

Features

Holiday reminder evolves into year-long relief program

By Richard A. Kiley

What began nearly two decades ago as a small reminder in the *Courier-Journal* to remember the needy at Christmas time has blossomed into a year-long support program for the destitute in the Diocese of Rochester.

The *Courier-Journal*/Catholic Charities Christmas Fund drive, which was established in 1969 as a joint project of this newspaper and the diocesan Catholic Charities office, has helped *Courier-Journal* readers assist thousands of needy families and individuals throughout the diocese.

As part of the drive, the *Courier-Journal* annually publishes a listing of the "100 Neediest Cases," which are being handled by various offices of the diocesan Division of Social Ministry. And although 100 cases year after year represent only a fraction of the poor people throughout the diocese, the drive has done well in capturing the true essence of Christmas.

According to Maurice J. Tierney, diocesan associate director of Social Ministries for Catholic Charities, the drive simply helps those who can't help themselves.

"These people are either not eligible for public assistance or are having the necessary papers processed; that takes time," Tierney said. "Others have lost benefits by misusing

1 Mrs. A. is a 31-year-old single mother with four children ages 14, 7, 4 and 2. Currently their income is limited, and they are dependent upon public assistance. Mrs. A. would like to go back to work and is seeking a job to become self-sufficient.

2 Mrs. B. is an Hispanic single parent living with her five teenagers. Because she cannot afford winter clothing, her children many times go to school underdressed. She is taking English as a second language, but finds it extremely difficult to provide for her family on a fixed income.

3 C. is a single parent with four adorable children, ages 4, 3, 2, and 1. They have no income. She is living with her family in emergency housing. This Christmas will be hard for the family. They need encouragement and joy at Christmas time.

4 This family arrived in this country from the Caribbean in the hopes of bettering themselves. Instead, the father decided to abandon the family after being here only a couple of months, leaving them without financial, social or family support. Now the family must face their first Christmas without one of the parents in an unfamiliar environment.

5 This mother recently moved from Brooklyn to Rochester to escape problems with children. She is 34 years old, has four children ranging in age from 2 years to 12. The mother adopted the two oldest children when their natural mother — her sister — died in 1982. The mother comes from a family with a history of substance abuse and "different" values. She is struggling to be a good role model for her children and to provide a safe environment for them.

6 Mrs. A. is a handicapped woman in her 50s who is living alone and receives little support or companionship from friends

public funds."

Tierney credits former *Courier-Journal* Editor Carmen Viglucci and former General Manager Anthony Costello with initiating the support campaign.

Viglucci, who is now president of Accu-Tech Graphics in Rochester, said he remembers when Catholic Charities would run a small, boxed reminder in the paper every Christmas asking readers to remember the needy. He and Costello wanted to expand the concept so "a few more people could have a better Christmas."

"Basically we copied the '100 Neediest Cases' from The New York Times," Viglucci recalled. "The Times ran the '100 Neediest Cases' of New York City. Catholic Charities was running something before that ... we just personalized it."

The response on behalf of readers was overwhelming, Viglucci said, and the spirit of the drive rubbed off on his staff.

"Everybody got involved — John Dash (former C-J news editor, now a religion writer for the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle), myself ... the whole staff."

What a lot of people don't know is that the Christmas fund drive helps people long past the holidays. Although a lot of the donations are distributed during the Christmas season,

or relatives. She, therefore, feels isolated. Such personal gifts as clothing would help alleviate this loneliness and make a memorable holiday for her.

7 Because her rent is so high, Ms. M. receives no cash allowance from public assistance, causing her to constantly turn to agencies for help with transportation, household and personal needs. She has been trying to find an affordable apartment for three years. Monetary assistance, personal gifts or leads to an apartment would help.

8 Ms. B. is a thirty-year-old mother of three young children. Her oldest son started kindergarten this fall. She is developmentally delayed and unqualified to work. She is raising her children on her Social Security payments and minimal help from public assistance. Despite these hardships, Ms. B. tries very hard to make sure she provides for her children and is usually fairly resourceful in this. However, the increased expenses around holiday time are difficult to meet on a tightly stretched budget. Holidays and family needs are very important to Ms. B., and she tries her best to make them special for the children. She is especially concerned that they have a merry Christmas.

