

SURVIVING THE EFFECTS OF A HARROWING CHILDHOOD

With Help from the Guidance Clinic

For Luce, learning to manage her mental health has been a journey. She has had to delve deep into traumas of her childhood, twist through an unstable family dynamic and grapple with the consequences of decisions she never had a part in making.

Three things have helped this bright, soft-spoken young woman along the way: patience, persistence, and prayer. Catholic Charities has played a part too. For the past four years, Luce has been receiving help and therapy from the Guidance Clinic, which provides long- and short-term counseling options for those facing behavioral health issues and life challenges. “Catholic Charities is a safe place where you can talk and process your feelings. I never stop thanking God for you,” she said.

EXPERIENCING TRAUMA AT AN EARLY AGE

Luce was born in Haiti and some of her earliest recollections include domestic abuse. She said she was frequently frightened of her father who was sometimes loving and caring, but sometimes violent and aggressive. “My father was verbally and physically abusive to my mother and verbally abusive to me,” she said. When Luce was five, she was kidnapped. She recalls being in the backseat of a car and the people in the car with her were armed. “I was so young,” she said. “And so scared of the guns. I remember them telling me to be quiet.” Her captors asked for money and Luce was returned when her family paid her ransom. Shortly after that incident, Luce and her mother left Haiti and went to live in New York then Florida.

Living apart from her father and adapting to a new culture made life difficult for Luce. “I remember going to school feeling sad,” she said. “My mom had to work and take the bus. That made me sad. I also felt lonely. I felt like the only one in my situation.” Even though Luce struggled with these bouts of depression, she worked hard and excelled in school. She had one of the highest GPAs



▲ Clinician Debra McLaughlin (left) has been working with Luce at the Guidance Clinic. She has provided tools to help her manage her anxiety and feelings.

in her class and was active in community service projects and school clubs, including the SHAPE (Students Helping Achieve Philanthropic Excellence) and the National Honor Society. She also enrolled in a program to become a Certified Nursing Assistant at the age of 16.

Unexpectedly, just before Luce’s senior year, her mother announced they were moving and offered no explanation. Adapting to her new school was difficult. But she persevered and graduated. Initially, her plans were to attend a community college, but her guidance counselor encouraged her to “think bigger.” Luce applied to the University of Miami and to the University of Florida and was accepted at both schools. Luce couldn’t afford to attend, even with the scholarships she was offered. “I was coming from a bad place, so just knowing that I got in was a mood booster for me.”



A Message from the EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

As the fall season approaches, we welcome a time of year when the spirit of generosity seems to swell within the hearts of our donors and volunteers — and we couldn't be more grateful!

This year has been challenging for so many — the impact of inflation and the lack of affordable housing continues to make life harder for people who are already struggling. Worrying about feeding your family or keeping a roof over your head can make conditions like anxiety, depression and substance use even worse. When I gather with our Directors, and they share client stories — I am so moved by how our services help people survive and, in some cases, thrive.

Thankfully, we have been able to expand our behavioral health programs. We have hired additional professionals to help the growing number of individuals who come to us for counseling and treatment.

None of the work we do could happen without the support of our donors. It brings to mind the message of Luke 3:10-11 — when a crowd asked John the Baptist, “What should we do?” He said anyone with two shirts should share with someone who has none and anyone with food should do the same.

We are called upon to care for our brothers and sisters. This is who we are and how we keep going. I count my blessings every day that we have supporters who accept the responsibility of sharing their gifts to care for others. Thank you for taking this journey with us and helping us save lives.

With blessings and gratitude,

Marlene Laó-Collins
Executive Director



Publisher: Marlene Laó-Collins
Editor-in-Chief: Jennifer Leip
Writers: Victoria Cranga, Hollis Painting
Designer: Miroslav Farina

383 West State Street
Trenton, NJ 08618
(609) 394-5181

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Our Mission:

Catholic Charities, Diocese of Trenton, inspired by our Catholic faith and shared values, restores dignity and independence to individuals and families, especially the poor and vulnerable, through service, advocacy and community building.



