Two years ago, when Sister Karen Scheer, RSM, M.D., a member of the Mid-Atlantic Community, interviewed to be a family medicine practitioner at Maria de los Santos Health Center in North Philadelphia, the medical director couldn’t understand why a white, middle-class woman from the suburbs would want to work there.

But when he discovered she was a Sister of Mercy, he said, “Oh, that explains it.” Often, her patients say the same thing when they realize Sister Karen’s calling in life.

As an undergraduate student at Gwynedd-Mercy College, “I had been interested in becoming a sister, but I also wanted to be a doctor and didn’t think I could do both,” says Sister Karen. When she realized she could combine the two vocations, she decided to become a family medicine doctor and work in poor communities. “Being a Sister of Mercy is the best way for me to develop and deepen my relationship with God and use my gifts,” she says.

Today she uses her gifts at the center that serves an area of about 100,000 people, many from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, South and Central America, and Mexico.

“It’s been a real challenge,” says Sister Karen. “The culture is Latino and the language is Spanish, which is not my primary language. But I feel every day that I’m really serving a need to a community of people that don’t have insurance or access to quality care.”

“We treat people regardless of their insurance status,” says Sister Karen. Maria de los Santos Health Center, a federally qualified health center, serves...
Sister Uses Her Medical Gifts

underserved, underinsured, and uninsured Americans, including non-U.S. citizens regardless of their ability to pay. Charges for services are based on a sliding-fee scale determined by each patient’s family income and size.

Despite the hardships that some people in the community endure, “My patients truly bring God to me,” says Sister Karen. “One African-American patient is 70-years-old and still works five days a week at a nursing home because she needs the money. She is deeply religious and is an inspiration to me. Parents I see work so hard—sometimes two and three jobs—to give their children a good education at a Catholic school. Many parents aren’t even from the United States, but they want their kids to have a better life.”

Typically, Sister Karen sees between 24-30 patients a day, alternating days between child and adult patients. “Often there is a high no-show rate,” says Sister Karen. “Some people don’t have the money for a doctor visit or their phone has been disconnected and they did not receive their reminder call.” Despite these challenges, the center had over 42,000 visits last year.

“I serve the poor, work with women and children, try to provide health education, and advocate for patients who need other assistance,” says Sister Karen. “We also offer social services through a social worker and behavioral services. We are a comprehensive center so we connect people to the services they need.”

“My favorite part of my job is education, teaching patients about medicine, exercise and diet. But they have many obstacles to overcome. Often they don’t have money or access to healthy food and it’s too dangerous to exercise outside because of the violence,” says Sister Karen.
Mid-Atlantic Member Works With Immigrant Farmworkers in Florida

After Sister Alicia Zapata, RSM, a member of the Mid-Atlantic Community and co-director of the Farmworkers Ministry in Auburndale, FL, served in Panama for a year as a pastoral associate with farmworkers, she decided to help migrant workers in the United States who struggled in the same way.

“I realized the farmworker community in Panama was the same as the farmworker group in Florida and the farmworkers in California that I visited,” says Sister Alicia. They had the same poverty and the same needs.”

A group member of the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Farmworkers Ministry is funded by bishops and employs attorneys to work with immigrants about their rights. In 1986, two years after Sister

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Since family and food are the core values for many of the people in her community, many suffer from diabetes, high blood pressure and obesity.

“Most people that Maria de los Santos Health Center serves are living below the poverty line,” says Sister Karen. “It is really an underserved community and being able to provide them with medical care, an on-site laboratory, and social and behavioral services really makes a big difference.”

“I listen to people, build their sense of work and worth, push people who can do more and aren’t pushing themselves, and give them hope,” says Sister Karen. “And I push myself, too. As a result, my Spanish skills are improving!”

For more information, visit: Maria de los Santos Health Center

“I listen to people, build their sense of work and worth, push people who can do more and aren’t pushing themselves, and give them hope.”

- Physician Karen Scheer, RSM, at Maria de los Santos Health Center in North Philadelphia
Mid-Atlantic Member Works
With Immigrant Farmerworkers

Alicia started working there, the Immigration Reform and Control Act was signed, making it illegal to hire or recruit unauthorized immigrants and granting amnesty to certain agricultural illegal immigrants and those who had entered the United States before 1982.

“While immigration has come a long way since I began, recently, the climate in the United States for immigration has worsened,” says Sister Alicia. “Racial profiling is rampant and some people say, ‘We can’t let illegals into our country.’”

“We need comprehensive immigration reform -- it’s a bigger issue than our country and its borders,” says Sister Alicia. “Many people have lost their land in their home country and can’t make money so they come here because they have no other choice, often intending to return home.”

