

## VOLUNTEERING

### Helps Fill the Void in Her Heart

On the floor of the clothing room at Warren Street, Community Service's Trenton office, Jennifer sits amid mounds of baby and children's clothes. She selects a garment, smooths it, carefully folds and gently places it on one of the stacks growing before her. For the past three years, she has been volunteering here, helping with office work and sorting donations.

A native of Monrovia, Liberia, Jennifer is more than 4,500 miles away from her home and family. She is also midway through treatments and reconstruction surgeries following a cancer diagnosis.

#### A MEDICAL ODYSSEY

In February of 2016, Jennifer discovered a little knot under her right cheek. Initially, her doctor thought it was an abscess and prescribed a cream. The knot did not go away or get smaller. Follow up at St. Joseph's Catholic Hospital in Monrovia determined the mass was a tumor. In July of 2017, Jennifer received a US Medical Visa and a referral to Temple University Hospital in Philadelphia. At the age of 30, she said goodbye to her family, including her seven-month-old son Vincent. She moved to Trenton to live with her uncle and begin treatment in the United States.

At Temple, doctors diagnosed the knot as an aggressive form of cancer. That October, surgeons at Cooper University Hospital in Camden operated to remove the tumor. Jennifer's right eye and nose were also removed. A flap of skin from Jennifer's thigh was used to cover her face. Doctors inserted a tracheostomy tube into her neck to help with her breathing and a feeding tube into her stomach. A year of radiation and chemotherapy treatments at Capital Health followed.

In September of 2018, Jennifer had surgery on her nose which allowed her to breathe on her own and the trach was removed in December. In July of 2019, Jennifer met with a team of doctors in New York to begin planning the reconstruction of her face. Several surgeries ensued,



▲ Jennifer cherishes photos of her young son. Her phone helps her stay connected to Vincent, who lives in Liberia.

including one which took bones from Jennifer's leg and grafted them to her cheek bone. She needed to use a walker for six weeks and then a cane for three months. This past October, Jennifer had oral surgery to prepare her mouth for the dental implants she will have in the future.

"I find Jennifer to be a remarkable human being. The courage she has demonstrated to leave her family to undergo the lifesaving procedures by the staff at both New Jersey and New York Hospitals is nothing short of a miracle," said Service Area Director Arnold Valentin. "Jennifer has shared with me that it is her mission to return to her family in Monrovia and give the support to her son that he so deeply deserves. Jennifer and I shared our stories of surviving cancer – I told her about my daughter Alexandria who survived a brain tumor that was removed in 1999 and remains today cancer free."



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

With the holidays upon us, I'm naturally thinking about all the things I am grateful for. At home, I am thankful for my family and friends who will help me celebrate and ring in the New Year. At Catholic Charities, I am most appreciative of our team and our donors whose hard work and generosity are the reason we can help so many families who desperately need our services.

This year, I am also captivated by the lights of the season. It reminds me that every candle, each bulb in a Christmas display shines as a symbol of Christ's love for us. Beautiful in their own right, they also bring brightness and warmth to what is around them. I hope you find a moment to enjoy the lights of this

holiday season and to bask in their glow and all they represent.

Remember too — we can be the light. Christ's love shines from our hearts through our deeds and actions. We can illuminate the season. We can lift those around us with caring, thoughtful gestures. And we can light the way with our love for those who are struggling.

I wish you and your family a wonderful holiday season. I hope it is filled with joy, His love for us and our love for one another.

In Gratitude,

Marlene Laó-Collins  
Executive Director



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

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

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# VOLUNTEERING

## Helps Fill the Void in Her Heart (continued)

### STAYING STRONG AND GIVING BACK

The reconstruction process is slow. After each surgery Jennifer needs time to heal before she can undergo the next. Volunteering at Warren Street helps fill her days. “We are thankful that we have been able to assist Jennifer along her journey,” said Valentin. “She is so courageous. We feel blessed that she volunteers with us.”

“I came to learn more of Jennifer’s struggles to maintain housing in Trenton while she continues to receive treatment,” added Valentin. “We at Catholic Charities and Community Services pay for Jennifer’s monthly rent so she can maintain a place to live. These funds come from donors who support Catholic Charities and Community Services for Immigrant individuals and families. She appreciates all we do for her, but it is she whom we thank for showing us the true value of life.”

