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Monique receives her bachelor's degree from Notre Dame de Namur University in May 2017. (Notre Dame de Namur University/Danielle Dana)



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Formerly incarcerated women are getting a chance at an education and a new life in the San Francisco Bay Area, thanks to a Catholic charity and a Catholic university.

St. Vincent DePaul of San Mateo County's Catherine Center is a faith-based program founded in 2003 by two Sisters of Mercy who had spent time volunteering at a local prison to help recently released women get their lives back on track. Women at the Catherine Center "participate in emotional counseling, substance abuse rehabilitation, as well as vocational, educational and spiritual programs," according to its website.

Catherine Center can accommodate up to 19 women in residence for 12 months, sometimes longer if the center feels that the women can benefit.

"A special feature of our program is we try to walk with women over the long term," says Vivian Clausing, director of the center. Women can stay at the center as long as it is able to provide them with help, assisting them with casework, medical issues, and other needs.

While over three quarters of women who are released from prison find themselves back behind bars in five years, over 80 percent of Catherine Center's former residents, "alums" as Clausing calls them, have not returned to prison.

Education can play a large part in helping formerly incarcerated people begin new lives. In many cases, however, finding a program that works for people with a unique set of challenges — and making it affordable — can be difficult.

Three years ago, longtime Catherine Center volunteer Jim McGarry was talking to Monique*, one of the center's residents. She told him how her struggles with drugs and the legal system had kept her from finishing college. Although she wanted to go back and finish her degree, she was worried that it would not be possible.

At the time, McGarry was director of the Sr. Dorothy Stang Center for Social Justice and Community Engagement, a project of Notre Dame de Namur University in Belmont, California. "I knew that the programs at NDNU could be really helpful," McGarry told NCR.

Before she was murdered in Brazil in February 2005, Stang, a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur, had dedicated much of her life to building schools for children who had "extraordinary barriers to success," as McGarry puts it. He began raising money for what would become the Sr. Dorothy Stang Scholarship Fund to help Monique and other Catherine Center women earn a degree.

"It was very moving for me when he told me I that I was able to go back to college," Monique told NCR. "And not only any college but a college that was perfect for me."

Monique was working full-time then, but she was able to enter an accelerated program for working adults, which had classes at night and worked around her schedule.

A preschool teacher before her trouble with the law began, Monique knew what she wanted to study if she got another chance at completing her education.

"I wanted to go to school to help children that are in similar situations as I was in a child ... the human services field. And that was exactly what I needed; they had that program," she said.

In May, Monique graduated summa cum laude with a degree in human services and an emphasis in counseling. She hopes to go to graduate school to earn her master's

degree and become a licensed clinical social worker.

Since Monique's success, Notre Dame de Namur University and the Sr. Dorothy Stang Scholarship Fund have continued to help women from the Catherine Center work toward a degree, an opportunity most of them would never have had.

McGarry has also expanded the scope of the fund. It now provides aid to immigrants and refugees, as well as to children from the foster care system and to emancipated youth.

The fund helps close the gap between the financial aid available and the frequently very large sums of money students with extraordinary barriers to success still need in order to attend Notre Dame de Namur.

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Immigrants and refugees may face legal hurdles in securing loans, and those without a family also struggle to secure additional funds. Borrowing money can be difficult or impossible for the formerly incarcerated, who carry a criminal record and often are in debt already.

Cici* first came to the Catherine Center in the late summer of 2013 and has stayed there since, graduating the primary program in record time. She went back to work soon after, and she quickly received multiple promotions at her job at a retail store, saving money and hoping to return to school.

Cici had already earned a bachelor's degree; "however, because of my addiction, eight months after graduation, I went to prison," she told NCR.

She describes her upbringing as "typical Asian ... so it was a lot of schooling." During her time in the primary program, she began tutoring Catherine Center women who were working toward a high school equivalency diploma. She also tutored Monique in her undergraduate courses and became interested in attending Notre Dame de Namur University's Master of Business Administration program.

"I'd always wanted to [get an MBA]," she says, "but I'd just never had enough clean time where I felt like I could be a successful student." Several years clean, Cici had saved some money but worried that the high cost of an MBA program would still

make it impossible for her to attend.

McGarry and the Sr. Dorothy Stang Scholarship Fund were able to help Cici continue her education; she was accepted into the program and began in the fall of 2016. She is on course to graduate next May, and maintains a 4.0 grade-point average.

Donna*, another undergraduate at Notre Dame de Namur University who is a recipient of the Sr. Dorothy Stang Scholarship, is now studying science, sociology and theology. She has a strong interest in the spirituality of indigenous peoples and has been active standing up for their rights. She even traveled to the Standing Rock Reservation last year to protest the Dakota Access Pipeline.

Set to graduate in May, Donna wants to join the Peace Corps and go to Peru after graduation. She hopes that by working with the indigenous people there, she will learn skills and lessons that can help her have an impact on the world she comes from.

"Hopefully, as I get more hands-on experience and I learn, I'll be able to have a broader perspective and be able to create paths to ways I can assist locally," she told NCR.

** To protect their privacy, the Catherine Center women's last names are not used in this story. Some of the names have also been changed.*

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