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Poverty

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ered the campaign, he said, and hundreds of radio and TV stations ran ads publicizing it.

Poor kids

This year's phase of the campaign will focus on the plight of children, Father Vitillo said during a phone interview from his Washington offices.

Sixteen percent of America's children — almost 12 million — live in poverty, he noted, pointing out that children have the highest poverty rate of any age group in the country. Among the effects of such poverty is an infant mortality rate twice as high as that of infants who are not impoverished, a rate that is second only to Russia in the industrialized world, according to CCHD figures.

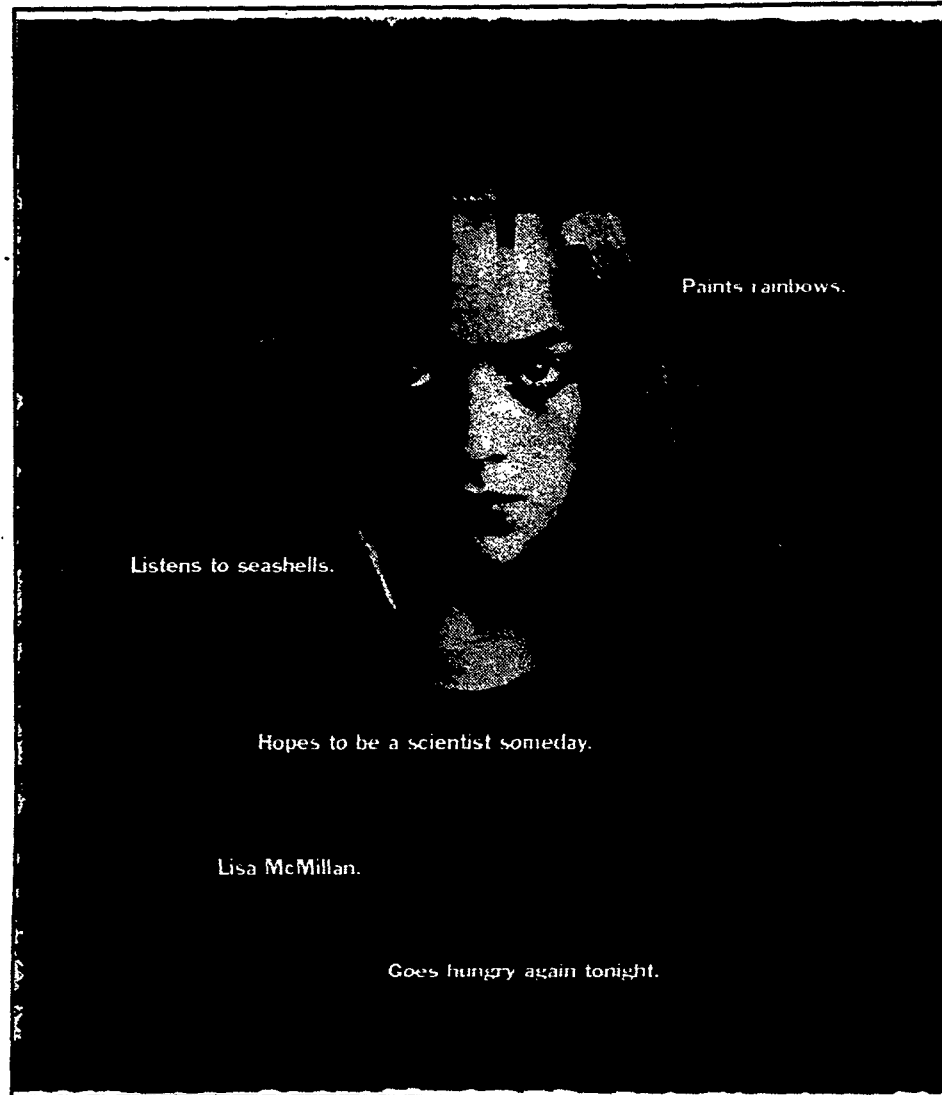
CCHD statements also noted that although poverty rates declined slightly from 1999 to 2000, the child poverty rate is higher than it was in 1979. Meanwhile, according to recent United Nations reports, the U.S. child poverty rate is higher than it is in such nations as Germany, Italy, France, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom and Japan. Father Vitillo attributed some of the disparity between the United States and other Western nations to the smaller social welfare safety net in America.

CCHD also pointed out that the U.S. Census Bureau considers the poverty threshold for a family of four to be \$17,650. However, Father Vitillo noted that other studies have shown that most Americans believe it takes closer to \$35,000 annually to adequately house, clothe and feed a family of four.

