

# helping PEOPLE help THEMSELVES

breaking the cycle of poverty for 35 years

CATHOLIC CAMPAIGN FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

## *The Deaf and Deaf-Blind Committee on Human Rights Brings* EQUAL ACCESS TO MEDICAL CARE FOR OHIO'S DEAF and DEAF-BLIND COMMUNITY

BY BETH GRIFFIN

It's stressful enough to make an emergency visit to the hospital late at night. It's even worse if you are in severe pain and cannot communicate with the medical staff.

That's what the members of the **Deaf and Deaf-Blind Committee on Human Rights (DDBCHR)** in North Olmsted, Ohio experienced at their local hospital, despite federal regulations that guaranteed them sign language interpreters. As an alternative, the deaf patients were asked to exchange notes with the staff, but this was problematic because English is a second language for most people who communicate by American Sign Language. Some were asked to read lips, but this was also unsatisfactory because only 30 percent of English is visible on the lips. Others were asked to bring a family member to interpret, but this raised ethical questions about privacy and neutrality and most hearing family members are not trained to interpret complicated medical terminology.

To call attention to the situation, 75 members of the DDBCHR, a group funded by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, staged a candlelight vigil outside the hospital. The hospital ignored them, but later agreed to a public meeting. DDBCHR Director Heather West says that the hospital's vice president



Photos courtesy of DDBCHR

DDBCHR LEADERSHIP TEAM MEMBERS AND VOLUNTEERS AT THEIR 2005 STRATEGIC PLANNING RETREAT IN CLEVELAND, OHIO.

and administrators met with 80 members of the Deaf community and listened to their complaints. "A hard-of-hearing woman described trying to interpret for her husband who was having heart failure," she recalls. "One of our members who was in the hospital with an asthma attack during the vigil said that the nurse closed the blinds when he told her why the people were gathered outside."

Ultimately, the hospital administrators agreed to strengthen enforcement of their existing policy requiring interpreters and offered staff training in the details

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## FROM THE INTERIM DIRECTOR

*Dear Friend of CCHD:*



Thanksgiving is just behind us and the Advent and Christmas seasons are just ahead. The Catholic Campaign for Human Development is grateful for the support provided to us through our annual parish collection, which was taken up in most Catholic parishes the weekend before Thanksgiving.

*Ninety-five percent of our revenue is generated through this important collection.* I am grateful to all of you who contributed in your parishes. This type of grassroots fundraising is essential to our ability to support people of low-incomes who are working to change conditions through their own efforts.

This newsletter focuses on an often forgotten and very vulnerable segment of low-income America—hard-working deaf and deaf-blind people who face hardships accessing medical care, securing housing and finding employment with a living wage. Fortunately, the Deaf and Deaf-Blind Committee on Human Rights (DDBCHR) in Ohio helps its members understand their rights and advocate for themselves. CCHD is proud to have supported their efforts over the past three years.

The vulnerability of people living in poverty was truly evident as we watched the news coverage of the recent hurricanes. People jammed into evacuation centers, living on highway overpasses, surviving on rooftops—may these images remain with us as we work to break the cycle of poverty in communities across our nation. May our combined efforts build communities of hope and economic stability that reflect the dignity of every human person. Thank you for your ongoing support of our anti-poverty efforts.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Timothy F. Collins  
Interim Director

### WHAT IS CCHD?

Through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 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 more than \$270 million to more than 7,000 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 will help break the cycle of poverty. CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between the poor and non-poor.

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## WHERE'S MY MONEY GOING?

All CCHD funds received are used solely for the support of CCHD's anti-poverty mission. CCHD abides by the charitable standards set by a leading donor advisory service. Our funds are divided as follows: 86% is assigned to CCHD's core program mission of community empowerment, economic development, education programs, and supporting services; 3% is allocated to coordinate the annual appeal; and 11% is assigned to administrative costs. We thank you for continuing to empower low-income people through your ongoing support for CCHD.



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of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Subsequently, says Heather, “the hospital has subscribed to an interactive video interpretation service and also encouraged its ambulance staff to call the hospital when they’re bringing in a person who will need an interpreter. We’re also asking them to reflect a patient’s deafness and need for an interpreter on their medical records.”

### **Communicating a Message of Hope**

Heather describes the hospital experience as the DDBCHR’s most significant success in its short life as a grassroots community organizing group in Northeast Ohio. But there are many other issues to be addressed. “There are 7,000-8,000 profoundly deaf people in our county (Cuyahoga) and another 17,000-18,000 who have some amount of hearing loss,” she explains. “Here, as elsewhere in the country, more than 50 percent of the Deaf community is unemployed. Those who are working are kept in low-paying jobs and many in the Deaf community are facing the brunt of the downturn in the economy.” Many deaf people have traditionally worked in manufacturing jobs or with the U.S. Postal Service, she adds.

Heather says, “Deaf and deaf-blind people have many skills and tend to be hard workers, in part because they are not able to communicate and socialize with hearing co-workers, so they are very focused on getting their work done. Deaf people have the ability to work in most job settings, especially when they are provided legally required, reasonable accommodations, such as interpreters for training and staff meetings, and text phones and pagers.” She explains, “The accommodations we are requesting from employers are not ‘special privileges’ but merely the equipment and adaptations guaranteed by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, which allows deaf and deaf-blind people to work as equals with their ‘hearing’ peers. We are asking for the opportunity to work at a job with decent pay and freedom from discrimination.”


