

# **‘They are our sisters in Christ’: Jessup parish helps expectant mothers in crisis pregnancies**

**By Karen Sampson Hoffman**

*Special to Review*

Ariane McBride was pregnant while living in a homeless shelter with her four children. She wasn't sure how she felt and her only friend suggested she terminate her pregnancy. A man she was working with for assistance gave her the number of a Gabriel Network volunteer. During that phone call, she just cried.

"I felt alone," she said. "They asked me what I needed and what I needed at that time was someone to talk with."

McBride was referred to St. Lawrence Martyr Parish in Jessup, which hosts a church-based maternity program with the Gabriel Network coordinated by Joe Toher. Volunteers Donna Ford, Sally Rico and Toher went to meet with her.

"They really comforted me," McBride said. "Knowing someone's there and has your back, it makes a huge difference," she said. "You start to feel like it's meant to be and you can do it. I'm so happy. Having her is the best decision I could have made.

I'm so happy that I get to keep her." "Her" is the baby girl McBride is expecting in mid-June. McBride plans to name her Joy. Gabriel Network works with women experiencing crisis pregnancies. Network team members assist mothers throughout their pregnancies and help them prepare for life after their babies are born.

Begun in December 2014, the St. Lawrence team has supported five mothers. Team members help mothers navigate available services; parish members provide everything from maternity and baby clothes to strollers, bassinets and diapers.

"I was finishing a master of arts degree in church ministry," Toher said. "I needed a

final project. I went to (Trinitarian) Father Vic (Scocco), and asked if he had anything he wanted. He immediately said he wanted Gabriel Network at St. Lawrence.”

Toher assembled a team; some members have casework experience, others worked at charitable organizations. Toher spoke during Masses, requesting assistance.

Parishioners overwhelmingly provided the material support.

“They’re participating actively in God’s work,” Toher said. “The parish has only asked, ‘What do you need?’ not ‘What do you do with it?’ ”

Gabriel Network Executive Director Stephen Wallace said the St. Lawrence team members proved themselves in six months.

“We sent them the first mom and crossed our fingers to see how it would go,” Wallace said.

### **About the Gabriel Network**

Gabriel Network, founded two decades ago as the Gabriel Project, operates maternity homes in Ellicott City, Bowie and Gaithersburg for pregnant women in need. The nonprofit organization also maintains a help line (1-800-ANGEL-OK) and a church-based support network that pairs expectant mothers with “Angel Friends” who can offer one-on-one mentoring and assistance.

There are currently 30 churches throughout the state that are members of the network; most of them Catholic parishes. Within the Archdiocese of Baltimore, 15 parishes are involved in the Gabriel Network.

Participating churches display large signs on their property that advertise a phone number women can call for help. They collect baby items, clothing, furniture and other goods that are donated to women in need.

The Gabriel Network celebrated its 20th anniversary with a May 2 gala at the Rosensteel Knights of Columbus Hall in Silver Spring.

*For more information, visit the Gabriel Network.*

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