Father Vitillo noted that children in poverty suffer regardless of how they came to be impoverished. Although some members of the public may be inclined to blame impoverished adults for their plight, "they can't necessarily say that about children," the priest said.

"Whenever the parents don't have (good-paying) jobs, the children live in poverty," Father Vitillo said. Children growing up in poverty often lack proper nutrition and education, he said, leading to a stunting of their physical, intellectual and emotional growth. Additionally, he said, such children often grow up to be poor themselves, perpetuating the cycle of poverty from generation to generation.

"By highlighting child poverty in our new campaign we hope to raise urgent attention to the essential need of providing enough food, shelter, medical attention and education, as well as emotional support and moral guidance, to our nation's next generation," Father Vitillo said. "If we are to break the cycle of poverty permanently, we must provide long-term solutions, not just stopgap measures."



Listens to seashells.

Hopes to be a scientist someday.

Lisa McMillan.

Goes hungry again tonight.

Prints rainbows.

Catholic Campaign for Human Development

Interfaith Action

CCHD has been funding anti-poverty initiatives since its founding by the U.S. bishops in 1970, and has given more than \$260 million to 4,000 projects nationwide, Catholic and non-Catholic — projects that help create jobs, improve neighborhoods, widen access to health and child care, and help people find permanent housing. One beneficiary of CCHD funding is Interfaith Action in Rochester, an alliance of churches, Catholic and non-Catholic, and businesses that has organized neighbors to revitalize the city on a number of fronts.

One of Interfaith Action's most prominent current initiatives, which began last March and is partly funded by CCHD, is called "Raise A Roof!" Interfaith officials pointed out that 65 percent of the city's housing units are rental, and that families continually leave the city in search of better schools. Meanwhile, vacancies, crime and high concentrations of low-income families make it difficult for neighborhood businesses to prosper.

Designed to increase home ownership on the city's west side, Raise A Roof has been funded and supported by a wide array of businesses, banks, churches,

schools, city government officials and organizations, and has consisted of neighborhood clean-ups, meetings with government leaders on various issues, and a variety of other activities.

The initiative has already affected families for the better, according to Interfaith officials. For example, 60 families have received mortgage pre-qualification counseling and are working towards home ownership, and three other families have actually purchased homes.

Father Paul J. Tomasso, pastor of the parishes of Holy Apostles, Holy Family and St. Anthony of Padua in Rochester, said Interfaith Action contains members from all three of his parishes, and has made a positive impact on their neighborhoods. Having just finished meeting with a local police official on public safety issues before being interviewed, he spoke passionately about why he wants to see crime lowered in the neighborhoods surrounding his parishes.

"We can't ask people to buy homes on streets that are filled with drug-dealing or drug houses or prostitution," he said.

He added that stable, crime-free neighborhoods can only benefit the children growing up there. For example, he said, parents who own homes in the city are

less likely to move frequently, allowing children to build a relationship with their neighborhood schools.

"This allows the children to stay with the same teachers and the same friends in the same environment," he said.

Eileen Dillio, pastoral business manager of the Roman Catholic Community of the 19th Ward, has raised six children on the west side of Rochester, and wants to help other families raise their children throughout her neighborhood. One way she said she's doing that is by serving as president of Interfaith Action, whose members include parishioners from the 19th Ward parishes — St. Augustine's, St. Monica's and Our Lady of Good Counsel.

Like Father Tomasso, Dillio stressed the importance of parents owning their own homes in the city in order to enhance the lives of their children. Too many city parents are forced to continually move from apartment to apartment in search of lower rents, she said, causing area schools to see a constant turnover in students throughout the year.

"It's a revolving door that just goes around and around because the parents can't keep quality housing," she said.

Dillio added that Interfaith empowers the children's parents by teaching them how to deal with local powerbrokers in an effective manner. When the children see their parents working through Interfaith successfully to change their lives, this teaches the children to better their lot through rational action, she noted.

"Indirectly, we're helping the children by giving a voice to their parents," she said. "I think Interfaith Action, as a whole, is giving voice to people who have rights to things but didn't know how to ask for them."

Can do

Groups like Interfaith Action are vital to turning around the lives of impoverished children, according to CCHD, whose Web site outlines a number of ways Catholics can help poor youngsters. Besides joining such a group, other ways include sponsoring a poor child's education; mentoring an impoverished individual; and paying decent wages to unskilled workers who may be raising families.

Father Vitillo added that Catholics need to lend their voices to the ongoing debate about welfare, and educate themselves on how welfare reform has affected poor families for better or worse. Most importantly, Catholics should include their creator in any attempts to help poor children, he stressed.

"We need God's strength to help us deal with these deep structural problems."

More information on the campaign can be found on the Web at www.povertyusa.org.

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