



History of Our Lady of Mercy Community Outreach

On September 11, 1989, Our Lady of Mercy Community Outreach Services, Inc. opened as a faith-based non-profit organization, addressing the concerns of the people in need on James, Johns and Wadmalaw Islands of South Carolina. The religious community of the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady of Mercy committed themselves in 1988 to establish a center for direct service to the economically poor in South Carolina. The opening of the Outreach was the direct implementation of their commitment. As the sponsors, The Sisters of Charity of Our Lady of Mercy provided a site on Edenvale Road , Johns Island, called the “Christian Hope House”.

The Sea Islands became the focus of the Outreach’s services because of the astonishing fact that many of the region’s residents live below the nation’s poverty level. Over the years, many changes have occurred on the Islands: the farming industry cultivated new crops; leaders of the civil rights movement sprang from the area’s communities; new means of economic growth and land development changed the rhythms of Island life. Hispanic families joined in the farming labor force and some now call the Islands their home. Bringing the richness of the Latino culture, they are emerging as new partners in the Islands’ development. Today the coast is respected for its rich heritage and various cultural influences, including English, Spanish and Gullah. However, the splendor and mild climate do not console many residents who live in poverty, struggling to make their dreams for the future a reality.

Onto this holy ground the Outreach staff stepped to be a presence and witness to the human dignity and rights of all peoples. Under the leadership of Sister Mary Albert Greer, OLM, the newly formed team began assessing needs by door to door interviews and discussions with local organizations. Shortly after their arrival, the Outreach staff faced the devastation and emergency needs brought by Hurricane Hugo. The Outreach center quickly became a relief center.

More than temporary solutions to the effects of poverty, the staff developed programs that were focused on the needs of the whole person, not just the immediate crisis. A new mission statement focused these programs on the areas of education, housing, health and outreach.

Through interviews and assessments, daily emergency services have been offered by the Outreach’s Social Worker. The distribution of food, clothing, financial support and household items remain part of the supportive services. During the spring and summer months, seasonal farm workers and their families have traveled to the Islands for work. Addressing their needs involved providing emergency services, health outreach, transportation and advocacy. English as a Second Language and Literacy classes continue to provide opportunities for the Hispanic population to further their education. The Outreach hosts the largest ESOL Program in Charleston County.

Too often adult residents lack appropriate skills for employment and young children may be deprived of healthy family systems. Originally, the Outreach developed a series of educational efforts under the C.O.P.E. Program (Community Outreach in Partnership with Education). The staff responded by offering a variety of education classes, parenting and budgeting sessions and mentoring relationships. After school tutoring and summer enrichment gatherings still offer a helping hand to young folks.

Children and senior citizens bear the burdens of poverty disproportionately. Many young people do not complete their basic education and are at risk to perpetuate the burdensome cycle of poverty. The

Outreach partnered with the schools by providing supportive services. The staff conducted a cultural awareness class in the schools and health, exercise and learning sessions at the senior centers. A unique socialization program brought music and self-esteem experiences together for the rural mental health program.

Many residents, especially the elderly, live in houses which needed significant repair. Sickness and long-term learning disabilities are often by-products of these deplorable housing situations. Often the elderly live alone, young families crowd into extended family homes with inadequate water or sanitation. The Outreach housing program attempted to correct these situations with generous volunteer laborers. Since 1989, the N.A.I.L.S. Program (Neighborly Assistance in Living Safely) improved the quality of life for 250 family homes, making them safer and more conducive to healthy living. Today residents are supported financially as they make improvements to their homes.

In 1995, Our Lady of Mercy Outreach joined with Bon Secours-St. Francis Hospital in establishing a program of health outreach and wellness education. Realizing that children die in South Carolina from preventable diseases, the Wellness Center staff focused on health education programs for parents. Since illness is often related to poor understanding of diseases, the Wellness Center provided health educational programs. A free dental service began in 1999 as the only dental program available to uninsured residents.

The mission grew and the scope of activities expanded. In July, 1991, the Outreach became a separately incorporated 501 © 3 under the sponsorship of the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady of Mercy. A Board of Directors was appointed and the Sisters purchased land and built the present structure on 1684 Brownswood Road, Johns Island. In 2002, an Education building was added, making it possible to offer educational services to adults and children. In partnership with local hospitals and a capital campaign, a new Wellness Center became a reality in 2008. Comprehensive Dental Care and Pre-Natal Care services now serve thousands.

Networking with local organizations, a hallmark of the Outreach, enhanced the effectiveness of many services. Since 1991, the Migrant Task Force and Interagency Meetings, two gatherings started by the Outreach Staff, the Outreach facility frequently acted as a host for community gatherings to address education, health and housing concerns and networking possibilities. Visiting nursing homes, boarding homes, housing units, senior citizens centers, head starts, day care centers and local schools became part of the staff's daily routine.

The Neighborhood House, located on America Street in Charleston, became a program of the Outreach in 2005 and an integral part of the sponsored ministry of the Sisters. Since 1915, the residents of the city have experienced compassionate concern and service through the presence of the Sisters. Today co-workers and many volunteers have developed a daily lunch program, educational training services for adults and emergency financial support. These services are strengthened as the Neighborhood House collaborates as a program of the Outreach.

The MISSION of Our Lady of Mercy Community Outreach continues to express itself in numerous and remarkable ways!

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