

—Christmas Appeal—

CFC helps build man's life

Jennifer Burke/Catholic Courier

Wilson Tyrone Raggs was trapped, held captive in a life he didn't want to live.

After a childhood marked with physical abuse, Raggs was kicked out of his house and onto the streets of Chicago when he was 11 years old. He was taken in by a street gang soon after, and, as a member of that gang, was forced to sell drugs, carry weapons and use them to hurt others. Raggs was also shot and stabbed several times himself. When he tried to leave the gang, members beat him with a baseball bat and burned him to prevent him from leaving.

"I can't quit, the only way is to die. You're stuck in this revolving door because you go in and out of the jail," Raggs recalled.

After returning from one of his stints in prison, Raggs fled Chicago and came to Rochester, hoping to build a new life for himself. He took on whatever jobs he could find, but nonetheless soon found himself facing eviction from his apartment.

Raggs, who suffers from depression, is mostly illiterate and sometimes has a hard time communicating when he's excited or under pressure. This often made it hard for the 41-year-old to express himself, and impatient people sometimes waved him away or gave him a quick answer without taking the time to really listen to him. After approaching both the Urban League of Rochester and the Baden Street Settlement of Rochester for help and being turned away, someone from the Urban League suggested that he try Catholic Family Center.

He did, and Renee Okafor was assigned to his case. That's when things began looking up for Raggs.

"This lady beat the pavement with me. ... This lady really put on her boxing gloves for me," Raggs said.

Raggs noticed that when Okafor accompanied him to some of the places he had been turned away from, "it's a whole different ballgame." Okafor helped him obtain food, clothing and a place to stay. She



Mike Crupi/Catholic Courier

During a meeting at Rochester's Catholic Family Center Dec. 3, Wilson Tyrone Raggs recalls how he received help from case manager Renee Okafor and the *Catholic Courier*/Catholic Charities Christmas Appeal.

was also able to help him see a doctor, and Raggs later had surgery to install metal plates in his arm and hip, reminders of the wounds and scar tissue that had built up during his years with the gang.

In June, Raggs began working at Rochester's Industrial Furnace Company Inc., delivering furnace materials to local corporations. Before he started working there, he volunteered at Catholic Family Center, moving boxes, organizing the clothing room, helping in the food room and doing whatever needed to be done.

"I don't forget what they have done for me," Raggs said. "They brought me a long ways. From this place I learned to pull myself up and grow. I came from having nothing to having self-respect. They gave me this chance. This system really does work. If someone really wants the help, this works. What they offer you, money can't buy."

Raggs said not only did Okafor help him become self-sufficient, she also provided something he desperately needed — a friend, someone who would listen. He said all the people who work at Catholic Family

Center have become like a family to him, since he doesn't have any family in the area.

Raggs said he tends to slip into depression easier around the holidays, when he sees families having a good time together. Being alone in his apartment with no one to talk to can be "almost like a jail cell," he said, but going to work or calling Okafor usually makes him feel better.

"I call her when I'm having problems. She introduced me to her kids. She's nice to me, Miss Renee," Raggs said.

Okafor remembers when she first saw Raggs he seemed to be "like a deer with big eyes." She said she's proud of the progress her client has made.

"He's a very good and reliable person," Okafor said. "No one just ever gave him that opportunity to be who he is. He's trying to survive."

Okafor said that Raggs doesn't take anything for granted, and she'll often find out that he gave his last dollar to someone he thought needed it more than he did. Raggs said that one of his goals is to be able to return the kindness that was shown to him.

"Hopefully I can help someone else that's in the predicament that I was in," he said. "I want to help someone else the way they helped me. If I ever was blessed with a lot of money, I would help the homeless. I almost was in their group, not by choice, by force."

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