“Jennifer is a very dedicated volunteer,” said Markeesha Ferguson, Administrative Assistant at CS. “She comes in whenever she can.” A close friendship has developed between the two. “She’s actually like a big sister to me,” said Ferguson, smiling. When Jennifer video calls her family in Liberia, Ferguson said she likes to pop on in the background. “I want her family to know she has friends and people who are looking out for her.”



▲ Director of Community Services Arnold Valentin and Administrative Assistant Markeesha Ferguson appreciate all the support Jennifer provides.

### FOCUSED ON THE FUTURE

As difficult as the surgeries have been, Jennifer says living without her son has been infinitely harder. “This fight with cancer has not only interrupted my life, but it is also affecting the life of my son.” When Jennifer left Monrovia, she left her infant in the care of her grandmother. In 2020, Jennifer’s grandmother passed away and Vincent went to live with his father. “He has had to live with several people,” she said. “It breaks my heart that he has to bear the consequences of my fight to stay alive.”

Even with several more operations to come, Jennifer stays focused on the future. “I have always tried to stay strong and positive,” said Jennifer. “I am not doing this only for myself, but for my son as well.” In a notebook, Jennifer keeps a record of every surgery she has had and every doctor she has met along the way. She hopes to share this journal with her son to help explain why she was apart from him for so long.

“I am thankful for every single person who has helped me through this process.” Jennifer said the gratitude in her heart knows no bounds for all of the doctors and nurses who have cared for her and the hospitals and organizations that helped cover her expenses.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION** on the programs provided by the Community Services team, call (800) 360-7711.



▲ Jennifer helps with sorting and folding the clothing donations that are dropped off at Warren Street.

# PROGRAM ADDRESSES THE EMOTIONAL TOLL

## After Violent Trauma

On Memorial Day in 2021, Josue was walking to work. He stopped at a nearby market for some food on the way but because it was a holiday, it was closed. Josue headed to another store a few blocks away.

He sensed a person behind him and began walking a little faster and realized a second person was walking straight toward him. The next thing he remembered, a stranger was helping him try to stand up. Josue had been attacked by two men. He was struck in the back of the head with a baseball bat and fell headfirst onto the sidewalk. While he was on the ground, the men kicked and robbed him.

“A good samaritan found Josue unconscious, face down on the ground,” said Beatriz, Josue’s sister. “He didn’t know what had happened to him.” She said the man who stopped to help Josue wasn’t sure if he was alive when he saw him on the sidewalk. He offered to call the police or take him to the hospital. Josue asked to be taken home.

Beatriz was shocked and scared when she saw her brother. His face was covered in blood, and he was confused. “He was asking, ‘What happened to me?’” She got Josue to St. Francis Hospital and the police were called. Josue was transferred to the Level II Bristol Myers Squibb Trauma Center at Capital Health Regional Medical Center in Trenton. Doctors explained Josue was lucky to have survived. “He was one of the blessed ones. I am so grateful he was alive.” She also learned that two more patients were admitted to the trauma center that day with similar injuries obtained in similar attacks.

### HEALING THE MIND AS WELL AS THE BODY

At the hospital, a Trauma Outreach Specialist met with Beatriz and Josue and let them know therapy was available to help Josue process the trauma he had endured. They were referred to Catholic Charities’ Children and Family Services’ Hospital-Based Violence Intervention Program (HBVIP), which provides services to victims of violent crime.

Josue began meeting with HBVIP Coordinator Scott Minchello, who is a licensed professional counselor. At



▲ Program Coordinator Scott Minchello worked with Beatriz to help her heal from the emotional trauma she experienced following her brother’s brutal assault.

first, because Josue doesn’t speak English, his sister sat in to translate. She said her brother was unsure at first, but he and Scott soon fell into an easy rapport, and he began sharing more. “He started to open up and deal with his feelings,” she said. “After his attack, Josue was afraid of going on the street alone,” said Beatriz. “He was very cautious and worried when he was by himself. The counseling helped him become more confident,” she said. As Josue became more comfortable with the idea of therapy, he began sessions with Case Manager Glenda Padin Rodriguez, who speaks Spanish, to deal with other traumas he had suffered in the past.

“Sometimes, when something bad happens, something good happens that’s greater than the bad,” said Beatriz. “In our culture, men are not open to talking about their feelings. He has had many hard situations in his life and here you can talk about everything and there is no judgement.” She said she can see the difference in her brother. “He is healing. He is getting better.”

