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Fund focuses on empowering women for social change

Alice Popovici | Sep. 2, 2011
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In downtown Asheville, N.C., across the street from the unemployment office, a couple of blocks away from the social services agency and less than a mile from the county jail, there is an old yellow house where everyone is welcome. By day it is a shelter for the city?s homeless -- a place to rest, eat a meal, find a friend and escape the heat -- and by night a home to Amy Cantrell, her partner, Lauren White, and a few others who help out with chores, cooking and maintenance.

Cantrell said she and White started Community of the Beloved in 2009 (they got the house about a year later) to offer homeless people the kindness and personal attention they cannot find at social service agencies, where they are often treated as just ?a number.? But the program provides more than immediate assistance to the nearly 100 people who filter through the house every week.

?It?s not just people being served, it?s not just charity, it?s creating a space where people are empowered, creating social change,? Cantrell said. Inspired by the ideas of Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King Jr., members of Community of the Beloved (most of them formerly homeless) work to create a safe, hospitable place where everyone is treated with respect, but they also reach out to the neighboring community by organizing public outreach programs and activities to help homeless people make their voices heard.

?Mainstream America -- what do they know about homelessness and poverty?? Cantrell asked. ?There are a lot of assumptions and myths that we?re trying to dispel.?

Soon, with the help of a $2,000 grant from the nonprofit organization Mary?s Pence, the group will try to reach further into the community, by starting a magazine or newspaper where they will print their stories. They will learn not only how to use their voices to tell a story, Cantrell said, but also ?to be advocates for social change.?

It is the kind of project -- organized by women, collaborative, empowering -- that Mary?s Pence has been funding since it was started by a Dominican nun nearly 25 years ago. Lately the organization has been funding more and more projects that focus on educating people, building skills and helping change perspectives.

Instead of just meeting an immediate need, the idea is to change ?the culture of a society, so the need doesn?t exist anymore. It?s about everyone having access to resources,? said Katherine Wojtan, executive director of the organization, which began in Chicago, moved to New Jersey, then Staten Island, N.Y., and recently moved again, to St. Paul, Minn.

The beginning

It was the lack of access to resources for women?s ministry projects, and one particular experience in 1986, that prompted Dominican Sr. Maureen Gallagher to start Mary?s Pence. Gallagher had been vacuuming her Chicago apartment, listening to the radio, and trying to work out her feelings of anger toward the Catholic church. Women were being excluded, their ministry work was denied funding, and they had no say in the matter.

?I was so angry at the church and the way they treated women,? Gallagher said, ?and all of a sudden in my head it came out: ?What are you doing?? ? Gallagher said she remembers hearing the question and answering that, as a woman, there wasn?t much she could do. But the question came again.

?It dawned on me that I had to do something,? Gallagher said. She remembered having heard that money from Peter?s Pence, the Vatican?s charitable collection, had been used to pay off the Vatican?s deficit, and thought she could start an alternative. ?I thought, ?What we need is a Mary?s Pence.? ?

Along with a few others, Gallagher gathered a diverse board of 13 women, including gay women and straight women, economists, professors, laywomen and women religious. They met for the first time on April 29, 1987 -- on the feast of St. Catherine of Siena -- and began to refine their vision, which was inspired by the work of St. Catherine, Teresa of Avila and Dorothy Day. They reached out to parishes, published a newsletter and held conferences. During their first year they raised and distributed $20,000.

?It was tenuous, but I always had faith in the Catholic people of the United States,? said Gallagher, who led Mary?s Pence through its first 10 years and now works with a women?s ministry on the U.S./Mexico border. ?It wasn?t priests or deacons or bishops or cardinals -- it was the people of the church.?

Since then, Mary?s Pence has funded more than 5,000 projects in North America, Latin America and the Caribbean, including farms and markets, small businesses and job-training programs. It focuses especially on projects that are self-sustaining.

