



Helping People Help Themselves



breaking the cycle of poverty for over 40 years

Catholic Campaign for Human Development
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CAMDEN STUDENT LEADERS

BY BETH GRIFFIN

A tenacious group of young students in Camden, New Jersey, is proving that there's no age limit on community organizing.

The Student Leaders' Von Nieda Park Task Force successfully advocated for environmental, safety, aesthetic, and equipment improvements and flood control in a derelict neighborhood park. The task force is comprised primarily of 6th, 7th, and 8th graders from two Catholic schools and a charter academy. What began as a summer discussion about civic engagement has grown into a grassroots movement to effect small but meaningful changes in the community.

In less than two years, the student leaders have transformed the park through a combination of their own painting and cleaning and their insistence that officials make sure the trash is collected and the area is fenced in to keep motorcycles out of the playground.

Franciscan Fr. Jud Weiksnar is the pastor of St. Anthony of Padua and one of the founding moderators of the student leaders. He says the group's efforts are "a hybrid of community service, community organizing, civic engagement, and being pains in the neck."

And rather than "trying to save the whole city," the student leaders work on

issues that are "important, challenging, and do-able," he says.

Persistence wins victories

Camden is one of the poorest and most violent cities in the United States. The members of the Student Leaders' Von Nieda Park Task Force attend schools in Camden and "are used to seeing drug transactions in broad daylight, and most have known someone who's been shot. Their lives are affected by the trauma of living here," Fr. Jud says.

But they demonstrate and inspire hope by their determination and actions, says Grace Kincaid, a Franciscan Volunteer and former Catholic Campaign for Human Development intern, who is another of their mentors. The Student Leaders plan and chair monthly meetings with city, county, and parks officials, as well as neighbors and other interested people. They discuss common concerns, push to get community issues resolved and hold civic leaders responsible for the promises they make.

Fr. Jud describes the persistence of the group in getting lighting for Von



Student Leaders in front of a mural bordering Von Nieda Park. They received a \$500 grant for this project from PNC's Neighborhood Wishlist contest.

Photo courtesy of St. Anthony of Padua Church, Fr. William 'Jud' Weiksnar.

Nieda Park. In November 2012 the Student Leaders told the city that the park needed new lights because the wiring had been stolen from the old lights. In January 2013 an official promised the lights by May. In July a different official promised the lights by October. When there were no lights by January 2014 the Student Leaders organized "Un-Dark the Park," planned as an evening vigil illuminated by car headlamps, flashlights, and candles. The mid-January event became a celebration instead when civic officials announced a schedule for bids and installation that would illuminate the park by May. "We'll have an even bigger celebration when the

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From the Director

Dear Friends,

The visionary bishops who created the Catholic Campaign for Human Development forty-five years ago were inspired by the biblical injunction to bring Good News to the poor. Their enthusiasm attracted fellow Catholics eager to advance the mission of Jesus Christ by working for social justice.

CCHD's founding bishops have gone to their eternal reward and the initial grantees are now silver-haired, but I am sure they would be gratified to know that their mantle has been taken up by a new generation.

In this issue of *Helping People Help Themselves*, we profile an up-and-coming group of young activists, the Student Leaders' Von Nieda Park Task Force, who are making a difference in their neighborhoods. They are using the time-honored tools of community organizing to identify local needs and advocate for realistic solutions.

I had the pleasure of meeting members of the Task Force when they visited the CCHD office last summer from Camden, New Jersey. These polite, confident dynamos are wise beyond their years. They described how they've transformed "the nation's most depressing park" into a safe place with help from adults associated with Camden Churches Organizing for People (CCOP), a CCHD-funded group.

One of the eighth-grade members announced, "Community service is fine, and we do it throughout the warmer months, but community organizing is for the long-term. It's more effective in getting the people with power to do something." It was good to hear those words from someone so young—and it reminded me that our mission is timeless. Our funded organizations may find new examples of poverty and injustice, but pointing out the causes and insisting on accountability will always be steps on a path to systemic solutions.

Each year, CCHD bestows the Cardinal Bernardin New Leadership Award on a young Catholic who brings leadership, energy, and diverse skills to the anti-poverty work of low-income projects and Catholic parishes. In these pages, you'll read about Ana and José Aguayo, who fight injustice through providing interpretation and translation services at the Northwest Arkansas Workers' Justice Center (NWAJWC). Their efforts have helped Latino workers recover lost wages and establish stronger employee standards. Congratulations to Ana and José!

I am inspired by the enthusiasm and commitment of young people to the mission and work of CCHD. Their dedication to making their communities better now and for the future is both comforting and challenging to those of us who've long been in the trenches of the war on poverty. And their example gives me just the right nudge, here in the middle of Lent.

Wishing you a productive Lent and a blessed Easter.

Ralph McCloud
Director, Catholic Campaign for Human Development

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Student Leaders and mentors at the Spanish language radio station 1680AM in Philadelphia, where they were interviewed on a weekly news show.

Photo courtesy of Actualidad Informativa, 1680AM, Miguel Arriaga.

lights are turned on,” Fr. Jud says, with cautious optimism.

Spreading hope where it is most needed

“Camden has struggled with having very little hope, but this group helps students to help themselves. They have a strong sense of empowerment,” Grace says. “The Student Leaders are the ones doing the community organizing, but as 6th, 7th, and 8th graders, they need adults to help them learn the steps. When they see something they don’t like and want to make a change in their community, we can help. We give guidance with skills like public speaking, organizing presentations and preparation,” she says.

