Catholic Charities
DIOCESE OF TRENTON
Serving Burlington, Mercer, Monmouth and Ocean Counties

The SPIRIT
FALL 2025

A SECOND CHANCE AT MOTHERHOOD

Samantha's Journey to Recovery

"The gratitude I have for this place…" Sitting in the art studio at HomeFront, an emergency shelter, Samantha shakes her head, searching for the right words. "Everyone here has been incredible."

In just three months, Samantha has gone from one of the most desperate situations she could imagine to living in a calm, caring environment where her needs, and those of her children, are finally being met. "I am so thankful to be here," she says.

A young mother of three sons, Samantha is beginning to feel hopeful about her family's future.

Earlier this summer, she was pregnant and living in a hotel and struggling with substance use. As her due date approached, she knew something had to change. "I started calling around, trying to find a program that would take me," she recalls. "But when I told them I was eight months pregnant, no one would help. And then I called For My Baby and Me."

A SPECIAL COLLABORATION

For My Baby and Me (FMBAM) is a collaborative program that provides opioid treatment, medical care and housing for pregnant women or new mothers and their children. The program brings together several partners: Catholic Charities, Diocese of Trenton; Capital Health; Trenton Health Team; Henry J. Austin Health Center; Rescue Mission and HomeFront.

Catholic Charities plays a key role, offering Medication-Assisted Treatment to help mothers stop using substances and intensive outpatient counseling services to help them manage their recovery.

"I got to HomeFront and three days later, I went into labor," Samantha said.

Because she tested positive for illegal drugs in the delivery room, her newborn son was taken into protective custody. Thankfully, through FMBAM, Samantha was quickly enrolled in substance use treatment and began attending a 12-step program. Her commitment to sobriety allowed her to be reunited with her baby 25 days later.

"I am so thankful I got out of that situation when I did," she said. "If I had gone into labor while I was still in that hotel, I might have lost my baby forever."

HOLDING ON TO FAMILY IS KEY

Family means everything to Samantha. When her father passed away when she was just 7, she and her mother moved from Florida to New Jersey to live with her aunt and uncle. The couple embraced her like their own child and became a vital source of support – especially after her mother passed away in 2019.

Now a mother herself, Samantha is doing everything she can to have custody of her two sons, ages 10 and 2, fully reinstated.

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A Message from the **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

Dear Friends,

Each story in this edition is a testament to the power of a second chance – a reminder that with compassion and support, lives can be transformed. Whether it's a family rebuilding after loss or individuals finding the courage to start over, Catholic Charities is there to walk alongside them, offering hope where it's needed most.

Pope Leo wisely said, "Evangelization in our time must be a dialogue of mercy, not a monologue of judgment." Your generosity makes that dialogue possible. Because of you, we meet people not with condemnation, but with open arms and practical help.

These second chances don't happen by accident – they happen because people like you choose to care. Your support provides food, shelter, counseling and most importantly, a renewed sense of dignity. It says to someone at their lowest point: You are not forgotten. Your life still matters.

In a world quick to judge and slow to forgive, your kindness speaks volumes. It is a reflection of Christ's love in action, and it inspires all of us at Catholic Charities to keep reaching farther and loving deeper.

Thank you for believing in our mission and in the sacred worth of every person we serve. Your compassion changes lives.

With heartfelt gratitude,

Marlene Laó-Collins
Executive Director

Catholic Charities
DIOCESE OF TRENTON

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Every donation to Catholic Charities stays with us to serve those in need. We do not share funds or donor information with anyone!

MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Thank you to all the volunteers who generously gave their time and talents to Catholic Charities, Diocese of Trenton. These dedicated volunteers, 1,206 of them, provided 12,895 hours of service in 2024.

At Catholic Charities, we rely on 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 those in your community who come to us for help.

To learn more, contact Hollis Painting at hpainting@cctrenton.org or 609–394–5181, x1159 or scan the QR code on the right.

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A SECOND CHANCE AT MOTHERHOOD

Samantha's Journey to Recovery (continued)

▲ With support from My Baby and Me, Samanatha and her son have a safe place to live while she works on her recovery and maps out a plan for her future.

"They've been able to visit me and meet their new baby brother," she said. "It makes me so happy to have all my boys together." In three months, Samantha expects to have her two-year-old with her permanently and is excited at the idea of having all three sons together by Christmas.

Since its launch nearly eight years ago, For My Baby and Me has served close to 200 families.

"What makes this program work so well is the collaboration among agencies," said Stacey Negron Care Manager and Project Evaluator. "We work together to create a safe, stigma-free space where moms can focus on their recovery. Housing, meals, health care, childcare, legal assistance, job support, diapers all of these needs are taken care of. In this environment, moms can rebuild healthy, stable lives for themselves and their children."

▲ Samantha has experience as a chef, so she's right at home in the teaching kitchen. She helps with the cooking classes for children.

FMBAM HAS SAMANTHA COVERED

"I get everything I need here in every way," said Samantha. "I have so much support. Every person I was with in the intensive outpatient therapy program – the counselors and the other patients – has had a positive impact on me. It's like everyone there is fighting the same thing and we all just come together to get stronger."

