



Helping People Help Themselves



breaking the cycle of poverty for over 40 years

Catholic Campaign for Human Development
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VOICES UNITE TO REFORM THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

BY BETH GRIFFIN

What happens when small local organizations comprised of enthusiastic, impassioned religious congregations focus their attention on injustice in their midst? They are heard! And they can play a transformative role shaping policy decisions that affect the lives of many people.

In Florida, more than 30 years ago, two very different groups of frustrated and committed people found common ground and support from the Archdiocese of Miami. One was trying to rebuild a fractured community after devastating urban riots and the other was fighting for the rights of senior citizens. Working together, they formed Direct Action and Research Training Center, or DART, which is dedicated to building justice ministries that are congregation-based.

DART is now a seven-state network of 20 organizations with 400 diverse congregations. It receives funding from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) to train leaders to engage their congregations in the life-affirming struggle to identify and change unjust systems.

The current major issue for DART-related organizations in Florida is a disturbing trend to criminalize common types of misbehavior among young children, despite a legal provision that would allow restitution and diversion programs for non-serious offenses.

Holly Holcombe, assistant director of DART, says 12,000 children were arrested in 2014 for generally minor offenses. During a tantrum, a five-year-old special education student knocked a tissue out of a teacher's hand. He was charged with assault. Children who got in shoving matches were charged with battery. Throwing an orange from a school bus window earned another child a police record.

There is general agreement that arrests disrupt schooling and close doors to scholarships, jobs, and military service in the future. Holly says it is nearly impossible to expunge the records due to the porous nature of modern technology and the commercial business of background checks.

Florida law allows police to issue a civil citation instead of an arrest. "It's not a slap on the wrist. It includes diversion, and there is restitution," Holly explains.

But the provision can only be used once for each child, and the law is applied unevenly throughout the state. "Eight counties in the state don't use it at all!" she says.

Rev. John Aeschbury, DART executive director, says, "It's important for



Participants of the Research to Action Advanced Leaders Training enjoy lunch between workshop sessions. Here participants learn to build their justice ministry through witnessing, evaluating, and engagement.

us to restore children to their families, their communities, and their schools. Kids have been turned into commodities and objectified by the system."

He says 5,000 children ages 5-10 years old were arrested in the last six years for offenses for which they could have received a civil citation, and statewide only 38% of all eligible youth received citations in the last year.

With help from CCHD, 10 Florida-based DART justice ministry organizations worked together to win passage of a bill to expand the one-time-only use of the civil citation to three offenses.

"It's still optional across the board, but we're moving the bar and want to make civil citation a default for a first offense throughout Florida," Holly says. "We have a senate sponsor and are working with local and state officials to implement and track the use of the revised statute."

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From the Director

Dear Friends,

Grassroots organizing is time-consuming, noisy, and ultimately, exquisitely effective. The group we profile in this issue of *Helping People Help Themselves* has been bringing people together and

winning social justice victories for more than 30 years. It is Direct Action and Research Training Center (DART). Over time, DART developed a successful process to help people of faith from different backgrounds meet in one another's homes to get to know each other, share common concerns, and consider solutions.

Participants bring the issues identified in "house meetings" to larger and larger meetings, where they develop strategies for action. Then they work with their local and state legislators to right systemic wrongs and hold elected officials accountable for the promises they make.

What began as two small groups with the support of the Archdiocese of Miami is now a seven-state interfaith network of 20 organizations comprised of 400 congregations. The Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) is proud to be a long-time supporter of DART's efforts.

Archbishop Thomas Wenski of Miami, who has extensive experience in organizing, noted recently that the DART members "incorporate Catholic social teachings with a unique and effective approach to address the suffering faced by thousands of families in our community."

DART's issues have changed since the 1980s, but the inclusive, bottom-up process has not. As described in these pages, 10 Florida-based DART justice ministries are working to reduce the number of children arrested throughout the state. Many youth are eligible for a "civil citation" instead of arrest, and DART is tirelessly advocating for the use of the civil citation to be expanded. Amazingly, 5,000 children ages 5-10 years old were arrested in the last six years for minor offenses. It's hard to imagine a six-year-old under arrest. I am grateful that DART is focused on this.

I'd also like to call your attention to a new book about the work of CCHD now available from Orbis Books. It is *Beyond Empowerment* by Jeff Korgen. With encouragement from us, Jeff spent time with CCHD-funded groups in different parts of the country. He is a knowledgeable organizer and knows CCHD well. Jeff made a pilgrimage to CCHD sites and in his book captures the heart of the people and groups whose vision brings Catholic social teaching to fruition.

Readers of this newsletter will appreciate Jeff's detailed examination of some of the groups that have been profiled here in recent years, including Café Reconcile in New Orleans and Women's Justice Circles in Seattle.

Finally, hearty congratulations to Edith Avila Olea, the winner of the 2015 Cardinal Bernardin New Leadership Award. She is an inspiring young woman. Edith embodies the commitment to empower others and the determination to respond to injustice that was characteristic of the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago.

As always, thank you for your prayerful support and encouragement of our work.

Gratefully,

Ralph McCloud
Director, Catholic Campaign for Human Development

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Members of St. Ann Catholic Church were part of the 2,000 attendees at the 2015 Nehemiah Action Assembly. At this assembly, local officials from the juvenile justice system learn about the problem of youth arrests and make commitments to address them.