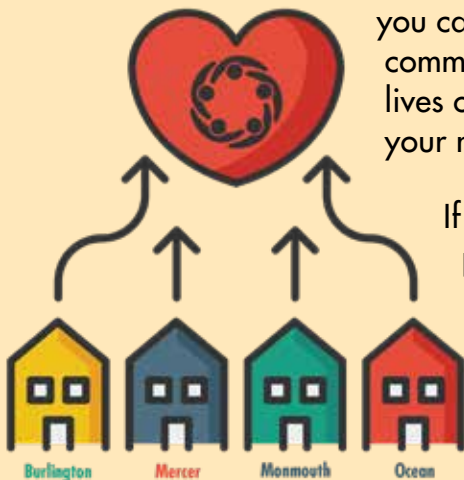
Correction: The Ellis Family Charitable Foundation's donation was inadvertently omitted from the Ambassador Circle of the 2021 Annual Report Donor Listing. We appreciate the generosity of all our donors and apologize for the omission.

Are you interested in helping your neighbors in need?

At Catholic Charities, we rely on the time, energy and passion of volunteers to keep our mission moving forward. One way to serve is by joining a County Board where you can have a direct impact on your community, making a difference in the lives of children, adults and families in your neighborhood.

If you would like to learn more, please contact Hollis Painting at hpainting@cctrenton.org or (609) 394-5181 ext. 1159.

Together, we can save lives!



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LAKWOOD FOOD PANTRY

Helps Families Make Ends Meet

A Lakewood resident for her entire life, Merrielle has always known the Catholic Charities' building on the corner of Monmouth and Second Avenue as a place to go for help. She remembers that years ago, her niece got a car through Community Services and family members received furniture.

Today, Merrielle finds herself in a situation where she needs to visit the food pantry once a week. The groceries and toiletries she receives help her make ends meet, and she is grateful for the assistance. She recalled how a partially paid electric bill set off a chain of events that left her homeless for over five years. "My utilities were cut off," she explained. "I had paid \$325 to the electric company, but my bill was over \$500. So, they cut me off." Unable to turn on lights in her apartment, Merrielle lit candles in the evening to see. One night, one of those candles ignited a fire. When it was extinguished, Merrielle no longer had a place to live.

After the fire, she said she stayed with family members for a while and then friends. Eventually she moved into a small homeless encampment for two years and then into Lakewood's Tent City for three years. Today, she lives in a small, one-bedroom home where she is happy. "The two things I always prayed for," she said, "were a stove and closet. And now I have those things."

Merrielle says one of the best parts about visiting Catholic Charities is getting to see Cesar Leiton, the Case Manager who oversees the pantry. "I love seeing Cesar," she said. "He is so nice. And there is nothing they wouldn't give you if you ask for it." In addition to making sure she doesn't go hungry, the food pantry helps Merrielle celebrate the holidays. "For Thanksgiving, they give you the whole Thanksgiving dinner for your family," she said. "At the holidays, I can get Christmas presents for my grandchildren. And Easter baskets for them too."

"Sometimes, when I get a whole chicken and have food leftover, I'll take it up to the square and feed the



▲ Merrielle says she feels welcomed and blessed every time she visits the Ocean County Community Services' food pantry in Lakewood because Case Manager Cesar Leiton is so friendly and helpful.

homeless who are there. Or maybe I'll make a tuna casserole with the macaroni I received from the pantry and take it to them." Paying it forward is important to Merrielle. "I don't forget what it was like to be homeless."

PANTRY ADJUSTS TO SEASONAL NEEDS

The need for food is great year-round, but Cesar explained that during the summer when the children are not in school, they don't receive school lunches. "We try and help make sure they get enough to eat," he said. "We even have extra snacks on hand at this time of year."

Most of the food at the pantry comes from a local food bank serving Monmouth and Ocean counties. Some comes from people in the community who bring in contributions. "We always welcome donations. Some of the things the people who come to us really appreciate are coffee, laundry detergent and toiletries," said Cesar.

FOR INFORMATION about receiving food from Ocean County's Community Services program or donating, call (732) 363-5322.

SURVIVING THE EFFECTS OF A HARROWING CHILDHOOD

With Help from the Guidance Clinic (continued)

THE BENEFITS OF A TEAM APPROACH

During a trip to Haiti to visit her father when she was 18, Luce was subjected to a frightening therapy for her mental condition that included prayers, fire and being held down by strangers. "Treatments in Haiti are very different," explained Luce, "more spiritual." While there, a doctor prescribed her medications with horrendous side-effects. One made her entire body shake. The tremors were debilitating. Not long after she returned from Haiti, Luce and her mother moved to New Jersey without her consent.

Debra McLaughlin, Clinician, has been treating Luce at the Guidance Clinic and marvels at how well she is doing. "Luce reached out for services and is fully engaged in her treatment," said McLaughlin. "She is responsible for the progress she has made. She's taking medicine and seeing a counselor. She's working on a plan and practicing her skills."

