



Helping People Help Themselves



breaking the cycle of poverty for over 40 years

Catholic Campaign for Human Development
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FAMILIES AND FRIENDS OF LOUISIANA'S INCARCERATED CHILDREN

BY BETH GRIFFIN

The path through the teenage years is strewn with temptations and with opportunities to detour through dark woods. Most children reach adulthood healthy and unscathed with a few daring tales to relate, but some stumble and are drawn into complex, frightening traps that are difficult to escape. And their well-intentioned families may be at a loss to know how to help.

In Louisiana, one of the most devastating detours leads directly from middle school to incarceration. Until a decade ago, more than 2,000 children endured nightmarish conditions when imprisoned for mostly non-violent offenses, including habitual truancy and acting out in class. In the adult-like institutions, physical brutality and emotional abuse were common.

The juvenile population in detention facilities has decreased dramatically and conditions have improved through the efforts of Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children (FFLIC), a group that has received local and national grants from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD).

"In the past, the system gobbled up kids. The media said they were 'superpredators' and 'throw-away kids,' when really, they were broken

kids who needed services," says FFLIC Executive Director Gina Womack. "They were voiceless and faceless, so there was no pushback."

Gina says most of the imprisoned children were from low-income, African-American families. She details a typical case, where a young boy, grieving the death of his caregiver grandmother, stole a car radio. It was his first offense, but he was sent to a juvenile detention facility.

In another example, Gina recalls a youth who stole a strand of pearls from his mother to give to his girlfriend. The frustrated mother called police and the boy was sent to a group home. There, he



Photo courtesy of Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children.

got into a fight and was remanded to an incarceration facility. "To look at the paper, you'd think they were murderers, but more than 70 percent were imprisoned for nonviolent offenses," she says.

Most of the incarcerated youths are fourteen

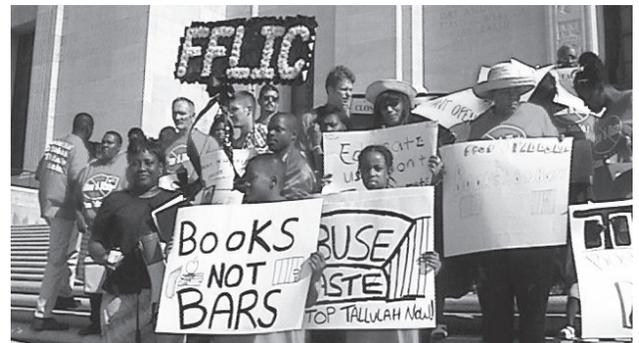


Photo courtesy of Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children.

to twenty-one years old, although Gina says, "In Louisiana, you can be locked up as young as ten. The law says students can be suspended for 'willful disobedience,' which is very subjective and includes being out of uniform." Suspended, expelled, or reassigned to alternative schools, kids are tempted to look to the streets for validation and end up in court labeled as 'ungovernable.' From there, it's a smooth jump to prison in a state that has the highest rate of incarceration in the world (867 prisoners for every 100,000 people).

FFLIC began in 2000 as an offshoot of the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana, Gina says. "It started as a support group for families whose children were entering the justice system. They were stigmatized as 'bad parents' and ostracized by their churches and families," she says.

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From the Director

Dear Friends,

It's hard for me to imagine being an adult in prison, but it's even more heartbreaking to consider that there are thousands of youth in juvenile detention facilities in our country. Most are poor, some are serving time for non-violent crimes, and all deserve to be treated with dignity.

Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) funds Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children (FFLIC), the impressive group featured in this newsletter. Before FFLIC was established, more than 2,000 Louisiana youth, some as young as ten years old, languished in juvenile prisons far from their families. As many as 70 percent were locked up after being suspended or expelled from school for offenses such as habitual truancy, improper uniforms, and acting out.

Last June, FFLIC members and staff addressed the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Subcommittee on the Catholic Campaign for Human Development in New Orleans. I was moved by the personal stories they told. They detailed frightening first-hand experiences of watching their young sons and daughters get arrested and jailed for relatively minor offenses. But they also described the compassionate and consistent support they got from FFLIC. In addition to giving valuable practical advice, FFLIC helps empower families to advocate for meaningful improvements in school discipline and a reform of the juvenile justice system. It is one of the few groups in the Southeast working to reduce the number of incarcerated children and institute effective restorative justice practices.

CCHD funding of the Louisiana organization advances several of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) priorities: it affirms the life and dignity of incarcerated people, supports families, and helps people stand up for their rights.

In this issue, you'll also see the results of an inspiring competition we run each year, the Multimedia Youth Contest. Entrants were invited to interpret this year's theme, "Build Community! Put Two Feet of Love in Action." Congratulations to the young winners and the CCHD projects they designated for funding. You can see the winning artwork on our website at: <http://www.usccb.org/about/catholic-campaign-for-human-development/multimedia-youth-contest/2014-mm-arts-contest-winners.cfm>.

I hope you had a restful and restorative summer. Thank you for your ongoing support of CCHD's efforts.

Gratefully,

Ralph McCloud
Director, Catholic Campaign for Human Development

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FRAMEWORK FOR ECONOMIC LIFE:

[http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/
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“It quickly got larger than mutual support. The families wanted to do something to improve conditions of confinement and also do something to change the system,” Gina says.

FFLIC joined the Juvenile Justice Project and others in a lawsuit challenging the conditions of confinement. In 2003, it won sweeping reforms to the state juvenile justice laws and an agreement to close the notoriously brutal Tallulah Correctional Center for Youth. “We showed that community-based alternatives would save money and improve conditions,” Gina explains.

“We researched other states and found the Missouri Model, which focuses on small, regional facilities that are more home-like and offer rehabilitation. It includes parents as part of the child’s treatment and keeps them close enough so they can see one another more often,” she says.