The vision evolves

By the time Sheila Daly became executive director of Mary?s Pence in 2006, organization leaders had started to notice that grants to Central and South America in particular were almost always going to income-generating projects such as sewing and product manufacturing co-ops. The question now became, ?How could we keep doing granting, but maybe look at it as a renewable grant?? Daly remembered. ?Because if they?re generating income they can pay the money back; it?s the spring that doesn?t run dry.?

A few years earlier, several women who led various projects in Nicaragua -- including a ceramics project, a jewelry-making project and a residence for pregnant women -- began to meet, share information about their work and collaborate. Daly remembers that they said, ?Let us decide ourselves how we?re going to use the money,? and this was the impetus for what would later become the ESPERA (Economic Systems Promoting Equitable Resources for All) Fund.

Mary?s Pence ?always saw itself as being the bridge? between women and various resources that were always available but just beyond their reach, Daly said, be it money, information, or channels of communication. ?It?s really about justice, but you can?t have justice when women aren?t included.?

The organization began distributing money through ESPERA Funds three years ago, around the time Wojtan became executive director. Now about half of its budget of $300,000 (minus administrative costs) goes to ESPERA Funds, and the rest to ministry grants.

Gilda Larios, the only employee other than Wojtan, lives in Mexico City and travels regularly to visit the eight

networks of women who are managing ESPERA (Spanish for ?she hopes?) Funds within Mexico, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala and Haiti.

One of the first of these networks to be established, in El Salvador, is made up of representatives from 14 community groups around the town of Suchitoto. ?They were very organized,? Wojtan said, ?and we knew that they had the leadership to administer the [funds].? Since it began three years ago, the network has made about 188 loans (about 68 women have received loans to buy livestock and start small businesses) and it has earned about $440 in interest. Larios visits the women regularly, reviews the projects that need funding, and helps solve any problems that arise.

?We encourage projects and income generation that meets a local need,? Wojtan said, ?because we don?t want them to become dependent on our [the United States?] economy.?

A new home

Wojtan, who just finished moving the office from Staten Island to St. Paul in early July, said she is settling into the downtown office with the help of a couple of volunteers. The organization moved to be close to the strong donor base, but also so that Wojtan could live closer to her two grown children, both in the Midwest.

She came to Mary?s Pence after serving on the boards of a few nonprofit organizations, and after about 16 years working in the corporate world. Wojtan said she began to reconsider her career path after her children left for college and she began a program of study and reflection called JustFaith Ministries. After spending a few months reading about social justice and meeting with people in her community, she realized she wanted to be involved in this kind of work.

?If we don?t fight for the rights of others, and work to make the world more just,? Wojtan said, ?there will be people that continue to suffer injustice.? This year, she said she was happy to see that some organizations working on similar projects -- including Community of the Beloved in Asheville; WHEEL, an empowerment center for homeless women in Seattle; and Hagar?s House, a New Orleans shelter that is expanding its social justice program -- are networking and sharing information with one another.

Cantrell, of Community of the Beloved, has heard the stories of people living on the street and dying on the street. There are older people and toddlers, those who are terminally ill and those who once had stability and lost everything, and many others who are living just one paycheck away from homelessness. But she said ?mainstream America? doesn?t understand the situation, and newspapers and television programs do little to change that.

?Every year at Christmas you?ll get a story about the homeless,? Cantrell said, along with a picture of people ?going down to the rescue mission to feed the homeless.?

Many people see a homeless person and think, ?You just need to go get a job and then you won?t be homeless anymore,? Cantrell said, or they assume housing and other assistance programs are available to people who apply for them. But, she said, most employers don?t want to hire people who are living on the street, and those who are hired find it?s hard to hold down a job when you keep moving from shelter to shelter.

These are the kinds of realities Cantrell hopes will be made known when the homeless people she is working with start publishing their stories as part of the Mary?s Pence-funded newspaper project.

?It?s devastating; it?s a national disaster that?s invisible,? Cantrell said. ?Something?s wrong with our system and our country and our cities.?

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