

DIGNITY OF THE PERSON

CARE OF THE POOR

HOLISM

THE POWER **TO DO GOOD**

COMPASSION

PARTNERSHIP

“They’ve given me inspiration and let me know my life is worth something.”

Bonaventure House helps man achieve independence after life on streets

Michael remembers how he felt after he learned he had tested positive for the HIV virus.

“I was scared to sleep because I was afraid I wouldn’t wake up,” he says. His cocaine habit, which had evolved from snorting to free-basing, got worse after the diagnosis. “At that point, I just didn’t care,” he says. “I thought, ‘I’m just going to die anyway.’ I had no feelings for nobody, not even myself. I was angry and scared.”

That was eight years ago. Today, Michael, 43, lives independently in a studio apartment in Chicago. Drug-free for more than a year, he hopes to become a drug counselor and to pursue his passion for poetry.

Michael, who began living on the streets when he was 16, credits his turnaround to the staff of Bonaventure House, a Chicago

residence operated by the Alexian Brothers for people who are HIV-positive.

He moved into Bonaventure House in February 2001 after he was referred by a drug treatment center. He found friendship, acceptance and a kitchen job designed to prepare him for the working world.

“I got along with everybody there,” says Michael, who left school after the seventh grade and has a cognitive disorder. “I knew they liked me too. That’s a gift.”

Still, Michael struggled with his drug habit. Also addicted to street life, he strayed from Bonaventure House, sometimes leaving for extended periods to get high. One day, he returned after an absence of more than a week, “and he looked horrible,” says Susan Zeigler, L.C.S.W., a Bonaventure House case manager who assisted Michael.

At Zeigler’s urging, he went to the hospi-

Michael, a former Bonaventure House resident, says he is grateful to Susan Zeigler for not giving up on him.

tal, where he was diagnosed with pneumonia. Making matters worse, he had stopped taking his HIV medication. After a week in the hospital, he was moved to a drug treatment center, where he suffered a relapse. He returned to the hospital for about a month, including a week in intensive care.

While visiting him, Zeigler and Veronica Llerena, Occupational Therapy Supervisor at Bonaventure House, who also worked closely with Michael, told him they were reserving a room for him but suggested that he needed a more structured living environment for a while. They recommended that he live in a nursing home temporarily and then move into a halfway house.

Michael reacted angrily to the idea but eventually agreed to try it. At the nursing home, staff members made sure he took his medications, and he enjoyed socializing with



the facility’s elderly residents. His recovery gained steam at the halfway house.

After five months there, Michael was approved for a government-subsidized apartment. Zeigler helped him find an apartment, and he moved into his new home in June 2002. It is the first time that he has lived in a place of his own.

“It’s great,” says Michael, who lives on disability payments. “What I really like is I can see my money going someplace else,

like for food or washing my clothes—someplace responsible.”

He thanks God for bringing him to Bonaventure House, and he is grateful to Zeigler and Llerena for not giving up on him. He calls Zeigler, who also has helped him with legal issues, and Llerena “my two angels.”

“They’ve given me inspiration and let me know my life is worth something,” he says. “I want to live. I want to live life happy.”

“Our ultimate goal is to make sure every student in the school is happy so they can learn.”

Social workers make life smoother for Catholic school students

Monika Chiappetta prides herself on being an organized person. She goes to work with a detailed plan for the day—and then hardly ever follows it.

“That’s the beauty of school social work,” she says. “It’s crisis-driven. It’s not long-term therapy. What mandates our day is what happens that day—or the day before if you weren’t there.”

She is one of six social workers who serve 14 Catholic schools in Chicago’s north-west suburbs as part of a program funded primarily by Alexian Brothers Hospital Network (ABHN), with additional contributions from the schools.

Launched in 1999, the program is designed to give Catholic school students access to social workers, a right guaranteed for public school students under Illinois law.

Catholic schools often cannot afford social workers, yet Catholic school students “still have problems,” Chiappetta says. “They’re still kids.”

The problems range from playground disputes to child abuse, says Chiappetta, who was the program’s first social worker and now serves as its Co-coordinator. “We do one-on-one interventions with kids who need help,” she says. “Our ultimate goal is to make sure every student in the school is happy so they can learn...We deal with depression, suicidal thoughts, problems at home with divorce or death....”

The social workers also deal with classroom issues, such as the separation anxiety sometimes experienced by first-time students or the difficulties that can arise when students move from one grade to another.

Although the social workers often work

directly with students, they also work with parents, teachers and outside experts on students’ behalf. The social workers also offer help to parents, who have a growing need for information about parenting skills and sometimes need crisis intervention, Chiappetta says.

She cites the case of an eighth-grade girl who became involved in an inappropriate Internet relationship with a boy. The relationship became all-consuming, and the girl, formerly an A student, began failing most of her classes. She racked up thousands of dollars in bills from telephone conversations with the boy, saw her relationship with her parents deteriorate, and stopped taking care of herself hygienically.

Alerted by the girl’s friends that “she was in over her head,” Chiappetta intervened, speaking first with the girl, and then

Monika Chiappetta says school social work is crisis-driven. “It’s not long-term therapy,” she says.



with her parents. She arranged for the girl to visit specialists at Alexian Brothers Behavioral Health Hospital in Hoffman Estates, Ill., who determined she was suffering from depression. Chiappetta then worked with Interfaith Parish Support Services of ABHN to arrange for the girl and her family to receive therapy. Chiappetta also enlisted the help of police experts in the case.

The girl “ended up graduating very happily, with very good grades and started taking care of herself,” Chiappetta says, adding that the girl now is doing well in high school.

The school social worker program embodies all the Values of the Alexian Brothers, particularly Care of the Poor, because when it comes to social workers, Catholic schools—and their students—are needy, Chiappetta says.

“It’s so rewarding to get thank-you notes from parents and to just know that the teachers can focus on their specialty, which is education,” she says. “It’s so awesome to know that all the hard work we’re doing is paying off.”