Today she works closely with immigrants in the South, helping them complete necessary government paperwork for citizenship and guiding them to the services they need, as most speak little English.

Other members of the 16-member staff help farmworkers get food stamps and Medicaid applications, rental contracts, employment applications, and school forms. They also offer other services, such as health visits from a doctor and nurse, a GED class in Spanish, and a housing committee that raises funds to help families afford a downpayment on a house.

“At Farmworkers Ministry, we foster the ideas of family and supporting each other. Everything we do furthers the mission of Catherine McAuley,” says Sister Alicia.

Sister Alicia, who is fluent in Spanish, can easily relate to the people she helps because her own family left their homeland of Puerto Rico.

Sister Alicia Zapata, RSM (center), sits in her office with two migrant farmworkers she helps through Farmworkers Ministry in Auburndale, FL.

“At Farmworker Ministry, we foster the ideas of family and supporting each other. Everything we do furthers the mission of Catherine McAuley.”

- Sister Alicia Zapata, RSM, at Farmworkers Ministry in Auburndale, FL
Mid-Atlantic Member Works
With Immigrant Farmworkers

Sister Alicia Zapata, RSM, at Farmworkers Ministry in Auburndale, FL

Rico because their landlord stopped their access to a water source, a stream on their property.

Even before her trip to Panama, Sister Alicia remembers attending a retreat in upstate New York with the Brooklyn Sisters of Mercy after high school. At the end of the retreat, she saw a sister packing up the leftover food and asked where it was going. When the sister responded that she was bringing it to a migrant camp, Alicia decided to go with her and learned more about the plight of migrant workers.

Today, Sister Alicia works with teenagers and adults, but works very closely with women who have come to the United States to escape domestic violence or abuse.

“It is difficult for these women to tell their stories,” says Sister Alicia. “But after hearing their stories I can help them complete forms and gather police reports and other evidence, such as letters from family and neighbors that back up the abuse. Getting proof of citizenship for these women can sometimes take up to a year.”

“We also hold self-esteem groups for women and domestic violence support groups. One woman came to every domestic violence group meeting for three years and never said a word. Finally, one day I asked how I could help. She told me she and her three children lived in fear of her husband because he threatened to get the whole family deported if anyone talked. I helped her and now she and her children are U.S. citizens and one child is in college.”

“We work with women and children and try to foster the family,” says Sister Alicia. “We are conscious of the needs of the women and give them a greater sense of value and self-esteem. Migrant farmworkers are among the most marginalized people in our country. My heart has always responded to their needs, doing whatever I can do to improve their lives.”

Spanish-Speaking Students Learn English through Degree Program

Sister Suzanne Neisser, RSM, a member of the Mid-Atlantic Community and the executive director of Bilingual Undergraduate Studies for Collegiate Advancement (BUSCA) at La Salle University in North Philadelphia, helps native Spanish speakers overcome obstacles so they can earn an associate’s degree while also learning English.

“We are helping a group of people who would never have had the opportunity to go to college,” says Sister Suzanne. “Like Catherine McAuley, we are empowering the disadvantaged and those who are on the margins of society.”

BUSCA, a 60-credit, five-semester program that begins with a 12-credit intensive English course, is designed for students who are either permanent
residents or citizens of the United States. Students must pass an English exam before they register for other classes in English such as political science, history and religion that fulfill a liberal arts degree. Students must pay for their college tuition, but Sister Suzanne helps them find financial aid or scholarships.

“Many students have low-paying jobs and want an education, but don’t have the supports—like parents—that can help them navigate the college process,” says Sister Suzanne. “We help them through the application and financial aid process.”

Currently, 190 students are enrolled in the program. Over 300 have graduated through BUSCA so far. Seventy have continued on to earn their bachelor’s degrees. One graduate of the program, Judy Carbonell, founded a mentor program that pairs former BUSCA graduates with current students, while another graduate, Joan Nuñez, works at a bank and helps La Salle students set up bank accounts. Another student, Justo Gallardo, an older Peruvian man who worked as a taxi driver, not only sent all of his children to college while he was part of the BUSCA program, but later earned his bachelor’s and master’s degrees. Now he teaches Spanish at La Salle University.

Sister Suzanne also teaches a university Spanish class and works each summer with BUSCA students and prospective students who need more assistance improving their English. She started at BUSCA in 2006 as a part-time motivational counselor and professor and became the director of the program in 2009.

“We are helping a group of people who would never have had the opportunity to go to college. Like Catherine McAuley, we are empowering the disadvantaged.”

- Sister Suzanne Neisser, RSM, director of BUSCA at La Salle University in Philadelphia, PA.
“Having a degree makes such a difference for their future!”

