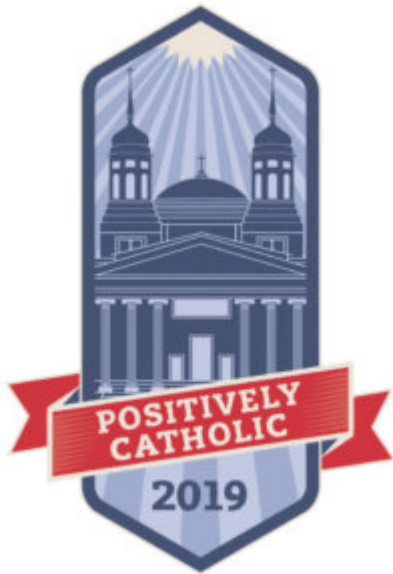


Catholic Charities program hones ability to secure substantive employment

Seventh in a Series



The October 2017 issue of the Catholic Review explored the theme of “Positively Catholic” through Education, Health Care, Parish Life and Service. Each Review issue in 2019 will explore one of those aspects of being “Positively Catholic.” This month we look at education.

A criminal record, food insecurity, child care issues and homelessness are among some of the barriers to finding and holding down a job faced by the men and women who find their way to the St. Edward’s Workforce Development Center in West Baltimore.

Coming in off West Lafayette Avenue, they encounter another hurdle, 50 steps up to the third floor of an elevator-less building that has undergone other iterations since it last served as a Catholic school more than five decades ago.

Clients may be discouraged the first time they make that climb, but when they return to the Ready 4 Work program to share the good news inherent in a paystub or

bank statement, it is often with a bound in their step.

“For those who are physically challenged, it’s one more thing they have to deal with,” said Leiloni Cheeks, a job placement specialist with the Catholic Charities of Baltimore program. “But when a graduate comes back to show us a paycheck, or their first mortgage payment ... you feel their joy.”

The center at St. Edward’s was founded in response to the April 2015 death of Freddie Gray Jr. in nearby Sandtown-Winchester and an ongoing cycle of failing families and schools that feed the illegal drug trade and horrific murder rate.

All are traced to a lack of opportunity that was among the factors that led Archbishop William E. Lori to pen two pastoral letters on racism in less than a year.

In attempting to reverse that systemic dysfunction by preparing clients for meaningful employment, many as automotive technicians, Catholic Charities is not reinventing the wheel, simply following the model it has in place at one of its landmark programs on the Fallsway.

Tough landscape

Catholic Charities yearned to do more in West Baltimore after Gray’s death from injuries sustained while in police custody, which led to rioting and distrust among residents and authorities that, four years later, has yet to subside.

“We were very intentional about being more present on the west side,” said Kevin Creamer, program manager of the St. Edward’s Workforce Development Center (SEWDC). “Everyone wanted to do something. ... We wanted to make sure we were doing the *right* thing.”

Creamer holds degrees from the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Ind., and Santa Clara (Calif.) University. He attended a Jesuit high school in Washington, D.C., grew up in Montgomery County, and contrasts his adolescence to those served by the SEWDC.

“You think about your own first job in high school, there was community support around that,” he said. “In West Baltimore, there are no stores where you (a youth)

can work. There are corner liquor stores. There isn't that access to opportunity."

In some parts of the city, it may be easier to procure heroin than fresh fruits and vegetables. The reality of life in a food desert is one reason Catholic Charities went to St. Edward, where it oversees a parish food pantry.

"We want the meals to be the invitation to the services," Creamer said. "If you're not addressing food security first, you don't have the luxury of thinking about a job down the line."

The Lafayette Head Start program occupies the second floor of the former parish school at St. Edward, which closed in 1967. The third floor houses the Ready 4 Work program, which meets daily, 9 a.m.-2 p.m., over the last two weeks of every month.

It offers classes on résumé writing and mock interviews. The Homeless Persons Representation Project helps clients expunge their arrest record.

"We wanted to (reach) the individuals who were looking for general skills training," Creamer said. "For a lot of our folks, there is so much talent and skill they possess, they've just not been trained to see it that way. Being able to help folks see what they can bring to the table is a big part of what we do over those two weeks."

The goal is not just a steady paycheck, but a career track that includes health and retirement benefits, which can prove life-changing.

"Some of those who have attended the program, their lives, their perception of things and their future, have changed," said Spiritan Father Honest Munishi, pastor of St. Edward, who linked its impact to the other programs on campus. "All these have brought a big impact in the life of people in this neighborhood."

Under the hood

More than 150 men and women have completed the Ready 4 Work program at the SEWDC since its formation in 2017. Of those, 87 have been placed in jobs, a few in nursing, most in the automotive maintenance and repair business.

Many came through a 12-week Automotive Technician Training Program in

Halethorpe, through a Catholic Charities partnership with Vehicles for Change, which supplies donated autos to those in need.

Like Ready 4 Work, the automotive program is free for participants.

Vehicles for Change added a Full Circle Auto Repair & Training Center several years ago, to hasten the re-entry into society of those who have been incarcerated and have completed its basic course.

Its leadership was familiar with the reach of Catholic Charities, as Chris Mathias, one of Full Circle's first hires, got back on his feet thanks to a program that inspired the SEWDC.

A high school dropout, Mathias nonetheless found good work as a heavy truck mechanic. A work injury, however, led to a prescription for oxycontin, addiction and five years in prison.

His life turned around at the Our Daily Bread Employment Center on the Fallsway, through its Christopher Place Employment Academy, which Catholic Charities describes as a "residential employment program that provides education and training, as well as recovery support to formerly homeless men of the Baltimore area."

"I wanted to change everything that was bad in my life," Mathias said. "It worked out good."

Now the fleet manager at Vehicles for Change, Mathias lives in Rosedale, in a home that includes his 20-year-old son. He plans to celebrate 10 years of sobriety Aug. 31.

Heavy workload

The president of Vehicles for Change is Martin Schwartz, a graduate of the former Cardinal Gibbons High School. Wayne Farrar, its main instructor, spent most of his teaching career across Wilkens Avenue, when Lincoln Technical Institute was located there.

"He (Farrar) became like an uncle, like a grandfather to me," said Taneshia Davis,

who came through the Ready 4 Work program and then was valedictorian of her Automotive Technician Training Program at Vehicles for Change.

She juggles a job at a Jiffy Lube franchise with caring for her three children.

“I am proud of myself for getting this far,” she said.

Willie Smith more recently went down that same path, all while working two jobs, following a shorter shift at a rental car agency with a 5 p.m.- 1:30 a.m. shift working security at the Maryland Zoo in Baltimore.

She was en route to the latter job when one of her adult children frantically called, with the news that the house in which they lived was on fire. It was not the first time she was left scrambling to find shelter, as an earlier row home in which she resided was sold and the new landlord gave her 60 days to evacuate.

“I’ve been homeless, but not on the street,” Smith said. “I’ve cooked meals on a propane stove, done what I had to do.”

What is her motivation?

Setting an example, she said, for her children, such as the ones made for her by her mother, who was a housekeeper at Villa Maria, another Catholic Charities facility, for more than 40 years, and her grandparents.

“I watched my grandfather go to a saw mill every day, and my grandmother put food on the table,” said Smith, who was born and educated in Virginia. “They kept the family together, they fought (for a better life) together.

“That’s what I’m trying to teach my kids.”

In late June, Smith landed a job at a Jiffy Lube on North Howard Street.

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