



Enlarging the Circle of Mercy...

Annual Report

7/1/2005 – 6/30/2006



Mercy Center is a neighborhood center for women and families in the Mott Haven section of the South Bronx. Its mission is to provide educational, technical, human and supportive services to women, parents and other family members, empowering them to reach their full human potential, lead meaningful lives, and be agents of change in their families and communities.

August 15, 2006

Dear Friends in Mercy,

As we concluded our celebration of Mercy Center's 15th Anniversary last year, we often reflected on how appropriate it was to consider these our 'teen' years. Since 1990 we have experienced all the random joy and serendipity of infancy and childhood – and the hard work and struggles, of course. Undertaking the funding and construction of our new home at the turn of the century was a decisive step forward into our future, involving over five years of careful planning and very generous support. Once we moved into our new facilities in February, 2003, we experienced dramatic growth in programs and participants, seemingly not unlike those sudden spurts of growth youngsters can go through when they seem to outgrow clothes every three or four months. Now we find ourselves at a point of deeper maturation and more focused development.

We see articles about gentrification in the South Bronx. One can't argue with the facts about the prices that real estate commands here, but we know that poverty still abounds in our midst. Surveys of our participants show that well over 60% manage to get by with household incomes of less than \$12,500. The largely immigrant population with whom we work are women and families who in varying degrees: share apartments; have little if any resources; are still slowly accumulating a basic proficiency in

English; have a 'breadwinner' who might be working as a dishwasher for 60 to 70 hours a week and bringing home \$200 to \$300 in household income; and have children being taught in underperforming schools with little opportunity to obtain assistance in their homework from parents who are overworked or have little education or only modest abilities in English.

Every day we see the vital importance of this Circle of Mercy that continues to bring hope, skills, confidence, and a brighter future to these good, solid people who have a strong work ethic and deep personal and religious values.

In this past year we continued to embrace strategic opportunities to accomplish Mercy Center's core mission to empower women and families to be agents of change. Programmatically, this included the design and implementation of two new programs which provide ever more helpful and empowering service to the people of the South Bronx. The *Family Development* and the *Women's Job Development and Entrepreneurship* programs are next-step responses that build on what we have accomplished in the past. They are holistic initiatives that bring together a range of resources and skills training in the service of core objectives of personal/familial growth and financial self-sufficiency for our participants. They are

described in more detail later in this report. We have been very blessed in being able to undertake these initiatives both through the generosity of foundations, individuals, donors and volunteers and the devotion and hard work of the staff.

Board of Advisors

The Board of Directors of Mercy Center instituted the Board of Advisors in June, 2004. In two short years, this Board has established itself as an essential component of our ability to respond more aggressively to the needs of our participants. They confirmed the vital role they play in the fiscal stability of Mercy Center with a second annual Cocktail Party and Silent Auction in April. This event now produces over a quarter of all non-foundation cash support for Mercy Center's operations. More importantly, the work of the Board of Advisors deepens and celebrates a shared sense of commitment among a very diverse group of supporters, and it helps garner a much wider circle of collaboration from friends aligned with our mission.



Srs. Suzanne Elliott and Pat Vetrano accept the thanks of the Mercy Center community for honoring the Sisters of Mercy New York Regional Community at the April gala.

The year ahead will bring its own set of challenges and opportunities, and certainly a continuing roster of women and families who come to Mercy Center in search of support, skills training, and a better life for themselves and their children. We are honored that the Circle of Mercy, as large and diverse as it is, is sufficient to welcome those in need. We are confident that this moment in our history of growth and maturation will lay a firm foundation for our service of South Bronx residents for years to come.

Mary Galeone, RSM
Co-director

Joseph S. Dirr
Co-director

New Program Initiatives

Family Development Program

For over ten years, Parenting and Anger Management classes at Mercy Center have provided specific training in family life skills. These have proven to be extremely helpful opportunities for individuals to reflect on relationships and patterns of behavior in their lives and to practice new ways of responding to daily situations. Though some of the participants are Mercy Center women involved in other programs here, many are mandated by the courts to come just for these classes. We remain committed to this work, since we continue to hear from participants about the insights they achieve and the impact it has on their behavior. We have heard more than a few say that their child has told them, “Mommy (Daddy), what’s the matter? You’re different now, and you don’t scream at me as much.”