- Sister Suzanne Neisser, RSM, director of BUSCA at La Salle University in Philadelphia, PA

Spanish-Speaking Students Learn English

A commitment to the people and the neighborhood is a hallmark of Sister Suzanne. She has lived and worked in this impoverished area of Philadelphia for 25 years, holding positions as a high school language teacher, a pastoral associate, a retreat administrator, and a spiritual direction professor. In college, Sister Suzanne was a Latin and French major with a minor in Spanish, but realized she could do more with Spanish and earned master’s degrees in Spanish and Christian spirituality.

“Because of my work and life in North Philadelphia, I have developed a heart for the poor. It is thrilling to accompany people on their educational journey, to help them become more empowered, and to watch them pursue their academic dreams despite many possible hardships,” she says.

For more information, visit: BUSCA program at La Salle University

Mercy Volunteers Help Immigrants in New York

Mercy Volunteer Corps members Anne McCabe and Rebecca Rybaltowski show mercy and grace to immigrants in Brooklyn and Queens.

Working in the New York offices of Catholic Migration Services, an organization that provides educational, advocacy, and legal services to immigrants in the New York area, the two women also live together in Queens with four other Mercy volunteers.

In these positions, they help immigrants complete documents, handle labor issues, find services and safe, affordable housing, and obtain citizenship.

“A day in our office is very busy,” says Anne, a graduate of the University of Maryland with a degree in Government & Political Science.
Mercy Volunteers Help Immigrants in NY

and Spanish who is from Baltimore City, MD. “Even though I speak Spanish, sometimes language can be a barrier because many of my clients are Caribbean, Haitian or Creole and speak different dialects.”

Also, the road to citizenship can be a lengthy process. “If you are applying yourself, sometimes you can gain citizenship quickly, but if you are applying for someone else, it could be years,” says Anne. “If you’re coming from Mexico, it could take up to 20 years.”

Mercy Corps volunteer Rebecca Rybaltowski (right) sits with Jesuit volunteer Megan Helbling (left) and Public Allies volunteer Kim Kearns (center), at Catholic Migration Services in Queens, New York.

Rebecca, a graduate of Gordon College from upstate New York with a major in Spanish, is in her second year at Catholic Migration Services. She worked as an immigration counselor last year, but now translates for the lawyers who don’t speak Spanish and works in the labor department, helping to advocate for workers’ rights.

Workers in the New York area can call a bilingual hotline to report employers who are not paying them, not paying enough, or forcing them to work in unsafe conditions. Rebecca listens to their stories and determines whether they should be passed along to the U.S. Department of Health, who will then look into the complaint.

“Myth people are working for three dollars an hour and, at first, many are worried about calling because they are afraid of getting deported, but the Department of Immigration is not notified and they can call the number anonymously,” says Rebecca.

Many of the people Rebecca talks to work in restaurants, delis, or construction, but one of the worst stories she heard was from a Trinidadian woman who was working in a Manhattan lawyer’s office six days a week.

“The people we help know it is their right to be treated fairly and to get paid. They might not have known that before they talked to us.”

- Rebecca Rybaltowski, Mercy Corps volunteer at Catholic Migration Services, NY
Mercy Volunteers Help Immigrants in NY

from 9 a.m. until midnight and was paid $100 a week. Catholic Migration Services immediately sent the complaint to the Department of Labor, though Rebecca says they do not always hear if the Department of Labor takes the cases from there.

“What these people deal with on a daily basis is really tough to hear,” says Rebecca. “Knowing that you’ve helped someone, even though we are often only the liaison, is really meaningful. We are at least a starting point for many people. We can’t help everyone, but the people we do help know it is their right to be treated fairly and to get paid. They might not have known that before they called and talked with us.”

Anne helps clients of many ages with various types of applications, from green card and childhood arrival paperwork to temporary protected status for people like earthquake victims from Haiti.

“I’ve always wanted to do something that genuinely helps people have a better quality of life,” says Anne. “Immigration can really affect the make-up of a family unit. I enjoy my one-on-one contact with clients, learning about people’s lives and helping them complete the necessary documents.”

Catholic Migration Services also helps with housing rights, as many immigrants are taken advantage of by their landlords who threaten to turn them over to authorities.

“We are all working together for the common goal of helping society, to show compassion and understanding, and sometimes just to be good listeners,” says Anne.

“I’ve been noticing the word ‘mercy’ in a lot of things I see, the words ‘mercy’ and ‘merciful,’” says Rebecca. “That really sticks with me; that’s what I’m doing. I’m showing mercy and grace to people who may not have known what it was before.”

For more information, visit: Catholic Migration Services

“Mercy Corps volunteer Rebecca Rybaltowski (left) gives a presentation at Catholic Migration Services in Queens, New York.