9 Mr. J. landed on the coast of Texas in 1981 after making the perilous journey from Haiti in a dilapidated boat. At that time Haitians were not given the status of refugees, and he was imprisoned immediately upon his arrival, first in Florida and then in New York state. After his release, he found it difficult to find employment because of his age and poor English. But his self-reliant nature makes him reject any form of government dole. He recently got a job as a dishwasher at a local college, but shortly thereafter was hospitalized with pneumonia. At this time, it is unclear whether he will have his job when he is discharged. Mr. J. has a wife and two daughters

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many needs are met throughout the year as well.

"There is an intense (giving) period during the holidays, but we meet a variety of needs all year long," Tierney said. "We aim for maximum mileage and minimum duplication."

According to Marcia Fedyk, who has been with the Catholic Family Center for 13 years, another aim of the drive is to develop self-sufficiency among recipients.

"They have to present a valid emergency; there has to be a documented need," Fedyk said. "Of course we wouldn't help someone who walked in every month for the same reason."

Rent, security deposits, prescriptions (not carried by Medicaid), transportation needs

in Haiti and almost all of his earnings go to them. Mr. J.'s warm and caring personality and winsome manner have made him a favorite of the staff at the Catholic Family Center.

10 Mr. E., his wife and infant son are political exiles from Ethiopia who arrived in the United States this past summer. He completed his high school education in Ethiopia, but was unable to work because of his political convictions. While trying to escape from their homeland, he and his party were attacked by fighter planes, and Mr. E.'s right leg was severely injured. He is working as a dishwasher in a local nursing home, but standing long hours and lifting heavy trays of dishes aggravates his leg injury. He recently began attending night classes at Monroe Community College in hopes of improving his education and employment qualifications.

11 Mrs. T. is a 43-year-old widow from an educated family in South Vietnam. She lost everything when the Viet Cong took over, but most of all, she lost her freedom. Mrs. T. was finally able to leave her country last year with two of her daughters but two other children were left behind. Her fragile health and concern about her two children still in Vietnam cause her constant anxiety and depression. Each day she hopes and prays that her family may once more be united.

12 Mrs. N. is 37 years old. She separated from her husband five years ago, leaving her beloved country in 1983 with four children and some broken English she had learned. Two of her children suffer from severe epilepsy. Regular doctors' appointments, calls from school when they have seizures, and constant supervision are all very demanding. Mrs. N. seldom has a moment for herself. She cries a good deal of the time when she thinks about her children's futures.

and emergency medical needs are among some of the areas for which campaign moneys are used, according to Fedyk.

"We try to get (recipients) to have some responsibility for their situation," Fedyk said.

But when people don't have any control over their circumstances — like when flood waters swamped residents of Elmira and Corning in June of 1972 — the Christmas fund provides hope during times of tragedy.

Contributions to the Christmas fund — whether checks or goods — should be sent to: *Courier-Journal*/Catholic Charities Christmas Fund, c/o Catholic Charities, 1150 Buffalo Road, Rochester, New York 14624. Please do not send contributions to the *Courier-Journal*.

13 Mr. and Mrs. S. fled from Cambodia and arrived in this country three years ago. They are in their mid-30s and have three children ages 12, 6 and 2. Mr. S. is employed but makes only \$4.95 an hour. Mrs. S. is unable to work. Her back was severely injured and permanently deformed when she was forced to carry heavy loads in a Khmer Rouge slave labor camp. She applied for Social Security benefits, but was rejected. The family is still struggling with social adjustments and hardship.

14 It did not take Mrs. L. long to realize it had been a mistake to remain in South Vietnam after the Viet Cong took over. Then it took 11 years before she was able to leave Vietnam. During those years, she and her Amerasian son endured almost continuous abuse and persecution. In her search for freedom, she left her homeland with high expectations. How happy she was when she got her first job! But life is not always simple; she lost the job because of poor English skills.

15 Mrs. R. is a 32-year-old Cambodian refugee, the mother of six children. Her husband died of starvation in Cambodia. Shortly after her arrival in the United States last year, her sponsor moved out of state and left her to fend for herself. Her five-year-old daughter is developmentally disabled and requires a great deal of attention. Mrs. R. was a farmer in her native country. She is functionally illiterate even in her native language. Cultural deprivation is one of the main concerns for this family.

16 Mr. and Mrs. T. are refugees from Cambodia. They are in their mid-30s and have three children ages 13, 7 and 2. The seven year old has cerebral palsy, and the two year old was born prematurely, weighing only one and one-half pounds. Mr. T. has been in this country for three years. He is now em-

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