



## WORKING ON THE MARGINS



Dominican Center volunteer tutor, Sister Carla Crave, accepts a rose from her delighted student Octavia Thomas.



The Dominican Center invited the Amani neighborhood to this year's Back to School Bash, celebrating the return to school and the accomplishments of that summer's Youth in Action Program.

# Taking Milwaukee's North Side from Grim to Grateful

BY BETH GRIFFIN

In 1995 the Amani neighborhood on Milwaukee's north side was a grim place whose boarded-up buildings were the most obvious sign of decades of neglect, disinvestment, and poverty. The largely African American population had little access to quality schools, public transportation, close-by employment opportunities, medical care, and safe and healthy housing. But Amani was home to families with deep roots in the community, and many people were inclined to stay rather than move to other parts of the city.

There, two Sinsinawa Dominican sisters established the Dominican Center for Women, a small urban ministry program located in a former rectory. After spending a few months listening to the needs of their neighbors, the two sisters opened a spiritual center and invited people to explore poetry and painting as a way to build relationships. The founders learned that many of the

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neighborhood's women had not finished high school and had a hard time getting local jobs—but they were eager to work and become homeowners.

The Dominican Center for Women launched a basic education program to meet this need. Soon the center added monthly Saturday classes on financial literacy, where participants could learn how to repair their credit, save money, and be good neighbors and responsible homeowners. The women who participated also encouraged their husbands and sons to attend.

Today, thanks to ongoing funding by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the Dominican Center is a fixture in Amani. More than 600 people have completed education programs since the center opened. More than 70 homes have been renovated. The center developed a resident-led neighborhood revitalization

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LETTER FROM



THE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends,

The Amani neighborhood of Milwaukee has more than its share of challenges. Unemployment is high. Poverty is endemic. Crime is frequent. The Amani zip code has the distinction of having the highest incarceration rate in the country. Ironical in that the word “amani” translates to peace in Swahili.

Yet Amani is a place of hope. One of the brightest spots in the neighborhood is the Dominican Center for Women, a tenacious and successful organization that receives grants from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD). The Dominican Center was founded in 1995 by two Sinsinawa Dominicans: Sr. Ann Halloran and the late Sr. Anne-Marie Doyle. Now led by Dominican Sister Patricia Rogers, it is the single Catholic presence in the neighborhood, with strong ties to Catholic parishes and organizations throughout Milwaukee. It is a safe place where neighbors gather to discuss, plan, and begin to effect positive social change.

The staff serves as a valuable resource and conduit to information and funding, but the Dominican Center works because it is driven by the experience, needs, and motivation of the Amani residents themselves and focusing on empowering its neighbors to achieve sustainable results for issues they identify.

Supported by local and national CCHD grants, the Dominican Center has helped Amani residents achieve a 25% reduction in crime and reclaim their neighborhood park from drug dealers. They have repaired credit, saved money, become proud homeowners, and rehabbed housing. They work closely with the local police on issues of accountability and community policing. In addition, they have devoted considerable effort to voter registration and *Get Out The Vote* initiatives.

Together the center and Amani residents have tackled high lead levels in the community’s water, paint, and soil by partnering with the city health department.

As residents became more invested in issues and their solutions, the Dominican Center helped them establish an independent resident-led neighborhood association, Amani United. The group continues to build on the Dominican Center’s experience and provides a cohesive identity for the residents.

The Dominican Center draws on local resources to provide skills not available in-house. One resource, the Marquette University Trinity Fellows Program, makes available an experienced master’s degree candidate with a commitment to urban leadership and social justice. Over two years, the grad student works part-time at the center during the academic year and full-time in the summer. Everyone wins.

I share these stories because I continue to be inspired by the commitment of the people who gather at the Dominican Center. The Catholic Campaign for Human Development supports their life-affirming efforts.

Congratulations to Fr. Matthew O’Donnell, winner of the 2018 Cardinal Bernardin New Leadership Award. Fr. O’Donnell’s work in a predominantly African-American neighborhood of Park Manor, Chicago reflects his commitment to the most vulnerable people in the urban community he serves.

Thank you for your ongoing support of CCHD. It allows us to help vulnerable people work together to address their considerable challenges.

Sincerely,

**RALPH MCLOUD**

*Director, Catholic Campaign for Human Development*

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 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.



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## From Grim to Grateful

plan, working with city and federal partners to enhance health, safety, education, employment, and family well-being. The center has helped residents channel large-scale and local public funding to infrastructure improvement, home repair, and crime reduction initiatives.

In short, the center has become an anchor in the neighborhood. But as the executive director, Sister Patricia Rogers, OP, says, "Resident involvement is key. We know how important it is to support residents who believe they can make a difference."

The Dominican Center promotes social change through community development and works with women and men to foster leadership and advocacy skills. One recent initiative, a "get out the vote" program, helps residents navigate complex voter registration rules and provides online access that many people lack. The program encourages prospective voters to register at Dominican Center resource fairs, which provide information about other valuable services from the community and the center.

