



## REWRITING HIS STORY

### How Robert Became a Force for Healing

Robert Brooks knows he's exactly where he's meant to be, doing the work he was born to do. As the Dual Disorder Coordinator for Project Free, a substance use treatment program, he counsels individuals and supports them on their path to recovery. He also leads a men's group at the Guidance Clinic, which provides long- and short-term outpatient counseling services. And, he teaches Life Skills classes to middle school students at the Grant School through Prevention Plus, a substance abuse prevention program for elementary and middle school students.

"It's true what they say," he laughs. "If you love what you do, you'll never work a day in your life. I enjoy this work so much, I forget I even have vacation time."

#### THE NEXT CHAPTER IN ROBERT'S STORY

Last year, Robert enrolled in a new master's program in clinical mental health counseling at The College of New Jersey (TCNJ). As a proud member of the inaugural cohort, he's excited to gain the tools and knowledge that will make him an even stronger counselor. The program, designed for paraprofessionals serving underrepresented communities, aims to help address New Jersey's shortage of mental health professionals.

"We are incredibly grateful to count Robert Brooks as a member of our Clinical Mental Health Counseling program," said Dr. Sandy Gibson, Chair of the Department of Online Counselor Education at TCNJ. "He brings a profound level of character and life experience that enriches the entire department."

"Inside the classroom," Dr. Gibson continued, "Robert is a fearless learner. He steps confidently into the counselor role during our role play activities and shares personal stories that bring our discussions to life. But what we appreciate most is his spirit of service. He lifts up his classmates, helps them find their confidence, and leads the cohort with genuine support and kindness. His decision to become a Licensed Professional Counselor is a gift to the future community he will serve."

Lisa Merritt, Service Area Director for Integrated Behavioral Health Services, echoed that sentiment. "Robert is a powerful advocate and role model. His lived experience, combined with his professional training, makes him uniquely qualified to support clients facing both behavioral health and substance use disorders. Robert leads with empathy and kindness. He knows firsthand what people are dealing with."

Pictured: Once the coursework is completed in the TCNJ master's program, Robert will be eligible to become a licensed professional counselor in New Jersey.



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

Spring has a way of inviting us to pause and look again – at what has been weathered, what has taken root and what is beginning to bloom. This season reflects what we know to be true in our mission: growth happens through steady, unseen effort before it ever comes to light.

At Catholic Charities, spring feels especially meaningful. Every day, we walk alongside individuals and families who seek stability, healing and a chance to begin again. Many come to us carrying heavy burdens – uncertainty, trauma or the weight of circumstances beyond their control. Yet, through compassion, care and steadfast support, we witness something remarkable: hope returning, confidence rebuilding and lives, slowly but surely, moving toward fullness.

“See, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:19). We see this new life unfolding every day – a person finding stability

and dignity when his mental health is supported, meaningful moments when volunteers help seniors remain safely in their homes with independence. Each story reflects the same truth: when compassionate care meets consistent support, lives are transformed.

None of this is possible without you. Your generosity is the soil in which these new beginnings grow. Because of your faithful support, we are able to meet people where they are, offer evidence-based care and walk with them toward brighter, more stable futures. You are not just donors – you are partners in renewal, advocates for decency and keepers of hope.

With heartfelt thanks,

Marlene Laó-Collins  
Executive Director

## El Centro Celebrates Three Kings Day



On January 4th, El Centro, our center for Hispanic and immigration services in Mercer County, celebrated el Día de Reyes, or Three Kings Day, with a party for the families at Sacred Heart Church.

Families enjoyed holiday music and refreshments while they waited. When the Three Kings arrived, they came with gifts for all of the children.

El Centro is a program of Children and Family Services.



Publisher: Jennifer Leip  
Editor: Victoria Cranga  
Writer: Hollis Painting  
Designer: Miroslav Farina

383 West State Street  
Trenton, NJ 08618  
609-394-5181  
CatholicCharitiesTrenton.org

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



## Board of Trustees

Most Rev. David M. O'Connell, C.M.  
President, Bishop of Trenton

Michael W. Herbert – Chair

Dolores Kelley – Vice-Chair

Marlene Laó-Collins – Secretary

Debra Elko – Treasurer

Josephine R. Esquivel

John W. Galuchie, Jr.

Rev. Msgr. Thomas Gervasio

Darleen Gillespie

Megan Gordon

Walter Hopkin

John J. Kuchinski

Hitesh Patel

Brenda L. Rascher

Kathleen Reilly

Christen Sachs

Madelyn Tusay

# REWRITING HIS STORY

## How Robert Became a Force for Healing

### THE PATH WAS NOT ALWAYS EASY

Robert's early life was marked by extreme poverty and abuse. As a teenager, he sold drugs to survive and things worsened when he began using himself. As an adult, he fell into a cycle of trouble, incarceration, release and more trouble.

In his early fifties, Robert was incarcerated again. During that sentence, he began therapy and was diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder. The diagnosis was something of a revelation for Robert. It helped him understand the patterns that had shaped his life.

