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Teens Spread Holiday Cheer

After learning about MercyFirst's Mother/Baby program through a MercyFirst staff member, the MiHi Youth Group made it their mission this holiday season to give back in a special way. The MiHi Youth Group is made up of Middle and High School students from the North Shore Community Church in Oyster Bay, NY. This year they helped spread some holiday cheer to 17 residents of our Mother/Baby program by sponsoring them. The teens sacrificed an item off of their own wish lists and instead purchased something for the Mom and/or baby that they were paired up with. The teens did not ask for donations of money or gifts, but instead used their own personal funds to go shopping to select the gifts themselves. This special act of kindness helped make the holidays a little bit brighter!

MiHi Youth Group member, Alex Fernandez age 15, went out and personally purchased toys for a 3 year old child in the program. Alex enjoyed the experience of independently purchasing and wrapping gifts for someone he has never met. Alex chose a toy turtle to give to the toddler!

Another youth, Josh Rosero age 18, participated in a work study program at Hofstra University this past summer. When he learned that one of the mother's in the program had an iPod on her list, he was compelled to use the \$250 stipend that he worked all summer for to buy it. When Josh's friends heard of his plans they wondered and asked why he would make such a gesture for someone he never met? Josh answered, "I know the iPod wouldn't fix all their problems but maybe it would let them know someone cared enough to give them something they wished for and the gesture would provide them a ray of hope."

Youth Leader, Josiah Melcher, commented that when learning of MercyFirst's Mother/Baby program it created an awareness of how different the environment of a foster home for these teens must be. He was particularly drawn to the wish list provided by the Mom's realizing that this may be the first time these ladies have been asked, "What would you like for Christmas?" It may have been the first time they have been encouraged to submit a list of wishes.

MercyFirst is very grateful for kindness of the MiHi Youth Group and everyone is proud of the teens for being so generous and willing to help others in need. It's a wonderful lesson learned from the youth in our community.



The MiHi Youth Group, a ministry of North Shore Community Church in Oyster Bay, NY.



MercyLink
connecting the MercyFirst Community

Fall 2011/Winter 2012

Message from the CEO: Working in Partnership

Making decisions that affect another's life is hard enough when it concerns our own children and our own families. Every day though, our staff make judgments and decisions that affect the lives of every child in our care and every family we work with. It could be a decision to have a child return home to their family where there had been substance abuse problems and domestic violence or a decision to report a family member for sexual abuse. In the course of a year we will work with 4,000 children and their families whose lives are more complicated than most of us can ever imagine.

For MercyFirst to make a major decision affecting a child's life, input must be secured from the Case Worker, Nurse, Clinician, Youth Support Counselor, teachers and then approved by our administrative staff. All of these staff have more work to do than they should given the number of children they are responsible for. Besides reaching consensus on these matters, our staff works in full partnership with the child's family - parents and many times with aunts, uncles, grandparents and cousins - who are deeply involved in the child's life. Difficult decisions that affect people's lives, but difficult decisions that must be made!

In addition, there are others who are involved that we must consult with, be advised by and get approval from – the public agencies we work with like Administration for Children's Services (ACS) in NYC, Nassau or Suffolk Department of Social Services, and NY State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) and Office of Mental Health (OMH). There is also a Family Court judge overseeing the case, the child's Law Guardian, the attorney for the family, sometimes a Probation Officer, and even our own attorney. Almost every decision must be made within certain defined time frames and based on federal or state law and regulations. All this is done to make sure that complicated decisions get made with the best interests of the child in mind.



Pictured: Gerard McCaffery with Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Mayor Bloomberg recently held an event at Gracie Mansion to thank adoptive parents and agencies like MercyFirst for providing foster children with a permanent home.

Not easy to say the least.

But this is what MercyFirst has done every day for thousands of children and families all these many years since 1894. Thanks for your support in helping us do it right!

- Jerry McCaffery, President/CEO

Save the Date

Monday, May 21, 2012
Spring Golf Outing
Tam O'Shanter Club & The Creek

Thursday, June 7, 2012
The Daniel J. McCarthy, Jr.
Scholarship Dinner
Brooklyn Botanic Garden

Recent Gifts

Angelo Silveri, \$5,000
General Building Maintenance

TD Charitable Foundation, \$5,000
Bridges to the Future

BNY Mellon, \$50,000
Bridges to the Future

RTS Family Foundation, \$125,000
Preventive Service Programs

Sisters of Mercy, \$20,000
Bridges to the Future

Newsday, \$10,000
Advantage After-School

MercyFirst is now recognized as an "Accredited Charity" by the Better Business Bureau for meeting 100% of their standards for Charity Accountability.



