

Hope from FRESH Start

From time to time, I will invite guest columnists to share their "Thoughts on our Church." I am especially anxious to introduce members of our Archdiocesan staff, given the extraordinary expertise they offer me and all our Archdiocesan efforts.

Harold (Hal) Smith has been Executive Director of Archdiocesan Catholic Charities since 1976 and has gained national respect in building one of our Nation's leading private charitable organizations. The more than 80 programs of Baltimore Catholic Charities span the whole Archdiocese and address the needs of children and families, the poor, the elderly and people with developmental disabilities. I am pleased that he has contributed this week's column.

This is a story of hope. As Executive Director of Catholic Charities, I have for over three decades known that hope is what we offer to those who come to us for assistance. Hope for a better life ... a life of self-sufficiency.

Nearly 17 years ago, a social worker in the Baltimore City school system was overwhelmed by the number of children who were doing extremely poorly in the classroom because their personal lives were in shambles. Usually from single-parent families, these children were living in situations that were so unpredictable that education was a mere afterthought. Linda Miller knew that these children had no hope of achieving the most basic of educational milestones that would prepare them for their own adulthood.

These children were not living on the streets, but they were truly homeless in the sense that they were living temporarily with friends or relatives because their parent was out of work and they had been evicted, they were being abused, and they were in a protective transitional housing setting or, even worse, they were moving from shelter to shelter, night after night. Today, with the mortgage foreclosure situation what it is, who knows how many families may reach this situation?

Linda did not give up hope for these children and enlisted the help of her friend Jack Pechter, who owned a real estate management company. He prevailed upon others in the real estate business to offer apartments rent-free for one year while families

were getting on their feet. The families paid one-third of their income for operating expenses only. At the end of the year and as they became employed, the rent for the apartment was adjusted to an affordable level, close to market rate, so they could stay.

Project FRESH Start (Family Relocation, Empowerment and Self Help) was born. Catholic Charities has managed this program from its start in 1991 as a partnership of The Associated: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore, Associated Black Charities, the Baltimore City Public School System and private real estate developers. Now the poor-performing students could begin to have stability in their lives, to focus on their education and to have hope for their futures.

In managing the program, Catholic Charities immediately assigns each family a case worker to assist in setting goals that include agreeing to an intense case management plan; participating in job training and educational opportunities to enhance or develop new skills; participating in workshops that teach parenting skills, health and nutrition, and self-esteem; taking an active part in their children's education; developing a budget and paying off debts; and submitting to random drug and alcohol testing. Staff assists families in securing job training, employment, tutoring and mentoring.

Let me tell you about one of our first clients, Paula. Laid off from her job, she had lost custody of her children because she could not provide for them financially. Paula had also lost hope. When she entered Project FRESH Start, Catholic Charities assisted her in obtaining resources for child care as well as helped her to further develop her sales skills. Today she is a new car salesperson at a dealership in Towson. She has proven to the court system that she can financially support her children and has been awarded full, permanent custody. Her children are doing well in school and are at grade level.

A few months ago, Linda made a presentation to our Board of Trustees. During it, a FRESH Start client named Elrich shared his story. He was 55, drinking alcohol, using drugs and smoking. He could not read and was raising two children alone. Upon entering this program, he received training and became a barber, learned how to read, and with help, overcame all three of his addictions. He now lives in an

apartment in a safe neighborhood that has good schools for his children. He offered heartfelt thanks for the support he has received from our staff and the program.

In the last year alone, Project FRESH Start provided housing and support services to 29 families and a total of 64 children. Catholic Charities now places families from the city school system as well as from our own programs, Our Daily Bread Employment Center and My Sister's Place. Project FRESH Start is, for many, the bridge to self-sufficiency.

Both Linda and Jack believed in the importance of hope. More importantly, they acted upon their belief. In their Jewish tradition, what they did is called a mitzvah. In our Catholic faith, we call it hearing the call of Jesus to act on behalf of our brothers and sisters. Something tells me that the parents and children in Project FRESH Start simply call it the miracle they had hoped for.