

# Program makes a business of ending poverty

**EDITORS' NOTE:** This is the fourth in an occasional series focusing on efforts by Christians to end poverty in the United States and abroad by promoting economic development.

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

When he walked into the Worker Ownership Resource Center in Elmira last winter, Andy J. Barrows was receiving unemployment benefits after having been terminated several months before in his position as a cook at Elmira College.

"A while back, I wanted to start my own business," the Horseheads resident recalled. "I got tired of working for other people."

Barrows read about WORC in a local newspaper and decided to check out the program which helps poor or otherwise disadvantaged individuals create their own business or employment opportunities.

WORC's offices in Elmira and Geneva serve the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes regions and have received funding from the U.S. Bishops' Campaign for Human Development, Catholic Charities and the Diocese of Rochester. Since its inception in 1992, WORC has trained more than 80 people in business skills, and has helped start or expand 21 businesses.

Last February, Barrows completed WORC's five-week business training program and is currently working as a freelance photographer. He shoots weddings and anniversary celebrations in addition to photographing for about 20 publications throughout the nation.

Barrows also works as the Chemung County Fairgrounds' official photographer, and he credits the WORC program for helping him become successful.

"It got me off unemployment and welfare," he said.

By doing so, WORC carried out its purpose, according to Kevin Hennessy, the program's executive director. WORC embodies the Catholic Church's belief that anyone — regardless of their income or appearance — is worth the risk of investment.

"If we hadn't started with that faith in the belief in people that comes in our



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Andy Barrows (left) takes pictures of a fellow graduate of the Workers Ownership Resource Center in Elmira following an Aug. 2 graduation ceremony at the center. Barrows, who completed the program last February, is currently working as a free-lance photographer.

faith, we'd still be sitting here twiddling our thumbs," Hennessy said.

And it's probable their hands would be doling out donated food and other items to the region's unemployed and poor. Hennessy noted that by the end of the 1980s, diocesan social ministry offices in the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes region were looking for new ways to serve the area's low-income residents. Many of them seemed unable to escape the unenviable cycle endured by people who must eat at soup kitchens and food pantries, he said.

"There needed to be some systemic change, or more fundamental change, to address the fact that so many people were out of work," he recalled. Hennessy added that even employed people suffered because the region lost high-wage industrial jobs in the 1980s that were replaced by low-wage service-industry jobs and light-assembly positions.

In 1989, the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes offices submitted a funding proposal to the Campaign For Human Development for the WORC program. The grant application was approved by CHD in 1991, and WORC received



Father Peter Enyan-Boadu discusses the guidelines of St. Monica's program during a recent interview with Vida Crockett.

matching funds from the Diocese of Rochester, which provided both money and staff support for the project.

In November, 1992, WORC initiated its first training program. Since then, several such programs have been offered.

An aspiring WORC participant is asked to personally assess his or her own life to make sure he or she is emotionally ready for the commitment becoming a business-owner takes, Hennessy noted.

WORC also helps possible clients examine their credit history to see how any outstanding debt that could hinder a future business might be resolved, he remarked.

Potential trainees are also asked to research their business proposal by spending time in the local library, informally surveying potential customers, and researching their possible competitors.

"Part of what's built into that is a self-selection process," Hennessy said. "Their research indicates their level of commitment."

Participants accepted for the "Planning Your Business" program then spend five weekly three-hour sessions learning about bookkeeping, marketing strategies, business operations, taxes and other subjects related to independent entrepreneurship. The general sessions are supplemented by weekly one-on-one sessions with WORC staff members.

"A lot of what we do is to try to demystify the process of developing a business," Hennessy said. "Some of the peo-

ple who come in here would not even be able to start a conversation with a banker. We were work with them to make them familiar with what banking is about, and at the end of the process, they are ready."

By the end of the course, participants must create their own business plan, and at that point, may be eligible for a small loan from WORC, Hennessy noted. Currently, WORC is working with area banks who are interested in taking loan applications from WORC graduates. The loans would be guaranteed by WORC, he said, adding that Chemung

Canal Trust Company has already used such an arrangement to finance some fledgling businesses.

WORC offers several types of follow-up programs including alumni and peer support groups; business workshops; technical assistance; attendance at Chamber of Commerce events; and assistance on writing and computer skills.

Although the program has received extensive publicity from the local news media, word-of-mouth seems to be WORC's best advertising vehicle, Hennessy noted — a fact to which Linda Swartout can attest.

Swartout and a partner plan to open a pet store in Elmira called New Eden by month's end. Swartout learned of WORC through another business-owner who had received help from the program in starting her own copying business and decided to check out the program. She graduated from WORC earlier this month.

"Whether you're already in business, or just looking to start out, there's a lot of stuff you can learn," Swartout said. "We've got a lot of new friends, and we've met people in the business world."

**EDITORS' NOTE** — Hennessy noted that WORC is always in search of volunteer speakers and workers from the business and financial communities. To learn more about WORC, call the Geneva office at 315/789-5091, or the Elmira office at 607/737-5212.

## Fr. Lawrence Gross resigns pastorate at Good Shepherd

**HENRIETTA** — Bishop Matthew H. Clark has accepted the resignation of Father Lawrence A. Gross as pastor of Church of the Good Shepherd, 3318 E. Henrietta Road.

Father Gross, who announced his resignation to parishioners at weekend Masses July 2-3, is serving as the parish's administrator until a new pastor is appointed.

According to Father Robert P. Ring, director of the diocesan Department of Priests' Personnel, Father Gross "thought it might be best for himself and the parish if he resigned." Father Gross was named pastor of the Henrietta church in 1992.

Father Ring said no specific issues or problems led to Father Gross's sudden and unexpected resignation. But he did say, "It's a large parish — one of the

largest in the diocese — and very challenging. I think it was a matter of feeling that this was not working out well."

Once a new pastor is named for Good Shepherd — possibly by early September — Father Gross will be assigned to another parish, Father Ring noted.

A Rochester native, Father Gross served as pastor of Holy Apostles Church from 1983-92. Prior to that, he served as associate pastor at Rochester's St. Thomas the Apostle Church (1982-83); chaplain at Bishop Kearney High School (1971-82); and as associate pastor of Holy Name of Jesus Parish (1966-71). He was ordained June 5, 1966.

Father Gross will be considered for another pastorate when one is advertised by the diocese, Father Ring said.

— Lee Strong