For My Baby and Me helped Samantha get a laptop so she could continue working toward her bachelor's degree. She is currently enrolled at Southern New Hampshire University, studying Health Sciences. "I don't want to be reliant on anyone. I want to be on my own. And I am so grateful to everyone at For My Baby and Me for giving me a second chance with my children. It's a privilege to be a mom."

FOR INFORMATION about the For My Baby and Me program, call 609–256–7801 or visit www.formybabyandme.org.

FROM STRUGGLE TO STRENGTH

Sherrelle's Journey with Project Free

▲ Sherrelle proudly shows a colorful collection of keychains she carries with her everywhere. Each ring representing a milestone in the 12-step program. In May, she added a new ring, one that marked a powerful achievement: one year of sobriety.

This spring, Sherelle attended a Father's Day gathering, and it was the first time in a long time she enjoyed celebrating with her family. The difference this year was Sherelle was sober. "When I was drinking, family parties were different," she said. "This year, drinking never even crossed my mind," she said. "It feels so good to be sober. I am enjoying life."

Sherelle's struggle with substance use started when she was a teenager. What began as a way to fit in and avoid reality became a continuous cycle of drinking too much and making poor choices.

"I started drinking when I was in high school, I got mixed up with the wrong crowd, stopped playing basketball and started down a bad path." She said she drank as a way to escape. "But when the alcohol wears off, your problems are still right there." Eventually, Sherelle realized that her drinking was only compounding her troubles.

READY TO MAKE A CHANGE

"The first time I went to rehab, I was in denial," Sherrelle said. "Thankfully, this time I was ready."

Her second chance came in May 2024, when she checked into the New Hope rehabilitation facility, prepared to begin a new journey. Determined to make a real change, she committed fully, attending 12-step meetings and finding a sponsor.

After completing rehab, Sherrelle moved to Epiphany House in Asbury Park, where she spent six months in long-term residential treatment, gradually preparing herself for life in the real world.

When her stay at Epiphany House ended, Sherrelle knew her journey wasn't over, she still needed support to maintain her sobriety. Back home in Trenton, she enrolled in Catholic Charities' Project Free and began the Intensive Outpatient Program. For three days a week, she attended counseling sessions with Clinical Team Leader Valaria Adams-Johnson.

"I learned so much from Miss Valaria," Sherrelle said. "I learned that recovery is a process, something you grow through, not just get through."

Over time, her progress allowed her to step down to just one counseling session a week.

"Here at Project Free, we approach treatment in a judgment-free way. We want to create a totally safe space for recovery," said Carla Ford, Clinical Director of Addiction & Recovery Services. "Our clinicians, medical professionals and peer recovery specialists support the men and women we serve by highlighting their strengths and building them up. Many of them come to us in a fragile state. By offering empathy and understanding, we show that we truly care about their recovery and want to see them get better."

PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

"I like coming to counseling. Everyone here is so positive. They are encouraging me to make progress in my life." Sherelle is working on getting her GED and plans to enroll in Mercer County Community College. "I love being in school. Math is definitely challenging me right now, but I'm grateful to be working toward my goals."

FOR INFORMATION about **Project Free,** call 609–396–4557. For details about **New Choices** a substance use treatment program for teens and young adults, call 609–984–9042.

PEOPLE OF HOPE

Stories that Transform Lives Through Service

▲ Arnold Valentin was honored to represent Catholic Charities, Diocese of Trenton with his story for CCUSA's mobile museum.

Last November, Catholic Charities USA (CCUSA) announced it would be launching a nationwide storytelling display entitled People of Hope: Faith-Filled Stories of Neighbors Helping Neighbors. This mobile museum will travel around the country for two-and-a-half years highlighting for visitors the profound impact 168 Catholic Charities organizations nationwide have made in their communities.

Earlier this spring, CCUSA put a call out to all its member agencies asking for employees and volunteers to share stories to populate this exhibit. Enthusiastically, 240 Catholic Charities colleagues responded with inspirational accounts of their service. CCUSA chose 40 entries to be included in the museum and invited the storytellers to its offices in Alexandria, Va., so their segments could be professionally recorded.

"You cannot imagine how delighted we were to discover two of the 40 entries chosen were submitted by members of our team here at Catholic Charities, Diocese of Trenton," said Executive Director Marlene Laó-Collins.

Director of Children and Family Services Mary Pettrow joined Catholic Charities more than 25 years ago. Like many non-profit professionals who face trauma daily, she knows how overwhelming providing care can be. Mary has been known to tell the parable of a young boy and older man walking on a beach full of starfish. The boy is throwing as many as he can back into the water. The man shakes his head and tells the boy his efforts are futile; he'll never make a difference. And as the boy sends the next starfish back into the surf, he says to the man, "Well, I made a difference to that one."

▲ This time next year, thousands visiting the People of Hope exhibit will have heard Mary Pettrow's heartwarming story about meeting her starfish.