### SUPPORT FOR THE ENTIRE FAMILY

Certainly, the victim bears the brunt of an attack, but their family members can be affected too. Beatriz was pleased to learn she could also receive counseling through HBVIP. She said counseling has helped her let

# SHARING THE INNOVATIVE COLLABORATION

## That Helps Pregnant Moms Recovery from Addiction

Since its inception in 2017, the For My Baby and Me (FMBAM) program has helped 140 mothers and their babies overcome substance use issues. A key component to the program's success has been the array of wraparound services creating a stable environment for recovery. The moms receive hospital care, housing, medication assisted treatment, clinical therapy, case management, childcare, and life skills and employment training. Their everyday needs, including food, clothing and diapers are met as well.

The program represents an alliance among six different community providers. Working with Catholic Charities in this holistic healthcare collaborative are Capital Health, the Rescue Mission of Trenton, HomeFront, the Henry J. Austin Health Center, and the Trenton Health Team.

“Since the opioid epidemic began, these women were overlooked because of a disconnect between maternal medicine and the treatment community,” said Associate Executive Director of Operations Susan Loughery. “Through FMBAM, pregnant women begin treatment and start receiving prenatal care at the same time. They're housed in a safe, sober setting and provided with support and everything they need to thrive as mothers.”

Recently, the FMBAM team was invited to join Dr. Eric Schwartz, Executive Director of the Institute for Urban Care at Capital Health, to present the program at the American Association for the Treatment of Opioid Dependence's 2022 National Conference in Baltimore.

Fittingly, the theme of the American Association for the Treatment of Opioid Dependence's 2022 Conference was “The Power of Collaboration.” The FMBAM team



▲ Nurse Care Manager Stacey Negron, Dr. Eric Schwartz and Susan Loughery helped design a display explaining the For My Baby and Me Program and presented it at the American Association for the Treatment of Opioid Dependence's 2022 National Conference in Baltimore.

explained how the partnership, with all its different types of services, knits together a comprehensive cocoon of support for pregnant women and new mothers who have opioid use disorders.

“We are excited to share this program to an audience of clinicians, social services agencies and medical systems from around the country,” said Chief Executive Nurse Lisa Merritt. “It would be rare to find a single organization that provides expecting or new mothers all of the resources that FMBAM delivers. We have demonstrated that creating this kind of partnership gives women and their babies the opportunity for a fresh, healthy start.”

go of the resentment she felt toward Josue's attackers, and she doesn't feel as overwhelmed as she did when it first happened. “The whole family has started healing. I needed help and the help is here.”

“Many victims of crime don't know there are resources within the community that can help them,” said Minchello. “We can connect people to programs that can be really beneficial to them.” He said HBVIP provides long- and short-term counseling to help individuals process the trauma they have endured. “There's also a case management piece to the program. We make referrals and follow up to see how someone is progressing.”

Many of the referrals Minchello makes are within the agency. “Catholic Charities provides so many services. I can connect a client to immigration services, assistance with food and rent or ESL classes.” He also makes referrals to other agencies in the community. “We do everything we can to ensure the victim of a crime has what they need to heal and move forward.”

**FOR MORE INFORMATION** on the Hospital-Based Violence Intervention Program, call (609) 394-5157.

# CLIENT ASCENDING:

## Getting Help and Giving Back

Jean Boyle doesn't use the word recovery when she talks about her behavioral health. "I say journey. Because, for me, living with mental illness has been a lifelong journey." Seven years ago, the path Jean was on led her to Catholic Charities, and she is grateful it did.

In 2015, when she first arrived as a client in the Outpatient Program, Jean admits she was at her lowest. "I was the one curled up in a ball in the corner crying." She explained that her previous experiences with mental health services had not been positive. Jean said she had been heavily medicated and lost custody of her children.

"The approach at Catholic Charities was different," she said. "I was treated as a whole person." Early on, Jean saw a therapist and a psychiatrist. She stopped crying and began attending the Women's Group for therapy. In 2016, when the group was discontinued, Jean decided to join the Self-Help Center (SHC) at Riverbank in Burlington.

The SHC empowers its participants to take part in creating the kind of a program they want to attend. All its services are designed to help people with behavioral challenges live independently. Members of the group can become peer facilitators and teach others the skills they have mastered. Some have been hired as drivers to provide transportation. Support groups led by peer facilitators tackle things like wellness recovery action planning, finance management, and coping skills for anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses. Exercise, yoga and tai chi classes promote physical wellness. There are also free recreational and cultural outings, providing participants an opportunity to try things that otherwise might be inaccessible to them.