Last year we saw the need to move beyond predominantly mandated, crisis-driven services that “rescue and fix” families to an approach based on a family’s self-initiated desire for improved family life. Recent news articles have shown that we are not alone in this trend. (See, for example, “Program Seeks to Fight Poverty by Building Family Ties,” NYTimes, July 20, 2006). Pascale/Sykes and William E. Simon foundations provided significant funds for us to launch our new Family Development Program. The needs of families are served by this



Angelica, a student in our ESL classes, enrolled her family in the Family Development Program. She has taken Parenting classes and has received extensive help with her immigration status. She has two children in elementary school, one of whom is partially disabled; they have both benefited from involvement in Mercy Center’s after school activities and camp opportunities. Through our partnership with Camp Fiver in upstate New York, they will be receiving a full range of assistance and development opportunities through their high school years and into college. Sr. Joan Anzalone has worked extensively with Angelica to obtain the best possible educational placements for the disabled child, and has helped with Medicaid applications to apply for a hearing aid. The family participated in a Family Weekend in June and also receives a monthly delivery of groceries from our friends in Demarest, NJ – 23 families there who shop for and deliver groceries to 23 needy families in Mott Haven.

program in manifold ways, as families develop their capacity to set goals, solve problems and achieve long lasting self-reliance.

We accepted 16 families (representing a total of 80 individuals) into the program, with another few on a waiting list. Staff trainings in the first half of the year prepared the way for a January start-up, when home visitations began. We maintained contact with the families, held workshops for the children and the adults in April, and took entire families to the Highbridge Community Life Center in Goshen, NY, for weekends in May and June. Immigrant families and families

entrapped in poverty can feel very isolated; they are afraid or unable to make connections with others, and they often lack the basic tools needed to navigate the complex demands of living on little or no money in New York City. This program creates a community of support among them while addressing an entire range of needs these families have, including: documentation and immigration issues, building strong family relationships, attaining employment, increasing proficiency in English, assuring availability of wholesome activities for children, and helping to secure a better education for their children.

Women's Job Development and Entrepreneurship Program

A Women's Entrepreneurial Feasibility Study was launched in October, 2004 to explore two possibilities for Mercy Center's next effort to assist in the economic empowerment of the women we serve. We sought to determine the feasibility of either providing support and skills-training for budding entrepreneurs in the community or beginning an entrepreneurial enterprise as an

organization, to provide income for Mercy Center but more importantly to serve as a training ground for women who wanted to be entrepreneurs. At the conclusion of the study, the Board of Directors embraced the implementation of this Women's Job Development and Entrepreneurial Program to address the economic empowerment of women through the attainment of employment and the eventual exploration



Shaneene enrolled in our Anger Management and Parenting courses and then decided to try out Job Development as well. She was adamant about finding work in order to become more stable and to provide for her children. She attended all workshops and completed all necessary requirements. In June, she successfully gained employment and is happy with her job. On that day, there was a huge smile across Shaneene's face that everyone kept talking about – she simply lit up the Center, and you can find that smile on her face today. Her attitude about life and herself has changed for the better, and the difference is very noticeable.

of entrepreneurial opportunities. Liz Claiborne, Mercy Action, JPMorgan Chase and New York Women's Foundations, among others, provided seed money for the initiative.

Previously, Mercy Center's efforts in this area had focused on specific skills training to prepare women for entry level employment in office and clerical jobs. In 2004, this was expanded through a partnership with Grace Outreach to include offering evening GED classes for women at Mercy Center. A missing component has been specific assistance in helping all our women find employment, even if they were lacking GED-level education, or basic English language skills, or needed help finding appropriate career opportunities. In February of this year we hired a Job Developer to work both sides of the field: with potential employers who might consider hiring Mercy Center participants; and with individual women of Mercy Center, exploring their goals and interests, identifying their skills, and connecting them with vocational and employment opportunities.

As a direct result of the Job Development and Entrepreneurship Program, community

based organizations have been made aware of these initiatives, companies are now on board and hiring our participants and the participants are experiencing positive changes in their lives. They have become more assertive, less fearful, and more ambitious. More importantly, the participants are excited and eager to work, and some have already become successful in obtaining steady employment.



Tomas and his family participate in many programs at Mercy Center, from ESL to Family Development and After School. So, enrolling them in the Job Development Program was another way to assist them. Tomas worked for a very difficult company that gave him a strenuous work schedule and very little pay. After participating in the program, Tomas successfully interviewed and obtained employment with a company that he loves and he has more than doubled his weekly pay. As a direct result, Tomas has more free time to spend with his family – which makes everyone much more contented with their lives as a family.

Program Summaries

Family Alternatives to Violence

*Parenting, Teen/Young Moms and Dads, Anger Management
Family Development, Family Weekends, Counseling, Social Services Assistance*

We can be very grateful that the random and pervasive ‘street violence’ that so typified the South Bronx during Mercy Center’s early years has somewhat abated, even if it is still too present. But what remains a challenge is the learning and the practice of patterns of behavior and reactions to situations that reflect what the heart of mercy is all about – non-violence, respect for self and others, the affirmation of the worth and potential that lies within each individual human life and the community at large.