College Tour for Teens

In early November a group of older youth and 2 staff attended a college tour and information session at SUNY New Paltz. They learned about the school, the application process, and what it would be like to go there. This experience allowed them to truly picture what it would be like for them to be in college. It was a great day for all!



MercyFirst Youth Help Others

Each year, youth from MercyFirst get in the holiday spirit by volunteering to help cook and serve dinner during family visiting nights. For Thanksgiving, there are 4 nights of turkey dinners served to the families of MercyFirst, complete with all of the fixings, which the youth get an opportunity to prepare. They bake corn bread, cake, help carve the turkeys, and then take turns serving food to the families. It is truly a blessing for all those involved. It is so important for all youth to learn to give back to their communities, and the youth at MercyFirst are no exception. And what better time of year to give thanks and spread joy than Thanksgiving and Christmas? During Christmas time youth also assist in creating "Santa's Workshop" during visiting hours for 4 separate nights. They volunteer their time by acting as Santa's elves, passing out Christmas favors, taking pictures of the families with Santa Clause, and serving dinner once again. We are grateful for their energetic, selfless, and gracious participation.



One youth is serving food that he helped to prepare for the event.



Comfort in Dolls

Kiana Norman from Brookville Center for Children's Services presented MercyFirst with nearly two dozen "duduza" dolls that she knitted along with other students from BCCS and Jericho Middle School. The students worked with their knitting looms to make the dolls for the kids at MercyFirst. Duzuza is the Zulu word for comfort.

"The students learned that MercyFirst has many programs that help young children; and by providing hand-knit comfort dolls to the children, they hoped to contribute in some small part to their healing. We're very impressed by all the wonderful work that MercyFirst is doing, and we're happy to be able to contribute something to that work!" said Patti Edwards, Project Supervisor.

Annual Harvest Ball

On Thursday, November 3, 2011 over 200 supporters gathered for MercyFirst's Annual Harvest Ball held at The Garden City Hotel in Garden City, NY. With the generosity of all the sponsors and supporters, this year's event raised over \$100,000 to help fund MercyFirst's programs. This year's event honored the children and families served by MercyFirst and spotlighted them in a brand new agency



Gerard McCaffery (center), President/CEO, thanked Patrick Reis (left) and Jonathan Russo (right) for creating a brand new MercyFirst video titled "Hope is Unstoppable".

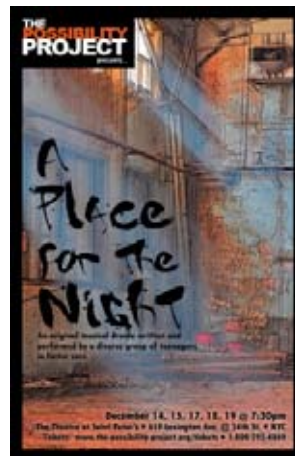


The youth and staff who were featured in the video really enjoyed being the 'stars' of the night!

video created by two very talented friends of the agency, Jonathan Russo and Patrick Reis. This inspiring video, titled "Hope is Unstoppable", shares the stories of the MercyFirst youth and is featured on MercyFirst's website, www.mercyfirst.org.

Youth Development Field Trip to the Theater

On Saturday December 17th, members of the Syosset Youth Development Team took 5 young men and women from our Residential Programs to the Theater at Saint Peter's to see the theater production "A Place for the Night" produced by The Possibility Project. "A Place for the Night" is an original musical drama written and performed by a diverse group of teenagers in foster care about a youth named Mula who has gone AWOL (absent without official leave) for the first time (sounds familiar to our kids). Mula comes upon an abandoned building where he hopes to spend the night, but soon realizes he is not alone. Mula meets Marlené and her friends who take him back in time to witness tales of family, friendship, loss, despair, and more. Mula learns from Marlené and her friends what it means to be young and in foster care. "A Place for a Night", truly enlightened our youth on what it means to be a young person in foster care. They were able to relate to the true stories displayed on stage and take back with them that there are caring people in the world and that there is hope for better days. The production also furthered the staff's knowledge on the difficulties that youth go through being in care. Overall, both youth and staff had a wonderful time on the trip, enjoying dinner in NYC and meeting the cast after the production.



The Youth Development department highly recommends the productions put on by the Possibility Project. The Possibility Project is a dynamic, year long, youth-led production that empowers current and former youth in foster care to create safe, peaceful, and productive lives and communities by using performing arts as an outlet.