In 2017, shortly after his release, Robert joined Catholic Charities' Partial Care Program, which provides intensive outpatient services including addiction treatment and mental health counseling. He devoted himself fully to recovery.

"I set four goals when I started Partial Care," he said. "I wanted to publish my book, "Psychology of a Thug: Demystify," move into a place of my own, get a car and go back to school." Within nine months, he had accomplished all four. That's when his counselors told him he was ready to graduate.

### A NEW ROLE HELPING OTHERS

Even though he was already running peer groups and supporting others in their recovery, Robert didn't feel ready to leave. "I didn't want to graduate," he admitted. But his counselors insisted. When he finally agreed, his counselor immediately encouraged him to apply for a part-time mental health peer advocate position with the Early Intervention Support Services (EISS) program, which provides screening and counseling in a comfortable outpatient setting. "She had plans for me," he said.

Robert joined Catholic Charities in 2018 while also attending Camden County Community College full time. In 2021, he earned his associate's degree in Addictions Counseling and became a Certified Alcohol and Drug Counselor. Recovery brought a new rhythm to his life: set goals, achieve them, set new ones.



▲ Robert has always been generous sharing about his journey. In 2023, he addressed a meeting of the SAMHSA GAINS Center's Sequential Intercept Model (SIM) Mapping Strategic Planning Exercise for Mercer County and shared valuable insights.

He continued his education at Rowan University, earning his bachelor's degree in Human Services Direct Care in 2024. Now, the master's program at TCNJ is the next step. He's building on the skills he first developed at EISS.

"Right now, I'm taking a class in Multicultural Counseling and thinking back to some of the people I served at EISS during COVID," Robert said. "If I had this knowledge then, my responses would have been so different."

When he completes the program, Robert will be eligible to take the exam to become a Licensed Clinical Alcohol and Drug Counselor.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION** about about the Partial Care program, call 609-267-9339.

To learn more about Project Free, call 609-396-4557.

To explore all programs offered by our Integrated Behavioral Health Services team, visit [www.CatholicCharitiesTrenton.org](http://www.CatholicCharitiesTrenton.org).

# A LIFETIME OF SKILL, A HEART FOR SERVICE

## Meet Joe

A gifted carpenter, Joe Steets has always loved building and repairing things, just as much as he loves giving back to his community. So, when he learned that the Fix-It Program was looking for volunteers to make minor home repairs for seniors living in Ocean County, he didn't hesitate. "When you have a talent, you should share it with other people," he said.

"Keeping up with home maintenance can be difficult for older adults," explained Kristine Santana, the Fix-It Coordinator. "Through a partnership with the Ocean County Board of Commissioners, we're able to provide vital assistance to seniors and adults with disabilities. Our volunteers, like Joe, take care of the jobs folks may not know how to do or may not have the tools to do."

Kristine added, "Our services help older adults stay in their homes longer, and that's important. We feel beyond blessed to have someone as talented as Joe volunteering with Fix-It. He brings an entire career's worth of knowledge and skill to the table."

Joe's career began early. "I've been in construction my whole life," he said. In high school, he attended vocational school to become a draftsman. After graduation, he worked alongside his uncle and grandfather, both carpenters, and quickly discovered how much he enjoyed the craft. He later enrolled in an evening carpentry program at Kean College, where he even learned to cane a chair.

Before long, Joe pursued a degree in Construction Management at the Newark College of Engineering (now the New Jersey Institute of Technology). It took eight years of taking night classes while working full-time and raising a young family to earn his degree, but he says the effort was well worth it.



▲ Joe readies his tool bucket before heading out to help an area senior with a job around the house.

Now eighty years young and as energetic as ever, Joe has completed countless Fix-It jobs: installing mirrored closet doors, doing minor electrical work, hanging drapes, mounting ceiling fans, changing smoke-detector batteries and so much more. Installing grab bars is one of the most common requests. "Grab bars can be tricky," Joe said. "You need to know what you're doing and what size to get. The ones with suction cups can be so dangerous."

According to his wife Cindy, "Not a day goes by that Joe doesn't go to Home Depot." When Joe knows he'll need an extra set of hands, she happily joins him on Fix-It visits. She says that when an email about a new project arrives, Joe gets moving right away.

"Joe likes to do things immediately," Cindy said with a smile. "We had a home in Monmouth County, and there was no way to get to the backyard from the family room. One day we were talking, and I said, 'If that window was a door...' The next day, there was a hole where the window had been, and the day after that, we had a door. Soon after, Joe built a three-tier deck leading out onto the lawn."

K



Catholic Charities  
DIOCESE OF TRENTON

# SAVE THE DATE

Cheers to Summer

# CASINO

# NIGHT



at The Breakers  
on the Ocean  
Spring Lake, NJ



Joe and Cindy are active members of Greenbriar Woodlands community and dedicated parishioners at St. Joseph's Parish in Toms River. Joe volunteers at the church's food pantry, unloading deliveries as they arrive. Although other congregations are closer to home, Joe has fond memories of attending Mass at St. Gertrude, which is part of St. Joseph's as a child when his family summered in Island Heights. "St. Joseph's Church does so much for the community. We are really happy there," he said.