“But they learn most of all from one another and from putting it into practice. The biggest change we see is not in the park but in the students themselves and in the confidence they have,” Grace says.

Fr. Jud says, “We train the students, challenge them, guide them, and do some hand-holding. This is not a club, yet they come willingly to weekly, hour-long afterschool meetings. They get together over a PowerPoint, not an Xbox,” he laughs.

Grace adds, “They spread a lot of hope to people in the community, especially adults who see how motivated they are.”

One of the neighbors the Student Leaders invited to a meeting was planning to move out of state to raise her two adolescent sons in a safe, more supportive atmosphere. Fr. Jud said Mirta Nieves changed her mind after the meeting. “In her 16 years in the neighborhood, she had never seen a group working to get improvements,

much less a group of middle schoolers,” he says. She was so enthused about the group she is now Assistant Director of the Student Leaders program and its first paid, part-time staffer. And her sons are the Student Leader representatives from their charter high school.

The Student Leaders are inspired by the vigorous community organizing efforts at St. Anthony of Padua. The parish is a founding member of Camden Churches Organized for People (CCOP), a group that receives local funding from CCHD.

Fr. Kenneth Hallahan, CCHD director for the diocese of Camden, says, “Community organizing is very important in the diocese and has been encouraged within the parish structure. Community organizing is about meeting people, cultivating relationships and building a stronger community through those relationships. The city of Camden is small enough, with about 80,000 people, to enable people to understand the city and its problems and meet the players.”

Six Catholic parishes belong to CCOP. The coverage of CCOP activities in the local media keeps social justice in the eye of both the secular and Catholic communities, Fr. Ken says. “And the

Student Leaders have been moving the model to a whole other level.”

The Student Leaders membership is fluid because of the age and circumstances of the youths, but the group is now firmly established and is expanding to include students from other Catholic Partnership Schools in Camden. A donor who follows the group on Facebook contributed the funds to hire the neighbor-turned-staffer. And with help from their mentors, the Student Leaders will apply for their own CCHD grant.

Says Fr. Jud, “Every little victory makes the students stronger believers.”



Student leaders interview Camden County Freeholder Louis Cappelli Jr. on MLK Day.

Photo courtesy of St. Anthony of Padua Church, Fr. William ‘Jud’ Weiksnar.



These benches were painted during one of the Student Leaders’ Park Cleanup and Paint-up Days.

Photo courtesy of St. Anthony of Padua Church, Fr. William ‘Jud’ Weiksnar.

DYNAMIC BROTHER/SISTER DUO RECEIVES NATIONAL AWARD FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE WORK

BY GENEVIEVE MOUGEY

Ana and José Aguayo immigrated to the United States with their family when they were eight and twelve years old. After settling with their family, which includes six other children, in the small town of Springdale, Arkansas, the Aguayo siblings witnessed injustices occurring in the workplace of their family members, friends, and community.

Five years ago, Ana decided to do something about these injustices. Together, Ana and José began their work against injustices by offering interpretation and translation at the Northwest Arkansas Workers' Justice Center (NWAJWC) to twelve Latino construction workers who were fighting against wage theft.

Through their determination, commitment to justice, and hard work to bring about change and to live in a world that reflects the gospel message, Ana and José have been able to see their friends and workers achieve great success. Together with the workers at the center, they have helped to recover over \$580,000 in lost wages for workers. Their efforts have led the way to establishing stronger standards for over 800 poultry processing plant employees. They did this while completing their degrees at the University of Arkansas.

José states that it is their parent's example that made this work possible. "It is their faith, values, and courage

that brought us to where we are today: fighting for a world that shows more compassion, more love, and more respect for the dignity of work."

Founded in 2002, the Northwest Arkansas Workers' Justice Center seeks to empower the local working community by helping low-income and immigrant workers in Arkansas to advocate against workplace injustices. They embody the CCHD mission and values by embracing Catholic social and moral teaching.

In describing the assistance the center provides to workers, Ana says, "We are able to make significant strides through funding support from CCHD, which enables us to be the region's primary advocate for low-income workers by administering Know Your Rights trainings, self-development programs, and having the capacity to offer a safe space where workers can find a welcoming hand, a listening ear, and a caring heart. CCHD support gives life to the Workers' Justice Center and opens up opportunities for our communities of faith."

Ana and José were recognized at the annual November meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore, Maryland, for their commitment and dedication to worker justice with the Cardinal Bernardin Young Leaders Award.

What Is CCHD?

Through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholics and friends of CCHD across the country help poor and low-income Americans to help themselves and their communities out of poverty.

Since 1970, the Catholic Campaign has contributed over \$280 million to more than 7,800 low-income-led, com-

munity-based projects that strengthen families, create jobs, build affordable housing, fight crime, and improve schools and neighborhoods. CCHD requires that projects develop community leadership and participation so that their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting and effective, and so that CCHD's investment in people will help break the cycle of poverty. CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between impoverished and affluent persons.



An initiative of the
Catholic Campaign for
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Today, 46.2 million people in America are living below the poverty line.

That's more than ever before—and far more than the population of our largest state. Join us and help to break the cycle of poverty.



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