More information about The Possibility Project and future productions can be found at www.the-possibility-project.org.

What is it REALLY Like Having a Mentor?

Sunshyne is a MercyFirst youth who has been meeting with her mentor, Heather, for over a year.

Q: What's your favorite thing about having a mentor?

A: I like trying new things with her, going new places. We always go out and do cool things.

Q: What kinds of things do you normally do with Heather?

A: Go out to eat at restaurants, go out to see movies.

Q: How has having a mentor helped you?

A: It has opened my eyes to new things. Now I know to try something before I say no to it.

Q: Is mentoring something you would recommend to your friends? Why?

A: Yes. I have a lot of fun! It's good to get out and do different things.

Are you interested in being a mentor like Heather?

For Long Island Opportunities contact:
Elaine Frazier
516.921.0808 x 525
efrazier@mercyfirst.org

For Brooklyn Opportunities contact:
Shajida McNab
718-522-0504 x 104
smcnab@mercyfirst.org



Sanctuary is Shared Worldwide

A few months back, MercyFirst hosted a visit for a group that traveled all the way from Australia, the "land down under"! The group of five visitors were in New York to attend the Sanctuary Networking Conference and were put in contact with MercyFirst through Michael Thomas at the Sanctuary Institute. Mr. Thomas being familiar with MercyFirst and its programs believed that the best advice that he could give the Australian group was to get first hand information on how Sanctuary worked at MercyFirst; the general challenges we faced, and how it worked with our core values and mission. A group of MercyFirst staff hosted a half day meeting to share their experiences with Sanctuary, discussed various issues, and answered questions. Sanctuary is in action back in Australia in a few stages. One group is in their second year of implementation, while another is just starting the process.

The visiting group consisted of Australian social service professionals from Churches of Christ Care, Mackillop Family Services, the Victoria State Child Safety Commissioner and Mercy Family Services, another Sisters of Mercy ministry.

Catherine's Corner

Mercy is the life-giving
Expression...is a
Response...a loving
Compassionate
Yes to suffering and misery

Catherine McAuley called us to be Mercy to all those in need, especially women and children; and for the past 118 years, MercyFirst has remained committed to a *Compassionate Response* to this mission.

Day in and day out, a dedicated administration/co-workers make every effort to help the children and families overcome the obstacles that keep them from living full and dignified lives.

The many mentors, volunteers, and benefactors continue to build with us a future of hope for our young people through our Bridges to the Future programs.

Our YES guides our vision and decision making; and identifies new ventures to meet the challenges of our times.

Thank you for being and doing Mercy! May you and your loved ones be richly graced by the God of Mercy as we live into another New Year!

M. Seton Agovino, RSM, VP of Mission Integration



MercyFirst's Project CARE

MercyFirst has introduced a new program to its youth that is called, Project C.A.R.E. (Canine Academy for Rehabilitation and Education). Through this program MercyFirst youth will learn basic health care and grooming techniques for canines, and gain basic knowledge of animal behavior and training methods. With this learned knowledge, the program goes a step further with a partnership with Last Hope Animal Shelter. This initiative will provide MercyFirst residents with opportunities to learn and practice critical life skills through the rescue and rehabilitation of animals in need of safe, loving homes. Project C.A.R.E. will temporarily adopt a dog from Last Hope and the residents will train the dog and assist in finding adoptive homes for them.



The youth enrolled in Project CARE also use our 5 Therapy Dogs to teach others about animals. During December the teens took a trip to the local elementary school in Syosset, the Village School. The MercyFirst teens got to show off the dogs to the students and answer questions from them about dogs. The dogs were given belly rubs and treats and the MercyFirst youth left with stockings filled with gifts!

SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR HOLIDAY DONORS

Syosset resident, Mary Majoy and the Village School Elementary PTA organized a special holiday breakfast at a Syosset dinner for 20 MercyFirst teens sponsored by Pastor William Edwards and the Freedom Fellowship of Christ Church. (right)



GEICO's Annual Holiday Toy Drive collected gifts for over 150 kids! (left)

Andrea Clifford and Robin Miller hosted "The Circle" party for over 50 local families who sponsored a group of residents. (right)



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SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR HOLIDAY DONORS

Our Friends at Merrill Lynch collected over 200 holiday items. (below)



A day of fun and games at Dave and Busters for our kids was provided by Mineola-Pacific Lodge, No. 125 (right)



Breezy Bikers Ride for Charity. (left)



Seaford High School delivered tons of holiday toys. (above)

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