“Deafness is on the decline,” explains Heather, “because of medical developments, but it won’t ever go away. Some of our members became deaf because of the Rubella outbreak in the early 1960s, but deafness has

a genetic component and also the strength of Deaf culture will never let the Deaf community die out.” Heather, who is not deaf, was fascinated by a fellow first-grader who communicated through American Sign Language (ASL). She learned ASL in high school and took one of her college semesters at Gallaudet University, which specializes in educating deaf and hard-of-hearing students.

### **A Stronger Voice for the Deaf and Deaf-Blind Community**

The DDBCHR began in late 1998 when Heather, then an organizer for Grassroots Leadership, and Roland Emerson, a leader in the Northeast Ohio Deaf community, attended a Poor Peoples’ Summit in Pennsylvania. On the way home, they decided that they would try to spread the word about what people in the Deaf community could do to achieve equal treatment with others. “Our first significant grant was from CCHD and we were able to attract other funds with that,” says Heather. The group now has 125 dues-paying members, a modest staff and an office in a local church basement. “We’re trying to help doctors in our area understand that they have a responsibility to provide interpreters for their deaf patients. And we are also encouraging the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and our local welfare office to maintain operational TTY (text communication) phones.” DDBHCR has a leadership team of 12 members, two of whom are also active in the Deaf-Blind community.

The group is currently using CCHD funds to start organizing youth. “The deaf youth are isolated here, so this will help bring them together and get them involved socially with one another and with the mission of DDBCHR,” says Heather. “Our youth leader is the son of a local DDBCHR organizer and is the only deaf student at his high school.”

DDBCHR also plans a conference in 2007 to bring together deaf leaders from surrounding states to train them in how to organize similar groups in their home areas to advocate for their economic human rights to housing, healthcare, education, communication, and living-wage jobs. 

***We are asking for the opportunity to work at a job with decent pay and freedom from discrimination.***

—Heather West

## MEET KENT NEMETH

### *Educating Deaf People About Their Rights is Second Nature*

“Most of the time, deaf people don’t know what their rights are,” says DDBCHR member Kent Nemeth. “It’s a huge learning process. I’m a strong advocate, but my primary focus is education.”

As chairman of the DDBCHR Education Committee, Kent is dedicated to shedding light on the rights issue through presentations and forums for both deaf and hearing audiences. “Our primary challenges are communications, housing, health care, jobs and a living wage,” he says. “These are basic economic human rights, which are regularly violated for the deaf in this, the wealthiest country.”

Kent was born deaf after his mother contracted Rubella. He grew up in Elyria, Ohio and graduated from the Ohio School for the Deaf in Columbus. Kent withdrew from college and has worked for the past 16 years as a tool grinder with a local company. He is one of two deaf employees and communicates with his boss in



writing. For meetings, he uses an interpreter.

Kent, who came to Catholicism through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, is active in the Deaf Catholic community and belongs to a parish where the Mass is signed by the priest.

DDBCHR is a significant part of his life. “The organization has been very inspiring to me,” Kent says. “It definitely empowers deaf people and we’ve been able to overcome a lot with its help.”

Kent is interested in helping other deaf people understand and exercise their rights. “Our goal is equality,” he says, “and we want to extend our focus beyond our local area.” He invites inquiries about DDBCHR at [DDBCHR1@cs.com](mailto:DDBCHR1@cs.com), 440-801-1998 (voice phone), or 440-801-1948 (TTY/voice phone).

### THIS CHRISTMAS, SHOP WITH YOUR VALUES

CCHD’s Economic Development Program promotes justice, human dignity, and self-sufficiency by supporting job creation and the establishment of businesses that provide decent wages, distribute profits equitably, and ensure an active role for low-income persons in business decisions.

Consider making a donation to CCHD in the name of someone on your holiday gift list, or visit [www.usccb.org/cchd/edshopping.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/cchd/edshopping.shtml) for information on how to order a variety of products suitable for holiday gift giving. Featured items are created by members of CCHD-funded economic development programs.

### Commemorate POVERTY IN AMERICA AWARENESS MONTH

**In our country**, poverty is a persistent reality: thirty-seven million Americans live on incomes below the poverty line, and even more have found themselves in poverty as a result of the devastating hurricanes that battered our gulf and Florida coasts this fall.

**Like the victims** of natural disasters, some individuals, families and whole communities are jolted into poverty by catastrophic circumstances. Others are born into poverty in the same way that their privileged fellow Americans are born into wealth. Either way, too many people in our country find themselves trapped in a cycle of poverty, bound by unjust economic structures and social policies, and marginalized in their communities.

**Each January**, CCHD commemorates National Poverty in America Awareness Month by reminding Americans of this sobering reality and encouraging them to do something to help.

For easy ways to raise awareness about poverty in your home, school, parish, or community, visit: [www.usccb.org/cchd/focusonpoverty.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/cchd/focusonpoverty.shtml) and [www.povertyusa.org](http://www.povertyusa.org).