The Amani Youth Action program extends the center's outreach to a different sector by engaging preteens, teens, and their parents in neighborhood service projects,



A successful Dominican Center student with her proud tutor, Sister Mary Menke.

block clean-ups, fellowship opportunities, shared meals, and summertime cultural outings.

The Dominican Center has also helped establish Amani United, a network of residents, other community stakeholders, partners, and funders committed to using collective resources on behalf of the neighborhood. An elected board of residents leads the group's monthly meetings to ensure it upholds the shared values of the participants.

The Amani neighborhood continues to face poverty, crime, and unemployment. But the consistent presence of the Dominican Center for more than 20 years has helped decrease the crime rate, increase the sense of community, and deepen neighborhood commitment to work together for change. ☀



Dominican Center staff, Octavia Parker and Wesley Landry prepare for the Bloom & Groom plant sale for local neighborhood beautification programs.



Students Gwendolyn Coates and Minnie Dyson work on homework exercises at the Dominican Center.



Amani Youth in Action participants get ready for an outing to a baseball game.

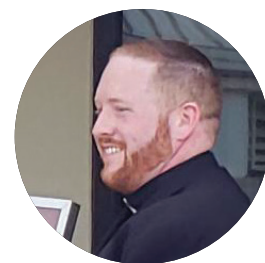
## 2018 Cardinal Bernardin New Leadership Award Recipient

**FR. MATTHEW O'DONNELL** is the 2018 Cardinal Bernardin New Leadership Award winner. This award recognizes a young adult for work to combat poverty and injustice in his or her community. Fr. Matt, 31, is a committed young pastor in a predominantly African-American neighborhood of Park Manor, Chicago.

Cardinal Blase Cupich, Archbishop of Chicago, said "At St. Columbanus, Fr. Matt O'Donnell has built a living example of Pope Francis' vision of a field hospital church that exists to serve humankind and spread the Gospel of a loving God. By his caring presence, his limitless energy for good works and his compassionate ministry, he has made St. Columbanus a beacon of hope in its community and an example of faith in action far beyond its borders."

Under Fr. Matt's leadership over the past five years, the parish food pantry has become one of the city's largest and is now complemented by efforts to address the systemic causes of poverty. A new parish Community Service Center offers GED prep, employment readiness, and career counseling. A local CCHD grant is helping the parish to open a café to provide job training and hospitality. The parish also seeks to counter neighborhood violence with Gospel love. When a local shooting occurs, Fr. Matt and parish leaders visit the scene, console loved ones, and lead prayers for peace. To support better community policing, the parish regularly hosts events that bring together neighbors and officers.

As a college student, Fr. Matt served as a CCHD intern for the Archdiocese of Chicago. He credits the internship with helping him to discover how the Church can transform communities and inspired him to become a priest. ☀





Jerusa Johnson enters her home in Amani. She bought the house with help from the Dominican Center whose staff she calls "angels in disguise."

## Meet Jerusa Johnson

**"A**mani is my home. I've spent my whole life in the neighborhood," Jerusa Johnson says. She is a contract worker for a state program that helps Wisconsin children in foster care.

In 2007 Jerusa purchased a renovated house with the assistance of the Dominican Center. Her single-family, four-bedroom home with a full basement provides an anchor for her extended family.

Jerusa's path to home ownership was neither smooth nor direct, but she continues to benefit from the steps she took to get there. Her major obstacle was poor credit: "Old stuff from when I was younger and didn't care or didn't know to care," Jerusa explains.

"I had to get my credit repaired, so I sat down with a credit counselor at the Dominican Center, a sister who let me know how important it is to have a good credit rating," Jerusa recalls. "She set up a payment plan."

The skills she learned, Jerusa says, are "helpful even now, many years beyond credit counseling." Thanks to those skills and consistent effort, Jerusa is proudly debt-free today.

At the center's Saturday programs, Jerusa connected with "excellent" people and "priceless" information. She began to volunteer at the center's resource fairs, where she was pleasantly surprised to find that in helping others, she also received help. One community vendor at a Dominican Center fair offered her a coupon for a free vision examination and

affordable eyeglasses. At the time Jerusa did not have health insurance. She was able to redeem the coupon to get the vision care she needed.

**"...a small place with a mighty, mighty impact..."**

Jerusa also participated in a neighborhood leadership training program with the encouragement of the Dominican Center. She is proud of the "long-lasting connections" she has with group members: "It cost me nothing and not only benefits me, but it lets me help others and partner with other people in the neighborhood."

She applauds the center's educational programs and its warm welcome as a place to meet and work together. For example, summer volunteers use vacation time and their own resources to help the Dominican Center and the Amani neighborhood: "These people are so genuine," Jerusa says.

The Dominican Center is a "diamond in the rough, a small place with a mighty, mighty impact on the community." She adds, "You might not know it's there, but once you know they are there, you see they're everywhere!" ➡

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