Progress is steady but incremental. DART has grown in size and effectiveness because it helps people surface their deeply held concerns and “engage with their feet on the ground,” Rev. Aeschbury says.

As a result, “public officials realize this is a voice to be responded to on different kinds of decisions,” he says.

“The organizations are people of faith who come together to act on the biblical mandate to do justice,” Rev. Aeschbury says.

DART organizations are independent of one another, but they use the same “very much bottom-up” model to identify issues and “come up with craftable solutions,” Holly says.

At its core, the model is based on the scripture account of Nehemiah, who brought people and their leaders together to devise solutions to a system that impoverished the

citizenry. Nehemiah insisted that the nobles, magistrates, and people be held accountable for the promises they made.

The DART groups gather first in small house meetings to discuss concerns. “We’re helping to build a justice ministry network based on households who will engage others. It’s built on relationship, it’s ongoing, and it’s not a one-time thing. It gives way to an act of faith,” Holly says.

Representatives from the house meetings gather at progressively larger venues to describe their issues and invite others to get involved. Each level of meeting includes training in organizing techniques.

There are four large assemblies each year. At one, the participants vote on the issue they will focus on for the year. At the largest, the so-called Nehemiah Action Assembly each spring, public officials are invited to commit to research solutions to a new issue or describe their efforts to resolve an ongoing one, Holly says.

The largest Nehemiah Assemblies among the DART members draw up to 3,000 people, Holly says. Ten years ago, the collective total of meeting participants was 11,000, and now it is 27,000.

CCHD funds allow DART to coordinate many local strategies into a cohesive effort, Holly says. “The focus on leadership development is critical and

we are able to have, as participants, people who are not normally at the table.”

“We work with the Florida Catholic Conference and others to provide a cohesive way to engage parishes. Catholic social teaching is really loving your neighbor as yourself. By extension, your neighbors are the community, and how best to love them but by keeping children out of jail?” she asks.

Book Feature

Beyond Empowerment: A Pilgrimage with the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD)

Community organizer and longtime Catholic social ministry consultant Jeffry Odell Korgen made a winding pilgrimage through the CCHD world. The result is *Beyond Empowerment*, a new offering from Orbis Books.

“I had always been overwhelmed by the amazing stories of CCHD-funded groups,” Jeff says. From the experience of researching his earlier books, he knew that the best way to tell a group’s story was through the eyes of its leader.

“Getting to know a leader in a group is almost like falling in love,” he laughs.

Jeff spent time with CCHD grantees in different locations, including Louisiana, Washington, Minnesota, Massachusetts, Illinois, and Arizona. He tried to explore different dimensions of organizing and development, and include varied regions of the United States. “I was balancing diversities,” he says.

The book is a pilgrimage that begins in Louisiana and leads to Boston, very much like his own life. He describes it as a powerful opportunity to reconnect with himself and rediscover the grace of God in the human person.

Beyond Empowerment uses the voices of CCHD organizers, staff, and friends to describe the hard work and joy entailed in bringing people together to improve their circumstances. Each chapter is packed with engaging personal stories and insights into the personal impact of organizing and the biblical call to work for justice.



The Polk Ecumenical Action Council for Empowerment (PEACE), an affiliate of DART, builds justice ministry in Polk County, FL. Members tour a drug rehabilitation clinic that PEACE helped open.

2015 Cardinal Bernadin New Leadership Award

The Cardinal Bernadin New Leadership Award recognizes new and future leaders who are working against poverty and injustice. It is awarded each year to a young Catholic (18-40) carrying out the Church's mission to promote social justice and address the root causes of economic poverty.

At the meeting of the US bishops in St. Louis this past June, Bishop Jaime Soto, chairman of the USCCB Subcommittee on the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), presented this award to Edith Avila Olea. Edith, 23, currently serves as parish outreach and Board of Young Professionals coordinator for Catholic Charities in the Diocese of Joliet, Illinois, forming relationships with the parishes and the clients that they serve. "I visit with pastors, religious, and lay people. I educate about our programs," Edith explains, "We seek to find long-term solutions to lead back to self-sufficiency."

Edith didn't always know that she wanted to work advocating for those who live in poverty, but serving as a CCHD intern at the Diocese of Joliet before her senior year of college caused her to change her career path. "Walking alongside so many people gave me so much motivation to work against injustice," Edith remembers.

While serving as a CCHD intern, Edith helped to organize a group to join the march encouraging Representative Roskam to vote for immigration reform. This experience among many others brought Edith to a realization: "I cannot be the voice of the poor, but I can

help give them their voice back. We must fight for all human dignity; it is our duty as Catholics."

Coming from an immigrant family, Edith experienced first-hand the struggles of many families who come to the United States and struggle against the challenges of poverty. "Through the years, I learned to overcome poverty . . . And I know I am not alone," she recounts.

For Edith, her faith as a Catholic cannot be separated from her vocation to pursue social justice. "Catholicism calls us to be anything but silent. Fighting for justice for all people isn't an option for Catholics, it's our mission," she says. CCHD was honored to present this award to Edith as she continues to promote justice in her community.



Edith Avila Olea (right) accepts the Cardinal Bernadin New Leadership Award from Bishop Soto (left) in St. Louis at the General Assembly of the US bishops.

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, CCHD 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
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Today, 47 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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