Seniors, caregivers assisting seniors or adults with disabilities who live in Ocean County and need help with household projects can contact Kristine Santana at 732-363-5322 x5322. Volunteers interested in joining the Fix-It team are encouraged to call.

▲ A dynamic duo — Joe and Cindy enjoy giving back to the community. When he needs an extra hand, Cindy often accompanies Joe on a Fix-It job.

# TAKING ON COMMUNITY VIOLENCE

## VOICES Offers Help and Healing

Shootings, street fights, gang violence – the Centers for Disease Control identifies community violence as a major public health threat, especially in urban areas like Trenton.

Tonya Hernandez, Program Supervisor of VOICES (Violence Prevention through Community Outreach, Intervention, Community Cohesion and Education to Promote Safety) of Mercer, explains that witnessing or being directly affected by community violence can lead to depression, helplessness, anger, shame or anxiety. Long term exposure can result in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Hernandez leads a team of five. “We’re small but mighty. Everyone has experience working with vulnerable populations.” The team provides Trauma Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF CBT) and case management services to children and families impacted by community violence in Mercer County. The program is funded by the New Jersey Attorney General’s Office.

The evidence-based therapy offered by the VOICES clinician helps individuals process the negative effects of trauma and develop effective coping skills. “We also run workshops on healthy decision making, coping skills and basic self-care. It’s a scary time to be a member of a vulnerable population,” Hernandez said. “Many families are in fight or flight mode, and they’re not thinking about how important it is to take care of themselves.”

Research shows that TF CBT successfully addresses a wide range of emotional and behavioral challenges associated with single, multiple and complex trauma.

Case management services connect families to essential resources, many of them offered by Catholic Charities. “We’ve referred many individuals to Early Intervention Support Services for counseling, and we

let people know about our Community Services food pantry and other supports available,” Hernandez said. “Our goal is to create a safer environment and help people build stronger, healthier lives.”

The VOICES team has also developed a community toolkit. The evidence-based curriculum and guide is being distributed to schools and churches to help them respond in the event of a violent incident. It includes resources and best practices for supporting those affected.

All VOICES services are free for victims of community violence. “If you’ve witnessed an incident or have a family member or friend who was impacted, you qualify,” Hernandez said. “Sometimes parents don’t recognize the trauma, so part of our job is educating them.”



▲ Even though the team is small, their impact on the community is powerful. Shown are Case Manager Duverlis Burneo, Clinician Kaitlyn Brown, Program Supervisor Tonya Hernandez and Case Manager Nelly Wetzel. Case Manager David Hancock is not pictured.

VOICES of Mercer is a program of Catholic Charities’ Children and Family Services. If you know someone affected by community violence or want more information about the VOICES program, call 609–394–5171.

# POINT IN TIME COUNT

## Creates A Snapshot of Homeless

On Wednesday, February 4th, members of the Community Services team in Mercer County were proud to join local community partners for the Point In Time Count. The Count, conducted by housing advocates around the nation, provides an accounting of sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness on a single day during the year.

Mercer County Executive Dan Benson led the Kick-Off event that morning. He said the Continuum of Care, a federal program committed to ending homelessness, is the difference between families being housed and families being on the street. He noted that the Point In Time Count results in 2024 were higher than they were for 2025. And it's expected 2026's count will be higher still.

Mayor of Trenton Reed Gusciora reminded the team before going out, the count is mission-critical and the unhoused in Mercer County need to know they matter.



▲ (from left) Director of Community Services Arnold Valentin, Executive Director Marlene Laó-Collins, City of Trenton Mayor Reed Gusciora, Rapid Re-Housing (RRH) Case Manager Ruchama Orne, Program Director Mosudi Idowu, RRH Case Manager Danny Jimenez, RRH Case Manager Elizabeth Tomaszewski and RRH Case Manager Terri Dyouis.

## MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

### WE'RE HIRING

- Administrative Assistants
- Bilingual Crisis Workers
- Housing Specialists
- Licensed Clinicians
- Mental Health Advocates
- Prevention Consultants
- Registered Nurses
- Residential Counselors



**Competitive salaries and benefits!**

<https://www.catholiccharitiestrenton.org/careers/>



### VOLUNTEER

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](mailto:hpainting@cctrenton.org), 609-394-5181 x1159.



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



383 West State Street  
Trenton, NJ 08618

See how we  
make a difference.  
**Ask Siri** to take you  
to Catholic Charities,  
Diocese of Trenton —  
no typing required.

# *Guardian Angel Dinner Dance*

is returning to Mercer County and you won't want to miss it!



*Mark your calendar*  
Friday, September 18 at The Boathouse