The atmosphere at the SHC was friendly and supportive. Before long, Jean had the confidence to facilitate her first group, an arts and crafts program. Through the SHC, she learned about Peer Advocates and decided to try and become one. She made it through the initial training and then completed the Wellness Recovery Access Planning training. Jean went on to earn her certification as a Recovery Support Practitioner. She is currently training to become a Certified Peer Recovery Specialist.



▲ Jean Boyle enjoys her role as a Mental Health Peer Advocate on the Burlington County PACT Team. She especially likes being able to provide understanding and support to the people she serves.

### OPPORTUNITIES FOR EMPLOYMENT

One Wednesday, an evening when the participants of the SHC meet to share a meal, Jean happened to be talking to Arlene Campbell, the Program Supervisor for the Supported Employment Program. Arlene mentioned she was looking for a driver and Jean gladly took the position. She said it felt good to be employed. Soon, she was working as a Peer Facilitator at the SHC. When a part-time position as a Mental Health Peer Advocate opened up with the Program of Assertive Community Treatment (PACT) Team in Burlington, Jean went for it.

PACT Team members provide direct services to people who have persistent mental illness and have needed hospitalization in the past and are at risk of returning to an institutional setting. Jean noted many of the clients she works with hear voices and have delusions. The team supplies psychiatric medical intervention, medication management, nursing, counseling, vocational aid and case management services. Every client gets an in-person visit at least once a week. Support from the PACT Team is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year through an on-call system.

"I feel like I can fight harder for the clients because I have been where they are." She said someone who has never had a diagnosis might find it easier to dismiss certain things. "I know how important it can feel,"

# 33rd Annual Guardian Angel Dinner Dance

We were excited to return to a live event for our 33rd Guardian Angel Dinner Dance held on September 24, 2022. Together we raised over \$212,000 to help those struggling with mental illness, addiction, domestic violence, homelessness and food insecurity.

This year's honorees epitomized the idea of service to others. We were pleased to present the following awards:

- Ruben, Client Achievement
- Stephanie Peddicord, Richard J. Hughes Humanitarian
- Hitesh Patel, Corporate Citizen of the Year
- Marlton Woman's Club, Burlington Light of Hope
- Paul Kolano, Mercer Light of Hope
- The Church of St. Veronica, Monmouth Light of Hope
- Josephine Esquivel, Ocean Light of Hope

Thanks to all our generous donors who make our life-saving work possible. Enjoy these photos from the wonderful evening.

she said. One of the best parts of her job is helping a client understand their diagnosis. "There's a difference between book learning and lived experience," said Jean. "I may not know all the terms, but I've been there." She is actively working on learning the clinical terms. "I've got definition cheat sheets hanging all around my desk and I'm always learning new things."

"Some of the people we work with are like me – untrusting," said Jean. "It takes a little bit to get through. I try and find the one thing we have in common and that tends to open them up a bit more." Jean said sometimes, when a client learns she is on medication too, that is the key. "And then I share my tips for managing the medication, like setting an alarm to make sure I take it on time."

## HELP WITH HOUSING LEADS TO TAKING A BIG STEP

In 2017, in a bad living situation, Jean needed to find a new place to live. She called Community Services' Rapid Rehousing program for help getting an apartment of her own. Jean knew to qualify she would need to show she could be self-sufficient within six months. She met with Housing Assistance Program Director Mosudi Idowu. "I told him, 'Give me the chance and I will do whatever it takes.' And he did." Through the program, Jean received rental assistance and it was the help she needed to establish her reliability as a tenant. "I love Mosudi. He made it work." Jean has since bought a three-bedroom house.

In order to become self-sufficient, Jean accepted a full-time position with the PACT Team. "The team I am part of is great. My Team Leader Akua Cann goes above and beyond." Jean said she can ask questions and vent if she needs to. She also said she can count on her teammates for suggestions and ideas on how to help those she serves.

"Catholic Charities was here for me when I was at my lowest. Today, I am a full-time employee and I own my home," said Jean. "And to be able to give someone the hand that has been given to me – that is everything."

Catholic Charities offers a variety of services for individuals who have mental health issues. If you or someone you know needs help, call (800) 360-7711.





383 West State Street  
PO Box 1423  
Trenton, NJ 08607-1423

**\$5,053,952 raised to-date**



## 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](http://www.CatholicCharitiesTrenton.org/restore)