



# Helping People Help Themselves



breaking the cycle of poverty for over 40 years

Catholic Campaign for Human Development  
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## OPPORTUNITY THREADS AND THE INDUSTRIAL COMMONS

BY BETH GRIFFIN

**T**en years ago Burke County in rural western North Carolina was still reeling from the loss of furniture and textile manufacturing jobs that were the foundation of its solid economy. Residents with deep generational roots and immigrants who had fled violence in their home countries to settle in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains all fondly remembered when they once had well-paid factory work and low unemployment rates.

But with one used sewing machine humming after hours in a borrowed room, a group called Opportunity Threads helped start a local renaissance in micromanufacturing. The group used grants from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) to establish a thriving worker-owned cut-and-sew cooperative. Opportunity Threads now employs 23 full-time workers who support approximately 100 family members in the resurgent community. The cooperative also interacts with more than two dozen local companies of various sizes to source and share work through a manufacturing network they founded.

Molly Hemstreet, the general manager of Opportunity Threads, describes a “convergence of consumer conscience” driven by people who want to know where their goods are made. “There’s an interest in local, sustainable goods that support the triple bottom line of

social, economic, and environmental benefits to the community,” she says.

With the help of a long-established local company, Molly and two other stitchers turned Maggie’s Functional Organics’s excess inventory of irregular socks into stuffed animals, in a successful introduction to upcycling. The cooperative’s largest contract is with Project Repat, for whom it turns used T-shirts into keepsake blankets. The leftover fabric scraps are again recycled for use in home insulation and automobile upholstery and door padding.

“We’re keeping 20,000 shirts a week out of landfills and we’re a zero-waste facility,” Molly says. Opportunity Threads also makes pet products, reusable vegetable storage bags, and apparel.

“We’re leading that movement in this region. Western North Carolina is a hopeful place, despite its challenges, and I don’t see myself wanting to be anywhere else,” she adds.

Molly is a lifelong resident of the area and a former teacher of English as a second language. She saw the struggle of migrant workers at a chicken-processing plant as they tried to unionize in a dangerous industry. “It was my



Workers at Opportunity Threads help each other solve a problem at the sewing machine.

‘aha!’ moment. The workers weren’t protected,” she says.

Opportunity Threads drew on skilled unemployed and underemployed people in the community to create sustainable livelihoods and put a new face on textile production in the rural South. Many of the workers are Mayans from Guatemala who work alongside U.S.-born colleagues, Molly explains.

The Opportunity Threads jobs boost the standard of living for individual families and promote the local economy. Because the operation is worker-owned, people have responsibility and a voice in the company, Molly says.

“We help develop workers’ participation in the business. Having a voice and decision-making authority gives people dignity and respects human life and livelihood,” she says.

The progression from worker to pre-member to worker-owner is often

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## From the Director

### Dear Friends,

The domino-like collapse of the textile industry in North Carolina in the 1990s was understandably devastating to people whose families had earned their livelihoods in the mills for generations.

In what seemed like the blink of an eye, unemployment rates skyrocketed and families were no longer economically secure. The factory closings impacted both residents with deep roots in the rolling hills and also immigrants who arrived more recently seeking safety for their families.

Like many of us, I followed the news from a distance and worried and prayed about the people affected. Over time, I was gratified but not surprised to see a glimmer of hope in the region—in the form of a grant application to CCHD from a feisty start-up called Opportunity Threads. The group is featured in this issue of Helping People Help Themselves. Opportunity Threads is a classic example of people seizing their own future to overcome a dismal situation they did not create. With a single sewing machine, a huge pile of irregular socks, and a good idea, Opportunity Threads started a worker-owned cut-and-sew cooperative that embodies the renaissance of the region. It is now at the center of a popular micromanufacturing movement that has helped return the region to prosperity. At CCHD we are proud to be part of the process.

Over the years as CCHD director, I have observed that many successful organizations we fund are led by people who see hope and opportunity where others find only despair and dead ends. Opportunity Threads was spearheaded by Molly Hemstreet, a former teacher who grew up in western North Carolina. I have had the distinct pleasure of visiting Opportunity Threads as it has grown and developed. Molly is a dedicated, selfless leader who has helped scores of unemployed

and underemployed people find dignity in work and entrepreneurship. More recently she and other leaders of Opportunity Threads developed the Industrial Commons to help interested existing small businesses convert to a worker-owned model to thrive in a changed landscape.

Molly was a fellow member of the U.S.-delegation to the World Meeting of Popular Movements at the Vatican in November 2016. When we returned from the event, she played the address Pope Francis gave at the meeting over the loud-speaker on the sewing floor at Opportunity Threads. I was moved when she described seeing the stitchers in tears as they heard their efforts affirmed by the Holy Father on behalf of the Church.

Also in this issue, please don't miss our recognition of younger folks who already understand and use their talents beautifully to depict Catholic social teaching in action. We are pleased to announce the winners of our annual Multimedia Youth Contest. Entrants in grades 7 through 12 were invited to interpret this year's theme, "Being Neighbors in Our Common Home." Congratulations to the young winners!

Gratefully,

Ralph McCloud

Director

Catholic Campaign for Human Development

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FRAMEWORK FOR ECONOMIC LIFE:

[http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/  
human-life-and-dignity/economic-justice-economy/  
catholic-framework-for-economic-life.cfm](http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/economic-justice-economy/catholic-framework-for-economic-life.cfm)

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slow and requires commitment. People hear about the cooperative by word of mouth. When a position opens up, potential workers take a skills test and get an orientation

by worker-owners about the expectations of employees and members of the cooperative. It may take six months for employees to become members of the cooperative and another year to develop the necessary skills to win the votes of their colleagues to become full worker-owners.

