Education is opening doors for hundreds of Hispanic students of all ages thanks to two programs offered by Catholic Charities.

Adela del Carmen Diaz and her children, twins John and Josefyn, age 4, are three of these students. Once a week, Adela comes to the Plaza Comunitaria to attend classes as she works toward earning her high school diploma. Once a week, she takes her son and daughter to the Parent-Child Learning Group where together they learn the skills and gain the knowledge that will help John and Josefyn be prepared for success in kindergarten.

While Plaza Comunitaria and the Parent-Child Learning Group are different in many ways, they share a common goal: helping Nashville’s Hispanic residents achieve success and participate in community life.

Adult learners

The Plaza Comunitaria program, hosted at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church and Cole Elementary School in south Nashville, is designed to meet the needs of Hispanic adult learners. The program is offered through an agreement between Catholic Charities and the Mexican government. The computer-based classes help participants receive certification at primary and middle school levels. It also helps them to improve or gain essential skills. Currently, there are 85 people enrolled in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, 18 in computer classes, and 71 in GED classes. More than 184 are enrolled in basic education classes to improve their reading, writing and math skills.

The program’s strength is its 15 volunteer tutors who provide instruction, guidance and support to the adult learners. One volunteer, Norma Godinez Murillo, has tutored students two days a week for more than a year.

Youngest students

The Parent-Child Learning Groups help parents and their pre-school age children gain basic education skills and knowledge that supports childhood development and family life. Three groups meet once a week for three hours. Approximately 40 parents and children participate in each group. During these sessions, the parents and children learn basic language and literacy skills. The parents gain knowledge about their influence on their child’s attitude about learning and about the importance of participation in their child’s education. They also learn parenting skills and receive information about community resources.

Participation in the groups can have a tremendous impact on a child’s life. One little boy participated in the program for a year until he entered kindergarten. Recently, during a visit to Catholic Charities, his mother said that the program changed a lot. His ability to build relationships with employers, to encourage and guide clients along their path to self-sufficiency, and to never give up has helped hundreds of refugees achieve their own dreams of security and peace.

Going beyond the usual employment efforts of identifying job openings and sending clients on interviews, Abdishakur and the employment staff find a way to start with clients’ skills in farming, fishing, or weaving and end with a dependable and desirable employee. They make sure clients have transportation for work (often riding the bus with them the first day), provide interpretation during new employee orientations, and respond to any concerns that may come up between an employer and client due to language or cultural misunderstandings.

In discussing his time with Refugee Services as both client and employee, Abdishakur says, “Catholic Charities gave me help through services when I arrived, changed my life when I got a job, and now lets me change lives of others.”

And when a client becomes self-sufficient, Abdishakur says, in his simple and expressive way, “It feels good.”
Why resettle refugees now?

It’s a question that’s come up a lot over the past two years as our nation has struggled economically. Some might say that now is not the right time to move one’s home to America. However, refugees aren’t leaving their homes to come here… most have not had homes for years or decades. Their lives have been lived in limbo in refugee camps throughout the world, each day’s existence dependent on humanitarian deliveries of clean water, basic sustenance, and minimal medical treatment. Each refugee’s journey to a place of safety in the United States or one of 26 other resettlement countries began years ago due to war, ethnic cleansing, religious persecution, and the worst of human indignities. Actually traveling to their final destination is the final step in a process that began long before our current economic struggles came to light.

Resettlement to another country has never been easy but refugees are a resilient group. Tales of kidnapping, torture, and withholding of food by the ruling majority are common among the clients of Refugee Services. They arrive with minimal belongings and the most basic of dreams… the opportunity to live and work to support themselves without fear of persecution. For those of us born in America, it’s probably an expectation we’ve taken for granted. But refugees, having spent much of their lives relying only on what was given to them or could be grown within the camps, look forward to the day when they can go to school, obtain a job, provide a home for their family, and contribute to their country… America.

Posters tell the story

Posters that tell the story, Families Caring for Each Other, will be displayed in several Nashville area public libraries in April. The posters, created by public and private school students in kindergarten through 8th grade, were entered in the annual contest sponsored by Catholic Charities in conjunction with the national observance of Child Abuse Prevention Month in April.

“The poster contest provides an opportunity for students to think about the importance of family and to express their feelings. The contest also provides an opportunity to teachers and parents to discuss various issues related to child abuse prevention,” said Marie Gilland, Catholic Charities program coordinator.

Throughout April, Catholic Charities staff members will distribute information in community schools and area malls about how to recognize the signs of child abuse.


**Finding a Family: the story of one teen in foster care**

A chance meeting and a photograph resulted in Michael*, 17, finding a “forever family” and leaving Tennessee’s foster care program.

In September 2009, Denise Todd-Cotrell, a Catholic Charities adoption recruiter, was managing an information table at a meeting of the Tennessee Foster Adoptive Care Association. A couple stopped by the table and picked up a picture of Michael, a young man in foster care. Denise was at the meeting hoping to find an adoptive family for him and many other teens in foster care.

The couple, the Todds*, wanted to know why Denise had a photo of the teenager. She quickly explained that it was her job to find loving families willing to adopt older children in foster care. The Todds told Denise that they had wanted to adopt Michael two years ago. They explained the barriers they had encountered in trying to meet Michael. Could Denise help them?

One of the barriers the couple had faced was that they were told that Michael was not interested in being adopted. He had been in foster care since age 14. They were told that he was happy with his foster parents. However, as Denise discovered, Michael did not understand what adoption meant. No one had ever explained the word or the process to him. He was afraid that he would have to change his last name if he was adopted. He was afraid that if he left his foster home in Memphis that he would never see his biological mother again.