Early in her tenure, Mary served as a Case Manager at our Domestic Violence Safe House. She shared a story about encountering a man who had stayed at the safe house when he was eight years old. Years later, their paths crossed again, and he immediately remembered her. Now an adult, he is married, works as a teacher and coach, and – most importantly – is the first man in five generations of his family who was not abusive. "All these years later," Mary reflected, "I met my starfish."

Director of Community Services Arnold (Val) Valentin prefaced his story for CCUSA with a personal reflection. When his daughter was seven, she was diagnosed with brain cancer; now, 26 years later, she is cancer free and has a family of her own. Since then, Val always held a special place in his heart for those struggling with health challenges.

Several years ago, a doctor from New York City called Val looking for housing assistance for a cancer patient living in Trenton, and without hesitation Val agreed to help. He learned Jennifer, a young woman from Monrovia, Liberia, was in the US for a series of treatments and reconstruction surgeries.

What he didn't realize was he already knew Jennifer. She had been volunteering at our Community Services office. Each week, she would sort and fold the donated clothes. "It has been an honor to help this young woman on her journey," said Val.

STAY TUNED for The People of Hope tour dates kicking off in spring 2026. Visitors to the exhibit will be invited to share and record their own inspirational stories of service.

RE-HOUSING PROGRAM PROVIDES STABILITY AND HOPE

for Navy Veteran and Single Mother

Born and raised in Hamilton, Marshay enlisted in the Navy after graduating from Hamilton High School North in 2002. She was following in her older brother Michael's footsteps. For the next four years, she served as a Quartermaster, navigating Navy vessels all around the world.

"It was a lot of responsibility," she recalled. "But I liked it." Not only did Marshay learn how to guide massive ships across the ocean but living in such close quarters also taught her valuable life lessons. "I learned my core values and how important it is to respect people."

After her military service, Marshay transitioned to civilian life and accepted a position with a medical management firm. She has been with the company for 11 years and now serves as a senior leader, handling workers' compensation cases.

Marshay is a single mother of a two-year-old son and 15-year-old daughter. When her brother Michael passed away, she also took in her 16-year-old niece. For several years, the family lived with a relative in a rented home. Life was stable until last year, when the relative unexpectedly announced they were moving to North Carolina.

SECURING HOUSING BECOMES A DAUNTING TASK

When the property owner realized Marshay couldn't afford the rent on her own, he decided to sell the home – leaving this single mom and her children needing a new place to live. But finding affordable housing in New Jersey is no easy task. With an estimated 200,000 affordable units needed to meet demand, the state is facing a severe housing crisis.

Juggling a full-time job and parenting, Marshay found the search exhausting. "I was looking for a place, but nothing was falling into my lap. It was stressful," she said.

A friend suggested she contact Catholic Charities. "I called initially asking about rental assistance," Marshay recalled. After explaining her situation to Case Manager Elizabeth Tomaszewski, she learned she was a good candidate for the Rapid Re-Housing program.

"Elizabeth went to work – every day, all day – looking for a home for us," Marshay said. Within 30 days, Marshay was presented with several options for to consider.

In May 2024, Marshay and her children moved into an apartment. "Moving from a house to an apartment was a big adjustment," she said, "but we're happy to be in our own place."

LEARNING TO MANAGE FINANCES AND MORE

In addition to helping Marshay find a new home, Elizabeth is helping her manage her finances. "My debt-to-income ratio was a mess," Marshay admitted. Elizabeth helped her understand the importance of budgeting and saving. "Now, I have clear goals for what I need to save and a system of checks and balances to keep myself on track."

The Rapid Re-Housing program uses a combination of federal and county funds to assist individuals and families in Mercer and Ocean counties find affordable, permanent housing. Participants can receive up to six months of financial assistance. The program also provides intensive case management and connects clients to additional community resources.

Case Manager Elizabeth Tomaszewski is still in touch with Marshay and follows up when she sees information or resources that may help provide for her family.

"Our goal is to ensure our housing placements are permanent," said Elizabeth. "We give our clients the tools they need to manage their finances, repair their credit and save money. We can also assist with job searches if needed."

"Elizabeth is always encouraging me," Marshay said. "She gives me positive reinforcement and shares anything she thinks might benefit me. Elizabeth and Catholic Charities have helped me so much. I am forever grateful."

FOR INFORMATION about our housing programs, call 800–360–7711.

GIVE HOPE A LIFT - DONATE YOUR UNUSED VEHICLE!

Do you have an old car, boat, motorcycle or trailer that's just sitting in your driveway? That unused vehicle can become a lifeline for a neighbor in need.

When you donate your vehicle to Catholic Charities, you're doing more than clearing space – you're helping provide food, shelter and critical support to struggling families right here in our diocese. And – we've made it easy for you!

Through our trusted partnership with Charitable Adult Rides & Services (CARS), donating is hassle-free. Simply call or fill out a short online form and CARS will take care of the towing, provide you with a donation receipt and handle all the necessary paperwork. Best of all, the proceeds from your vehicle will go directly toward helping those in need.

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Or visit: catholiccharitiestrenton.careasy.org

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