Parenting and Anger Management courses continue to be well attended. Many of the participants are mandated by the courts to attend, and they are an important extension of our reach into the community. Some attendees then participate in other Mercy Center offerings – yoga, GED classes, Job

	Number of Classes	Participants
Parenting	8	212
Teen Parenting	2	32
Anger Management	7	204
Total	17	448

Development, etc. – but for many people this is the only contact they will have with us.

We are also very fortunate to have a volunteer psychologist and a volunteer psychiatrist (bilingual) who come weekly to Mercy Center to offer their expertise to our participants. It is blessing to be able to offer services to them that might otherwise be beyond their reach.



Theresita took teen parenting classes last semester. She had to drop out of high school when she became pregnant, and we feared that would be the end of education for her. She stopped by at the beginning of the summer with the good news: she had just received her GED and is registered to start college in September. She, her husband and their child are doing well!

Another participant in parenting classes summarized her experience: “I’ve learned to pay more attention to my children and also to the way I react. I realize that I can’t change everyone but I can change myself. And I’m becoming a more positive and active parent.”

Employment Yes!

Computer Basics (Bilingual), Keyboarding, Intro. to Word, Adult Basic Education (Literacy), GED classes (Grace Outreach), Business Training, Job Development (Bilingual), Counseling

Mercy Center's training and employment assistance to a total of 172 women during FY 2006 was distinctive in a number of ways. Our constituency comes from a wide variety of backgrounds, language competencies, educational credentials, skills, work experiences, cultural histories, and personal and family situations, and each situation brings its own specific obstacles to full employment. Therefore, our response was multifaceted:

- A volunteer taught literacy and Adult Basic Education to students twice a week.
- ESL classes were available for those seeking employment.
- Grace Outreach offered GED classes at Mercy Center two evenings a week.
- Computer instruction provided skills training necessary in today's job environment: Keyboarding, Intro. to Word, and Computer Basics, from turning on the machine to navigating the internet.
- Business Training prepared women for entry-level clerical and administrative assistant positions.
- Counseling and coaching sessions helped women identify skills, set goals, and develop plans for their futures.
- Job Development resources began to uncover specific opportunities for further skills training of participants and provided job referrals.



Angelica is a young high school graduate who was trying to find a job. As a participant in our Job Development, she learned how to focus on her goals and come up with a personal plan of action. Angelica successfully applied to and was accepted into college for the fall and will be working on a part-time basis. She has been actively interviewing and is happy with the direction of her life. She feels prepared to enter the work force and manage school, which wasn't even an option for her before.

ESL/Immigrant Services

ESL Classes (3 Levels), Conversation Groups, Immigration Assistance

More than 500 students enrolled in Mercy Center's English as a Second Language classes. This was accomplished through the generous presence of 56 volunteer teachers and assistants offering over 5,000 hours of service. We were honored to continue our partnership with conversation partners from the International Center.

In addition, Immigrant Services was expanded and diversified under the leadership of one coordinator with the assistance of two part-time, pro bono lawyers. Consultations sometimes resulted in people being referred to law firms or other pro bono agencies, e.g., in the case of domestic violence situations. Over 80 people were assisted.

As part of the Immigrant Services Program, participants who were permanent residents were encouraged to apply for citizenship. Thirty people attended the



Volunteer Sinead Keegan team-teaches ESL on Saturday mornings with her sister Siobhan.

citizenship classes and 14 participants passed the test the first time. Many needed assistance with reading and writing since their command of English was marginal. The next step for a number of our participants who have obtained citizenship is to request assistance with petitioning for relatives. The process for citizens bringing immediate relatives is much faster than for those petitioners who are still permanent residents.

CHAMPIONS Youth Services

After School activities, House of the Roses Dance and Drumming, Saturday Reading Enrichment, Girl Talk, Camp Fiver, Winter/Spring/Summer Camps, Ernst & Young (and other) Day Trips

After School activities were expanded to accommodate more participants and a variety of enrichment activities, including anger management workshops, art projects, gardening, keyboarding, nutrition education, sign language instruction, and yoga.

The **Saturday Reading Enrichment** program involved 31 children in first through sixth grades who were scoring in the lower percentiles in reading. With the help of seven adult volunteers and 22 youth volunteers, the children participated in tutoring sessions, group reading, educational games, arts and crafts, and special music and the arts sessions.