McLaughlin also noted that Luce has an entire team working to ensure her care is as thorough and as effective as it can be. "There are advanced practice nurses, physicians, psychiatrists and clinicians who are working together who can communicate very easily," she said. "If a concern comes up about the side effects of a medication, it can be handled right away."

Luce said the care she has received at Catholic Charities has been transformational. Early on, she met

with David Bokor, Advanced Practice Nurse, and then she worked with Ricardo Lemos, Clinician. "There is something special about Debra and Ricardo," she said. "I wish I had them around me all of the time. They understand. They are genuine. They care for you like they would care for their own daughter or son. You can tell it's not just a career for them. It is a passion."

A BRIGHT FUTURE AHEAD

This past spring, Luce graduated from Mercer County Community College and on September 1, she started classes at The College of New Jersey, pursuing a degree in Business Management. "It is really a blessing to live in the U.S.," said Luce, who is extremely grateful for the care she has received. "I've progressed. I've gotten better. I learned it's okay to take a breather, take a step back and look at everything as a whole." In the future, she hopes to bring attention to the struggles of people in Haiti who lack mental health resources.



There is more to Luce's story. To read the entire article, scan the QR code.

The Guidance Clinic is located at 39 North Clinton Avenue in Trenton. For more information, call (609) 394-9398.



◀ Carole Bursac, Branch Manager at Investors Bank in Lambertville, recently presented a \$10,000 contribution from Investors Foundation to Executive Director Marlene Laó-Collins for the Restoring Dignity, Giving Hope Campaign. These funds will help ensure Catholic Charities is able to serve those in need far into the future.

To find out how you can support the Campaign, contact Jennifer Leip at jleip@cctrenton.org or call (609) 394-5181 ext. 1137.

SHARING HIS JOURNEY

Sparks Hope and Encouragement



▲ Brandon with his Mental Health Peer Advocate Robert Brooks.

Brandon's outlook on life is upbeat and positive. His smile is wide. He works at a job he loves and has his own apartment. He is also an active member in his church. "There is a lot I thank God for every day. I am in a good place right now. I have a good support system."

Brandon's life hasn't always been this stable. When he was in his early 20s, he experienced a series of setbacks and difficulties. Living with his father in Charlotte, NC, Brandon began spending too much time and money in night clubs. He was also smoking and drinking. Eventually, his father asked him to move out.

Brandon was homeless for two years. "For a time," he said, "I lived on the street in Charlotte. Then I went to visit a friend from high school who lived in Spartanburg, SC and I slept in the backseat of her car." After a falling out with his friend, she threw all of his belongings out of the car. Brandon had nowhere to go.

Carrying all his possessions, Brandon went looking for a bus station so he could return to the Trenton area, where he grew up. "I was angry at the world. I was mad at my dad. I needed help," he said. He remembers an older woman drove him to the Greyhound station. From there, he called his grandmother and she helped him with the fare and offered him a place to stay.

"When I got back, my mother and brother called around looking for services and they found Catholic

Charities," he said. "Partners in Recovery is one of the best programs that ever happened to me." The program assists individuals who suffer with more severe and persistent psychiatric and co-occurring disorders and helps them reach an optimal level of functioning in the community.

Wilson Bagely was a Mental Health Peer Advocate at the time. He remembers Brandon's early days in the program. "Brandon was a unique client. He had some anger issues, and it took him some time to adjust. But he did not give up. He has come a long way."

Through the program, Brandon received counseling and help managing his mental health. He also received supported employment services and help finding a job. For the past six years, he has been working for a janitorial company. "I love what I do," he said. "People have no idea how hard we work. We vacuum the carpets, clean the restrooms, dust, empty the trash and buff the floors. It's a lot."

Today, Bagely is the Medication Assisted Treatment Coordinator. He recently organized an alumni day for the participants in the Partners in Recovery Program. "Meeting a former client, hearing about their journey and seeing their success gives current clients a feeling like there is light at the end of the tunnel." Brandon was one of the alumni Bagely invited back to share his story. "He shared and helped the clients understand what it was he needed to do for himself. I am really proud of Brandon. His encouragement will make a difference in someone else's journey."

FOR MORE INFORMATION on the Partners in Recovery Program, call (609) 396-4557.



▲ Brandon with Medication Assisted Treatment Coordinator Wilson Bagely.