The long vetting is at the core of democracy, Molly says. “We all have to work together as a team. We’re looking for a balance: We want good stitchers who can get along with one another and think on their feet. We want each person to make it easier for the next person in the production line.”

As a result of the painstaking process, Molly says Opportunity Threads has never lost an owner or a pre-member to a vote of the worker-owners.

Opportunity Threads began in 2008 and now generates more than \$1.5 million in annual sales. It is in the enviable position of choosing its own customers and partners. “We want to keep the work we have, add capacity, and base our growth on good relationships. We’re looking for long-term partners whose values align with ours.” Molly says.

CCHD funding helped Opportunity Threads train cooperative leaders and pay salaries as workers learned new skills and implemented longer-term and larger-scale projects.

“CCHD found a deep authenticity to our story and took a chance on us. It’s one of the only groups willing to fund community economic development. It



A worker up-cycles used t-shirts into blankets for the Massachusetts-based company Project Repat.

empowered us,” Molly says.

Opportunity Threads sees itself as part of a larger picture where suppliers and producers work together to offer their own

unique contribution to the marketplace. Molly calls it “co-opetition,” explaining, “Another mill helped us get started although I was a competitor. Later we built the Carolina Textile District to aggregate work, vet the producers, and determine who’s best for a job, instead of competing and being at each other’s throats. The ‘pie’ of the textile industry is so large, there’s a piece for everyone.”

The success of Opportunity Threads and its worker-owner model attracted requests for help from other small groups. “We’re working with other mills to build a voice in the absence of a union. Others asked how we’re embodying democracy on the workplace floor,” Molly says.

In response she and others formed the Industrial Commons to help small-to mid-sized industrial firms and networks create economic opportunity for low-income workers, improve livelihoods, develop democratic workplaces, and root ownership in communities to create sustainable change.

The Industrial Commons received its first CCHD grant in 2017. “There’s no model for this in the Southern labor movement. We’re more of a teaching arm,” Molly says.

So-called heritage industries are a focus for The Industrial Commons. “Baby boomers who built businesses in textiles, woodworking, and metalworking, among others,

are getting ready to retire,” Molly says. “To keep the legacy of the business, keep the people working, root wealth locally, and give the founder an opportunity to stay involved part-time, it makes sense to sell the business to the workers.”

The Industrial Commons helps businesses convert to a worker-owned structure. It runs workshops to introduce the concept, benefits, and process to business owners, economic development agencies, and business support groups. In addition it accompanies businesses through the actual conversion process.

The organization’s mission is to work for the common good by creating dignified workplaces that provide jobs, educational opportunities, outlets for creativity, an opportunity to participate, and the ability to earn a livelihood.

“When people have what they need, they often set up a culture of giving and work of their own free will to create a better society,” Molly explains. “The worker-owners at Opportunity Threads, for instance, voted to make a \$2,000 donation to the Priest’s Discretionary Fund at St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church in Morgantown.”

Opportunity Threads and the Industrial Commons provide forward-looking solutions to a problem that once seemed intractable. As large industrial jobs give way to smaller, local microbusinesses, both groups are promoting economic justice and human dignity. 🔄



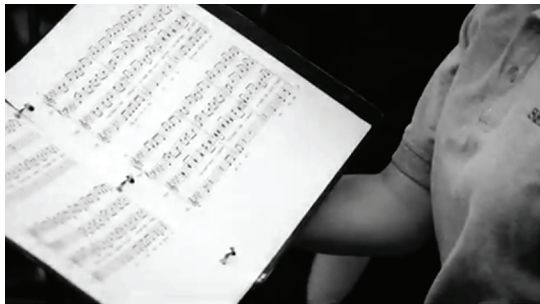
Walter concentrates as he works to get the stitching just right!

## Multimedia Youth Contest Feature

Each year the Catholic Campaign for Human Development hosts the Multimedia Youth Contest to engage young students in grades 7 through 12 by encouraging them to learn about poverty in the United States, its root causes, and faith-inspired efforts to address poverty. Students become educators themselves as they use their creativity to communicate what they have learned to others in their community.

This year CCHD is honored to name Kelly Beekman from Ballwin, MO, as this year's winner! A rising junior at Cor Jesu Academy, Kelly wrote a song titled "One of Millions." Kelly says, **"My song describes real-life events that occur daily in the lives of the impoverished. But it also shows these people coming together to actively seek for a change in our society as well as their own lives."**

Listen to the song at: <https://youtu.be/JpTdMTsCgtØ>



### "One of Millions"

Waking up again the challenge of a lifetime  
How will I make my daily bread?  
I hope for doors or windows called opportunities.  
Still there's no roof over my head.

And I know I'm one of millions  
Working too hard to survive  
And yet still I don't know why.

Refrain:

It's not that I can stand alone  
But that I stand with many.  
It's not this world that we call home  
But our place in heaven.  
My brothers starve out in the streets.  
My sisters have become so weak.

I lose more than I gain, the debts pile higher—  
This is my cold reality.  
Done the unspeakable as it has been done unto me,  
My mind is breaking down on me.

But I can't let all my struggling  
I won't let it be in vain.  
I will search and seek a change.

You will hear my voice  
You won't have a choice  
You think I had a choice  
To break this cycle, I did not.

(Estoy aquí / Soy una persona / Tengo una vida como tú. / Somos diferentes, pero eso no importa.)

Congratulations, Kelly!

For more information about the CCHD Multimedia Youth Contest, visit [www.usccb.org/about/catholic-campaign-for-human-development/multimedia-youth-contest](http://www.usccb.org/about/catholic-campaign-for-human-development/multimedia-youth-contest).

### What Is CCHD?

**T**hrough 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.

**S**ince 1970, the CCHD has contributed over \$300 million to more than 8,000 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, 43.1 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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