

Mercy Associate Helps Refugees

Mercy Associate Mary Bartholomew personifies the corporal works of mercy in her work with refugees and victims of trafficking from around the world.

Mary, a senior service director for Lutheran Social Services of New England, helps refugees get the services they need after they arrive in the United States. The agency provides a variety of assistance to refugees, including physical and mental health services and placement in foster care homes.

“The work with refugee children is so rooted in the spiritual and corporal works of mercy,” Mary says. “We’re welcoming people and offering them support, understanding, safety and the best resources at our disposal.”

“Most of the refugees range in age from six to mid-teens, and they are often victims of war,” Mary says. “Many have lost parents and other family members. All of them come seeking safety, and they are hopeful for a better and more life-giving experience in this country.”

When refugees arrive in the United States, Mary and the staff of Lutheran Social Services help the children and teens adjust to American culture. “We help them acclimate to this new country and embrace their own ethnic heritage and traditions,” she says. The agency hosts many cultural events where participants bring food from their home country and dress in native clothing. “We don’t want them to forget where they come from and who they are,” she adds.

Mary, who has worked for Lutheran Social Services for almost nine years, has had a rich and fulfilling relationship with the Sisters of Mercy. Her social work career began at Mercy Center for Developmental Disabilities in Worcester, MA, in 1972. She also worked for McAuley Nazareth Home for Boys in Leicester, MA, Mary continues to work part time at the home.

“Both of those ministries are outstanding for their sense of welcoming toward people who are struggling, people who are sorrowing, people who need hope and respect and dignity,” Mary says. “The staff welcomes and accepts children and parents for who they are and where they are in their lives.”

The values Catherine McAuley embraced are evident in the lives of the sisters she worked with, Mary says. “Those values are alive, tangible and accessible,” she says. “The Mercy charism is a hallmark of the treatment and service provided to children in need as well as to their families and to the larger community.”

Mary, who has been an associate since 1989, served on a steering committee of the former New York regional community for several years, an experience that was “very meaningful, in terms of the lifelong relationships that were formed and the opportunity to grow in mercy. It was a wonderful gift.”

Mary describes the goodness of the Sisters of Mercy as “God given, reliable, grace filled and the source of real happiness.”

“The graces that have come from those relationships have brought me into a deeper relationship with God,” Mary says. “It is a joy to be with the sisters, and they share that joy with us. I have been really blessed with knowing many wonderful women and men in mercy.”

Mary says her work with refugees and the mercy charism are inseparable. “We comfort the sorrowful, educate those who need to learn, clothe those who need warmth and provide for all of their daily needs,” she says. “There isn’t a day that goes by that there isn’t an opportunity to console, to offer some kind of healing.” She also noted that her work aligns with the Institute’s Critical Concern of immigration.

While engaging in the works of mercy is personally rewarding, Mary says she and her co-workers receive much in return. “Mercy is not a one-way street,” she says. “No matter how much we give, I think each of us who work in this ministry receive back abundantly.”