Volunteers from Ernst & Young, Regis High School and Canisius College provided **Field Trip** opportunities for 63 young people. Many of our children had never been out of the Bronx and their immediate environment, and giving them a chance to go to museums and the Bronx Zoo helped to expand their vistas.

The House of the Roses program of dance and drumming entered its second year at Mercy Center. A total of 105 boys and girls in grades 1-11 participated. The sessions were jam-packed with dancing, drumming and self-esteem building exercises led by five different members of the House of the Roses, a volunteer dance group. The children performed in New York City three times this year: at a fund-raiser at Loft 11; in *Project Dance*, an annual dance event in Times Square; and in *Roses are Dance III*, the House of the Roses' third annual spring festival, in which the children performed in front of family, friends and invited guests at the Miller Theatre at Columbia University.



Above, Sarah, an After School and Girl Talk participant, also volunteered as a tutor in the Saturday Reading Enrichment program. Below, Mercy Center's children in the Dance and Drumming group got the chance to enjoy a very special visitor...Antonio Banderas!



One student, whose mother reported he was having behavior problems and trouble with reading in school, was given special attention by tutors. As a result, he showed more interest in reading at home and a better ability to focus on learning.

Another student, for whom English is a second language, worked with an English-only tutor, which forced him to speak more English. His language skills have improved, and he speaks English now, even with his Spanish-speaking friends. A hyperactive child, he calmed down considerably in class and credited his tutor, saying, "She speaks nice to me. I don't feel stupid or silly when she is working with me."

Personal Development and Empowerment

Spirituality Groups, Retreat Days, Health and Wellness Programs, Yoga, Nutritional Cooking, Salsa and Merengue, Women's Movie Discussions, Art Workshops, Knitting and Crocheting, Handywoman Training

People living in poverty lack more than money; they often are poor in enriching activities. At Mercy Center, we relish being able to offer women the chance to learn new skills, develop themselves in new ways, and explore new interests that genuinely enhance their daily lives, to the benefit of themselves and their families. Enrollment exceeded 200 in knitting and crocheting classes, spirituality groups, yoga classes, quarterly retreat days, salsa, merengue and swing classes, a monthly women's movie and discussion evening, art workshops on peace (interior and exterior) themes, and basic home repair courses.

Health and wellness served as a unifying theme for us. A "Mind, Body, Spirit Street Fair" in September attended by hundreds of participants and neighbors kicked off a number of complementary activities throughout the year: weekly dancercise lessons, three 10-week courses in nutritional cooking offered by the Cornell Cooperative Extension, six-week courses in Breathwork, periodic visits of a Mammography Van from St. Barnabas Hospital and the introduction of "Capacitar" exercises, simple ways for women of the community to practice techniques and disciplines of stress reduction and healthy living.



Above, nimble hands in a knitting class, and below, reiki and relaxation at our September Health Fair.



Josephine, who works in the neighborhood, was looking for ways to improve her life. She came to Salsa & Merengue, Introduction to Computers and the Internet, and Anger Management classes at Mercy Center, but she was most faithful to the Women's Movie Discussion group. She described coming to the group as not only a chance to share with other women and have fun, but as therapy. She says the group has helped her to be more independent, to stand on her own, and to take better care of herself. This year, Josephine went back to college and, along with one day earning a degree, she also has plans to become a home owner.

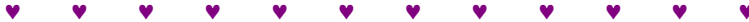
Staff Transitions – and Thanks!!!

We have said too many goodbyes this year. Sr. Breige Lavery left to continue her very effective immigration work, first in Florida and now on Long Island. After volunteering full-time at Mercy Center for three years, Paul and Margaret Marc-Aurele took to the road to work with Habitat for Humanity along the east coast and in Florida. Fortunately, others who left are a bit closer and we are glad we will continue to see them: Mary Anne Sullivan left to tend to some family commitments; Yolanda Santiago decided to return to parish religious education work in the Bronx; and Tim Powers is returning to teaching, this time at Xavier High School in Manhattan. We consider ourselves very fortunate that their paths crossed ours in a shared work for the people of Mott Haven.

At the same time we welcomed with great expectations a number of new staff : Judith Criado-Fiuza is coordinating the ESL program and the efforts of our extensive roster of volunteers, and Rachel Soltis has assumed overall responsibility for Youth Services, Camp Fiver families, Outreach, and Advocacy/ Spirituality. In addition, we continue to be graced by full-time

volunteers. Kathleen Coughlin and Holly Frindell come to us through the Mercy Volunteer Corps, as have ten others before them over the past ten years. Maren Loftness will be with us for a year through the Christian Brothers Volunteer program, a first-time gift made possible through the assistance of that program's director, Brother Jack Flaherty. We are very excited about the contributions they will make in the lives of the women and families of Mercy Center.