“For us, it wasn’t just a lawsuit but an opportunity for families to elevate their voices and participate in a campaign to change legislation,” Gina adds.

FFLIC is a statewide organization with more than 750 members. “We

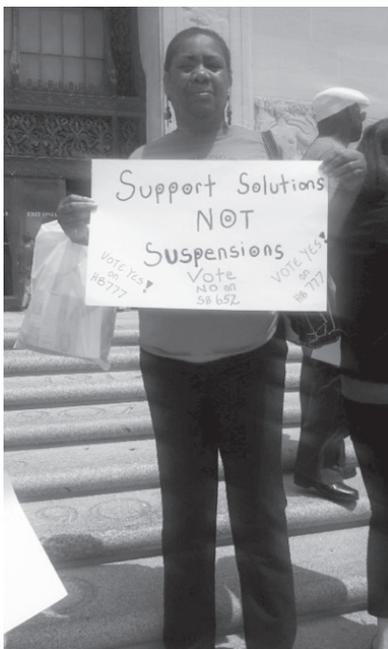


Photo courtesy of Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children.

advocate for children and provide a space for people to utilize the voice they already have,” Gina says. “We teach transformative leadership development to parents and use direct action organizing and peer advocacy to strengthen families and communities. Families are the experts on what they and their children need and it’s great to see the light in their eyes when they recognize their power to push boundaries, call their legislators, and make demands.”

The group uses CCHD grants to hold lawmakers accountable and press for funding to implement the reforms that are now enshrined in law. The 2003 Juvenile Justice Reform Act laid the foundation for subsequent legislation that established a children, youth, and planning board in every jurisdiction to identify service gaps and keep children out of detention centers. But, Gina further explains, the self-governed boards are unfunded and not present in all areas. FFLIC has a seat on several active boards.

Tom Costanza, CCHD director for the Archdiocese of New Orleans, says, “FFLIC empowers mothers to feel hope and provides a forum for them to express their thoughts and feelings constructively. With FFLIC, they can see the light at the end of the tunnel.”

“FFLIC’s work aligns with Catholic Social Teaching and CCHD’s funding priorities. It supports the life and dignity of the human person and underscores the centrality of the family,” Tom says.

FFLIC also advocates for objective disciplinary policies in schools. “Harsh policies deny children a right to education and contribute to the so-called



Photo courtesy of Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children.

‘School to Prison Pipeline,’” Gina says. Since 2009, annual suspensions dropped from 90,000 to 64,000, but some schools still suspend 25 percent of their students each year.

FFLIC works with families to establish parenting groups in the schools that help parents understand the school culture, learn about positive behavioral support, and develop techniques to hold schools accountable for providing quality education to every student, Gina says.

FFLIC urged the passage of a law that requires teacher training in conflict resolution and behavioral methods to keep children in the classroom.

Today, there are fewer than 400 youth incarcerated in Louisiana. With CCHD’s help, FFLIC promotes early intervention to keep children out of the justice system and supports rigorous legal defense and shorter sentences.

“CCHD helps people in poverty who are affected by an issue to move into positions of power. Their funding allows us to work with families and figure out ways to move them out of poverty, learn their rights, and fight for their children,” Gina says.

MULTIMEDIA YOUTH CONTEST 2014

Teenagers responded enthusiastically to CCHD's annual Multimedia Youth Contest. Entrants from across the country used a variety of media to interpret the 2014 theme, "Build Community! Put Two Feet of Love in Action." Entries included paintings, collages, PowerPoint presentations, sculpture, and prose.

Gianna "Gigi" Arnieri, a seventh-grader in the Archdiocese of Chicago from Holy Family Catholic Academy in Inverness, Illinois, won the grand prize. Her entry was a short story, "Walking the Line," which explores a young girl's personal journey from the shadow of poverty to the clarity of empowerment and hope. The contest judges said Gigi "delivers a powerful message, whose form and content are astute and deeply moving."

The grand prize is \$500 cash for the awardee and \$500 for a CCHD-funded group of her choice. The prizes will be presented at the annual conference of the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry in San Antonio, Texas, which will take place December 4-6, 2014.

The Multimedia Youth Contest helps CCHD encourage students in grades seven to twelve to learn about poverty in the United States, as well as its root causes and the faith-inspired projects of CCHD and similar organizations that address it. The contest is sponsored in part by RCL Benziger, a publisher of Catholic religious education materials.

"Two Feet of Love in Action" is a shorthand description for the two distinct yet complementary ways that

Christians put the Gospel into action: social justice and charitable works.

Jessica Bailes and Danielle Nguyen from St. Mary Magdalen Catholic School in Altamonte Springs, Florida, in the diocese of Orlando, used paint and poetry for their colorful entry, "Footprints that Rescued Me." They won second prize in the seventh to ninth grade division for a work that includes scriptural verses and original poetry to illustrate the saving power of God's love. Judges commented, "The combination of the words and images draws the viewer into the piece and creates a moving, meditative focus on the scripture verses at the center."

Martha Maruna, a student in the Diocese of Springfield at Routt Catholic High School in Jacksonville, Illinois, won second prize in the tenth to twelfth grade division. Her watercolor entry, "Walk of Faith," focuses on the barefoot soles of a person approaching scenes of poverty. "The beautifully crafted images in this piece invite the viewer to reflect on the path of the feet in the painting and to contemplate encounter and engagement with the suffering in their own communities," the judges said.

The second and third-place winners receive \$375 and \$250 awards, with a matching amount donated to a CCHD-funded group. The winning entries are displayed at: <http://www.usccb.org/about/catholic-campaign-for-human-development/multimedia-youth-contest/2014-mm-arts-contest-winners.cfm>.

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,

community-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
Human Development

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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