The adoption team explained to Michael what adoption meant and that he did not have to change his name unless he wanted to do that. After the Todds agreed that he could maintain contact with his biological mom, Michael was ready to consider the possibility of adoption. After several more sessions with his adoption team, the Todds and Michael finally met on May 12, 2010. The Todds recognized right away they wanted him as their son; Michael knew he had finally found his “forever family.”

After several visits with the family, Michael was placed in the Todds’ home on June 25, 2010. His adoption was completed in February 2011.

For information about adopting a foster care teen, please contact Denise Todd-Cotrell at 615-352-3087, ext. 236.

*To protect privacy, these names are fictitious. The situation described is real.

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**Learning about poverty**

Pamela Kelner, director of Jewish Family Servicenter, leads student Will Perlen, Battleground Academy, Andrew Wilson, Bill Blass Prep School, and Kristin Eng Tow, Father Ryan High School, through an explanation of social services resources as part of a poverty simulation exercise presented recently at Gordon Jewish Community Center in Nashville. These students and more than 50 others from the Catholic and B’nai B’rith youth organizations participated in a series of role-playing exercises to better understand the challenges that people with low income encounter in their daily lives in meeting basic needs.

In Tennessee, 14.8% of the population lives in poverty. More than 20% of Tennessee children live in poverty. The official federal poverty level in 2008 was an income of $22,025 for a family of four.

Following the poverty simulation, the Catholic and Jewish youth and adult volunteers discussed the experience and their observations. Another joint program is planned for next year. The youth are also hoping to work on a service project together.

The poverty simulations are part of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development’s initiative to reduce poverty. The simulations are designed to increase awareness of poverty and prompt action within local communities. To learn how to host a poverty simulation experience, contact Fran Rajoite, frajoi@ctcenn.org or call 615-352-3087.
Board members share parting thoughts

Ed Stack, Mary Ellen Rodgers and Minnie Horton know their way around Catholic Charities and its boardroom table. Together, they have served more than 26 years as Board members, helping steer the agency through its greatest period of growth and change since it was established in 1962. In June, they will leave the Board as new members take their place. In their own words, they share thoughts about the agency.

Ed Stack
President of the Board from 2008 to the present; Board member from 1995 to 2002 and from 2004 to 2011. He is President/CEO of Behavioral Centers of America.

“Catholic Charities is in a good place. It has great leadership and employs outstanding people. It has the support of the church and the community. Its Board members bring diverse talents and new ideas to the table. I believe that the words ‘charity’ and ‘service’ are exemplified by Catholic Charities. The breadth and depth of its services to people in need are amazing – counseling, adult day program, refugee services, adoption services, food programs, Hispanic family services and more. It is always a struggle to meet growing and changing needs. However, I know that Catholic Charities can meet any challenge. This was demonstrated again by its response during the May 2010 flood.”

Minnie Horton
Board member since 2005, chair of the Program Oversight Committee, member of the Development and Executive Committees. She is retired from the IRS.

“Revenue has grown from approximately $6 million when I joined the Board in 2005 to $16 million in 2010. The growth has been incredible and is always program driven. For example, the statewide Tennessee Office for Refugees is now part of Catholic Charities. “Catholic Charities does work that other nonprofits are not equipped or prepared to do. The diversity of its services matches the diversity of the people it serves – people of many religious, racial, ethnic, cultural and age groups. Community needs are rapidly changing and increasing, and, in some instances, becoming more urgent. Catholic Charities stands ready to respond. It has fantastic leadership and staff. Its volunteers are amazing; they are dedicated, competent and hardworking. The combination of the agency’s leadership, staff and volunteers is powerful.”

Mary Ellen Rodgers
Board member since 2005, chair of the Audit Committee and member of the Finance Committee. She is Senior Vice President and Private Client Advisor for U.S. Trust/Bank of America Private Wealth Management.

“Catholic Charities consistently rises to the occasion to provide services that have great impact. “Catholic Charities never loses sight of its mission. It stays focused. It is blessed with thoughtful, stable capable leadership. I think these are its greatest strengths and the reasons for its successes. “Business could learn a lot from Catholic Charities. It has good management practices and strong internal controls. Its growth is thoughtful and mission-focused. It knows what it does well and does it. The right questions are asked: What is the need and who will benefit? How can staff and resources best be used? Where is the funding? It is constantly challenged to ensure that its personnel and operational infrastructure keeps pace with growth.”

Need for food assistance increases; resources stretched

The number of people receiving food assistance through the Loaves and Fishes and North Nashville Outreach programs is at an all-time high. These programs now provide more than 8,400 meals during a typical month.

Loaves and Fishes, Community Meals for the Hungry, serves a hot, nutritious noontime meal every Monday, Wednesday and Saturday in the parish center at Holy Name Church in East Nashville. Each day that it operates, Loaves and Fishes welcomes and feeds an average of 200 people.

The North Nashville Outreach program distributed 2,145 emergency food boxes last year, an average of 178 boxes per month. However, in January 2011, 212 food boxes were provided. These emergency food boxes meet an urgent, short-term need; they provide enough food to prepare three meals a day for three days for each person in a family. Without food donations resulting from special Super Bowl “Souper Sunday” collections by churches and other groups, the pantry at North Nashville Outreach would have been empty in February and March.

Headlines report that food prices are rising. For the families and individuals served by Loaves and Fishes and North Nashville Outreach, these cost increases mean it is an even greater challenge to provide for their households.

Because of the growing need for food assistance, the current resources of the Loaves and Fishes and North Nashville Outreach programs are severely strained. Additional community, church and individual financial contributions and food donations are needed so that these programs can continue to meet the basic needs of the people they serve. For information regarding how to donate, please contact mstack@cctenn.org or loavesandfishes@cctenn.org. Thank you.