WORKING IN TANDEM

Service Areas Care for Clients

One of the things that sets Catholic Charities apart from other service providers is the holistic approach the agency takes when it comes to caring for the people it serves. This summer, the Community Services team began delivering bags of groceries to Behavioral Health Services clients once a month to ensure they had enough to eat.



▲ In July, Mike Coyle of the Burlington County Food Pantry made a delivery to Delaware House.

“Our program provides breakfast and lunch,” said Jennifer Boswick, Partial Care Program Supervisor in Burlington County. “Even so, we know we have clients who are food insecure,” she said. “We serve people on food stamps. We have participants who are caring for other family members or who are on a fixed income,” she said. “There are many reasons. It could be a lack of transportation or being overwhelmed by inflation.” Whatever the cause, Boswick said the clients receiving the groceries are grateful.

If you, or someone you know, is food insecure, our food pantries are open. If you are in a position to help, donations would be welcomed!

Mercer Community Services Food Pantry (located at Mount Carmel Guild)

73 North Clinton Avenue, Trenton, NJ
(609) 394-8847

Mondays through Fridays 9:30 to 11:30 am AND
Wednesdays 1 to 3 pm

Burlington Community Services Food Pantry

450-460 Veterans Drive, Burlington, NJ
(856) 764-6940

Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays 9:30 to 11:30 am
AND 1:30 to 3:30 pm

Ocean Community Services Food Pantry

200 Monmouth Avenue, Lakewood, NJ
(732) 363-5322

Mondays through Thursdays 9 am to 12 pm

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Guardian Angel Dinner Dance

SATURDAY

September 24th

5:00 – 10:00 pm

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2022 HONOREES

RICHARD J. HUGHES **HUMANITARIAN AWARD**

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Hitesh Patel

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Ocean County

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MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES BECOME MORE ACCESSIBLE

For People in Crisis

On July 16th, a three-digit national hotline for individuals in crisis was introduced. The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline replaced the previous National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. The previous number will always remain available to people in emotional distress or suicidal crisis (1-800-273-8255).

Now, when people call, text, or chat 988, they will be connected to trained counselors who will listen, understand how their problems are affecting them, provide support and connect them to treatment. As a Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic (CCBHC), Catholic Charities provides crisis services in central New Jersey.

“We are proud of our role in delivering essential, life-saving services to residents seeking crisis interventions in central New Jersey,” said Assistant Executive Director of Operations Susan Loughery. “Our CCBHC and Early Intervention Support Services (EISS) in Burlington and Mercer counties provide timely access to psychiatric consultation and counseling to individuals who are in need of urgent mental health care.”

Catholic Charities offers psychiatric urgent care and clinical interventions in a welcoming and comfortable outpatient setting for people who are not in need of hospitalization. The crisis team works collaboratively with individuals to identify and address specific needs through evidence-based and trauma-informed services, and medication therapeutics.



▲ Associate Executive Director of Operations Susan Loughery was interviewed by NJ Spotlight’s Joanna Gaggis about Catholic Charities’ role as a provider of services for the 988 Lifeline.

Additionally, Catholic Charities’ dedicated access center, powered by a public safety answering point provider, connects callers to our crisis intervention services, schedules services and coordinates transportation. The agency began promoting the dedicated access center in July. Navigators at our dedicated access center, called the Behavioral Health Hub, will answer the line and direct callers to the most appropriate service.

“We are actively eliminating barriers to behavioral health care services and substance use treatment so people who need help don’t have to wait,” said Loughery. “We know early treatment for people experiencing a mental health crisis or emotional distress can provide stabilization and support recovery.”

The Behavioral Health Hub number is (609) 729-5648.

988 SUICIDE & CRISIS
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Capital Campaign Expands Vital Services

In one way or another, we have all seen someone who is hungry, homeless, a victim of domestic abuse or suffering with behavioral health or addiction issues. Now more than ever, people need our help.

So far, funds raised through our **Restoring Dignity, Giving Hope** Campaign have been used to expand our domestic violence services – an increase in cases has forced us to house survivors in motels because our safe houses are full. We have augmented our immigration services to include family counseling and employment assistance to make sure the hard-working people who come to us can thrive in a community they call home. Additionally, we will relocate our Ocean County food pantry to a larger facility to serve the growing number of food insecure families.

We hope to meet our \$10 million goal and ensure the most vulnerable among us always have what they need.

www.catholiccharitiestrenton.org/restore