“We are all working together for the common goal of helping society, to show compassion and understanding and sometimes just to be good listeners.”

- Anne McCabe, Mercy Corps volunteer at Catholic Migration Services, NY
"People in other countries want the same basic things we do. They want a safe place to live, to raise their families, for their children’s futures to be brighter.”

- Mercy associate Maureen McCullough, Mid-Atlantic Director at Catholic Relief Services

Mercy associate Maureen McCullough (left) with girls in Pakistan on one of her trips with Catholic Relief Services.

As the director of the United States Northeast/Mid-Atlantic region for Catholic Relief Services, Mid-Atlantic Mercy associate Maureen McCullough walks humbly, bringing mercy and compassion to the poorest of people.

“In Rwanda, which suffered through mass genocide in 1994, one woman said, ‘Tell the people in the U.S. that the little bird still sings. We still have hope in Rwanda.’ A young Palestinian boy said, ‘Tell them that not all Palestinians are terrorists.’ I’ve found that people in other countries want the same basic things we do. They want a safe place to live, to raise their families, for their children’s futures to be brighter.”

As a regional director for Catholic Relief Services, Maureen also travels throughout the East Coast, through 39 dioceses from Portland, Maine to Richmond, Virginia.

Rooted in the Catholic social teachings about justice and care of creation, Maureen sees many similarities between her ministry and her commitment as an associate. “This is the Year of Faith, so how can we help others see how this connects to our faith? This is not just an add-on; this is who we’re called to be. As the Micah quote says, ‘act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.’”

“Catholic Relief Services was started by the bishops after World War II to assist in the resettlement of mostly European refugees. Now we do all kinds of international development work in nearly 100 countries around the world,” says Maureen. “Often, we already have people on the ground in other countries when disasters hit, like the Haiti earthquake, so we can immediately respond to emergency situations. And we remain in countries long after the disasters occur.”

Though Maureen became a Mercy associate in 1999, Mercy had a presence in her life long before that. Born in Misericordia Hospital in Philadelphia, she was taught by the sisters in school, and later served on
Associate Brings Mercy Around the World

the Mercy Health System board. She joined Catholic Relief Services in 2005 after many years as a lawyer and as a representative in Pennsylvania Governor Casey’s office, where she focused on issues of community development, housing, healthcare, and assistance for the homeless. She sees her work at Catholic Relief Services as an extension of this advocacy.

“One of our beliefs at CRS is that people everywhere have the right not to migrate. They have the right to live in safe, decent places that provide them with dignity.”

This advocacy work takes many forms. Maureen has traveled from Nicaragua to meet with coffee farmers about fair trade, to India for rebuilding after the 2004 tsunami, and to South Sudan to stand in solidarity with the people and pray for peace as they seceded from the Sudan. Catholic Relief Services is also committed to helping women by educating young girls, sponsoring maternal health programs and working against human trafficking. Groups of women in many countries have pooled their resources and started successful micro-credit programs that have allowed them to earn a living.

“I remember in Rwanda, one Tutsi woman named Christine showed her group some beautiful embroidery she had done with the help of a micro-credit group,” says Maureen. “When the people I was traveling with said, ‘Oh, we would love to buy that!’ Christine said, ‘No, I already have a buyer in the market.’ And she said it with such pride, that she was able to do something positive like that with her life.”

“The micro-credit groups break down religious and cultural barriers, too,” she adds. “One group of women in Afghanistan, where women don’t always have a lot of opportunities, started a successful bakery. Today, there are over one million savings group members participating in almost 50,000 groups in 35 countries.”

Catholic Relief Services partners with other organizations, diocesan leaders, and colleges and universities to create social justice committees, train student ambassadors, and bring speakers from overseas into schools.
Associate Brings Mercy Around the World

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They ask others to Pray, Learn, Act, and Give to help them advocate for immigrants, raise awareness about foreign assistance and fair trade, support those in need abroad, influence policies such as trafficking legislation and slave labor, and create employment opportunities for people everywhere.

“When you think about people coming, for example, from Mexico and about why someone would come through the desert and those terrible conditions, you have to figure that the conditions they are fleeing must be much worse, and they often are,” says Maureen. “The same goes for people overseas, where we offer programs to anyone, regardless of their religious background. We feel we are bringing the news of the gospel through action and the people we meet are always incredibly grateful for what we do.”

Maureen and her six-person staff—two of whom are bilingual—also do special outreach among Hispanic populations in the United States who have come from Guatemala, Mexico and other areas in Latin America.

“We can all work together. We need to realize our commonality and bring peace to our world. As a Mercy associate, that is what I try to do,” says Maureen.

For more information, visit: Catholic Relief Services