristina is pictured above with her youngest daughter.

see me trying to do everything I can to provide for them. I just want my kids to be happy and succeed better than I did.”

**FOR INFORMATION** on Rapid Re-Housing, contact Supervisor Mosudi Idowu or Housing Specialist Kristine Bodnar at (856) 764-6940 in Burlington County; (609) 394-8847 in Mercer County; or (732) 363-5322 in Ocean County.



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**VIRTUAL FUNDRAISER**  
**September 9, 2021**

It is with great pleasure that we announce plans for our signature fundraising event, the Guardian Angel Benefit of Hope. While we were hopeful to return to a live celebration, we felt it was important for us to keep everyone safe – thus, we will be enjoying from the comforts of our own homes once again!

On Thursday, September 9, 2021 we will honor our community partners who inspire and offer hope to those we serve. We will recognize their efforts to support our mission of eliminating poverty, trauma, and adversity in our community.

To learn more about the event, visit [CatholicCharitiesTrenton.org/GABOH2021](https://CatholicCharitiesTrenton.org/GABOH2021) or contact Jennifer Leip at [jleip@cctrenton.org](mailto:jleip@cctrenton.org).

**The 2021 Guardian Angel Benefit of Hope promises to be a great success, and we look forward to your continued support.**