No listing of staff is complete without a mention of the gift of volunteers that makes this Circle of Mercy so energizing and effective. Well over 150 people contributed over 6,000 hours in various ways – as computer instructors, ESL teachers and teachers assistants, receptionists, tutors for after school and Saturday reading, mentors for children and adults, building maintenance, members of Boards of Directors and Advisors, etc. Their generosity, expertise, devotion, and genuine affection for the women and families of Mercy Center create true community here – a gift sorely needed in today's world.



Gene Sullivan, a retired corporate lawyer, first came to Mercy Center in the fall of 2003 as a two-day-a-week volunteer through the Ignatian Lay Volunteer Corps. A year later, his wife Mary Anne became ESL Coordinator at Mercy Center. While getting her hair done one day and talking with the stylist, a woman next to her overheard the conversation and became interested in her work. Karen Bratone began volunteering in the ESL program, as a teacher and with administrative tasks, and brought along her teenage daughter on a number of occasions to help in our youth programs. This past year, her husband Steve, a bilingual retired lawyer, also began volunteering two days a week – joining Gene Sullivan in providing Mercy Center participants with nearly full-time legal assistance, particularly on immigration concerns. That is a Circle of Mercy coming full circle!

Financial Information

The story of Mercy Center is a story being written by many people, all of whom have a passionate commitment to the women and families we serve.

In addition to the volunteers and staff already mentioned, we are very grateful to the following foundations for their generous support of ongoing operations and programs.

Allegany Franciscan Ministries, Inc.
Allied Irish Bank
Allstate Foundation
Anonymous Foundation
The Frank J. Antun Foundation
Axe Houghton Foundation
Balm Foundation
Rose M. Badgeley Res Charitable Trust
The Barker Welfare Foundation
Catholic Charities of New York
Church of the Presentation
Con Edison
The Daphne Foundation
Dunn Family Charitable Foundation
William T. Grant Foundation
Emy and Emil Herzfeld Foundation, Inc.
Hispanic Federation
Independence Community Foundation

The J.P. Morgan Chase Foundation
The Kazickas Family Foundation
Linden Foundation
Liz Claiborne Foundation
Mercy Action
New York Women's Foundation
Pascale Sykes Foundation
The Edward and Ellen Roche Relief Fund
The Redemptorists
RTS Family Foundation
Helena Rubinstein Foundation
St. James Episcopal Church
Sarita Kennedy East Foundation
William E. Simon Foundation
Srs of Mercy, NY Regional Community
ViBern Foundation,
Laura B. Vogler Foundation

Additionally, Mercy Center has been gifted with other support to benefit our long-term fiscal stability. The ViBern Foundation provided another \$60,000 toward a five-year \$250,000 donation to an endowment, and this was matched by other generous supporters. And through the pro bono efforts of Carter Ledyard & Millburn LLP we received a settlement of \$275,000 to recoup additional environmental costs incurred in the construction of the new building.

The generosity of individuals has enabled Mercy Center to grow into an ever more vibrant and expansive presence in the South Bronx. One generous supporter in California has funded a second social worker for the 3rd year in a row. Nearly \$100,000 was raised at the Spring Auction which was attended by over 270 people. Additionally, \$60,000 was received in two large gifts. These three sources together account for around 25% of Mercy Center's cash budget of over \$800,000.

But each person makes a tremendous difference. Many of our individual donors have increased the amounts of their donations; in the past 3 years the number of individuals contributing \$500 or more jumped from 24 to 117. Overall, our donations from individuals (including the Auction event) have increased from \$73,000 in FY 03 to \$362,000 in FY 06, an increase of almost 400%. The appropriate committees of Mercy Center's Boards continue to search for new sources of revenue, particularly through brokering connections between Mercy Center and likely friends. Meanwhile, our work is being funded by an ever-widening Circle of Mercy that is responding with extraordinary generosity to the need we have for additional funds to grow our services.

Expenses continue to climb. Cash outlay has doubled over the past three years, largely because the added space provided by the new building has allowed us to expand our programming and serve more people, requiring additional staff members. A 67% increase since FY 2003 in full time equivalents on staff (from 11.4 to 19.1) has come at a cost of \$283,000 annually, but it has also fueled an increase of over 200% in participants and a breadth in programming that increasingly meets a full range of personal and family needs – truly enlarging the Circle of Mercy in Mott Haven. Thank you for your interest in and commitment to this important work.

