

Catholic Charities helps woman find, hold onto job

Shari Lynn Preston nodded out a window in the dining room at Our Daily Bread Employment Center in Baltimore.

“I was on the line,” she proclaimed. “I came through those doors, and was treated with respect. I learned to keep my mental state together. ... Now, a lot of the people I broke bread with here are on my bus.”

Happy and fulfilled with her job as a driver of the Charm City Circulator, Preston was the guest speaker at the 30th annual Catholic Charities Leadership Breakfast Dec. 8 – six months after she came seeking help.

Her testimony, shared with several hundred business leaders and other benefactors, personalized the individual impact of the raw numbers that Louis R. Cestello, chairman of the breakfast committee, and William J. McCarthy, executive director of Catholic Charities, had just recounted.

They mentioned \$2.1 million raised in the past year, which saw 600,000 requests for emergency services, 350,000 meals served, and safe and affordable housing for nearly 1,700 seniors, all delivered by 15,000 volunteers and 2,000 employees.

It was left to Preston to single out and give thanks to Pat Bennett, the placement manager who helped her find stable work and new purpose.

“God directed people in my path,” Preston said later. “Whether Pat knows it or not, she was placed in front of me.”

A native of Brooklyn, N.Y., Preston moved to Baltimore’s Brooklyn neighborhood in 2005, armed with a commercial driver’s license but burned out from her years working in a residential drug education and prevention program.

Preston said that she appreciates the irony of the circumstances that brought her to OBDEC. Reliant on public transportation that was adversely affected by last winter’s

record-setting snow fall, she was fired from her job as a food service worker at a Baltimore hospital after too many late arrivals.

She came to OBDEC last June, the same month Bennett transitioned from a career in the banking industry to a position with Catholic Charities, where the Work 4 Success program trains unemployed clients to find a job in a highly-competitive market and hold onto it.

“I was just getting my feet wet myself,” Bennett said. “When Shari came to me, she was so enthusiastic about the guidance she had received from Mike Jones, who helped her in the Work 4 Success program. Shari just needed a little direction.”

Bennett convinced Preston, who had experience driving a bus at BWI, that she should return to the transportation field.

“I had just gotten certified to be a food-safety worker, but I didn’t care for it,” Preston said. “Pat (Bennett) made me think about transferable skills. I like to drive. It’s what I’m good at.”

At the Leadership Breakfast, Preston invited all to visit her on the Orange and Purple Lines of the Charm City Circulator, and gave thanks.

“I am very grateful that you could make that possible,” Preston said. “Your seeds are being planted in good soil. Please continue to keep planting, so we can harvest.”

For more about the Catholic Charities Leadership Breakfast, visit CatholicReview.org/mcmullenblog.