

Going Above and Beyond the Usual Vincentian Help:

Our Lady of Hope Conference uses systemic change approach to provide a “hand up”

After eight long years of trying to help a client keep a roof over her head, Vincentians at Our Lady of Hope Conference in Bedford decided to assist in a different manner.

Darlene, a single, unemployed middle-aged woman, was living in a constant state of crisis that was reflected in her surroundings. Her mobile home was in tremendous disrepair and often on the verge of eviction from the trailer park. Her personal appearance matched her surroundings, as she always had disheveled, uncombed hair and did not show any interest in taking care of herself. Her mental health was affected as well. At times she seemed depressed, despondent and possibly suicidal.

Over the years, Conference members came to her aid numerous times with rent, food, heating fuel, and repairs of broken pipes and a leaking roof. Darlene’s constant dependence upon the Conference’s emergency financial support was the subject of numerous Conference discussions regarding the most effective ways to help her. Members concluded that they were actually enabling her situation more than they were helping her, and decided to end further financial assistance.

But cutting her off financially seemed as if they were yanking away a life preserver from a drowning woman. And was this the Vincentian thing to do?

It was time to try something new. The focus then shifted from merely providing a handout to giving her a hand up.

Michael Birkovich, the Conference’s vice president, shared some systemic change programs from the National Council that other Conferences are using. The “Bridges Out of Poverty” national mentoring program teaches Vincentians how to facilitate discussions with people in need in an effort to help them help themselves out of their situation. Using principles from this program, the Conference members agreed to support a team to mentor Darlene for three months.

Two Vincentians, Michael and Marlene, visited Darlene in her home to inform her about the decision to stop all financial assistance. They also asked if she would be willing to discuss her life, problems and dreams, in addition to allowing them to mentor her for three months.

Darlene agreed and the Vincentians subsequently visited her weekly to listen to her talk about her life, her children (who lived out of state), why she was unable to work, how one calamity after another occurred and how she was finally beaten down to the point where she could hardly function as a viable person.

The visits continued and included heart-felt discussions about how to manage one obstacle at a time, and how to make small changes – such as personal hygiene, keeping the trailer tidy, etc. – one small step at a time.

Marlene provided helpful suggestions on improving personal appearance, and even took Darlene shopping to buy cosmetics and a new dress.

The Vincentians slowly noticed a change. The trailer was almost tidy. Darlene's appearance was no longer dowdy and her depression seemed to be replaced by some confidence. When a pipe needed repair, the Vincentians showed her how to fix the problem herself. She was also shown how to make minor repairs around the trailer.

Darlene's self-confidence continued to grow after three months of personal consultations.

For the first time in years, she started a job and began her journey to self-sufficiency. Although work was inconsistent, she found other jobs to pay her bills. And the Vincentians were pleasantly surprised when they learned that Darlene also began volunteering with hospice, the Red Cross and Parma Hospital during the hours when she wasn't working a paid job.

Seven months later, she started taking classes for her GED in addition to working on her certification as a home health care assistant. She subsequently passed the certification test with a perfect score and the next day the school placed her in a full-time position.

Vincentians at Our Lady of Hope Conference couldn't be any more proud of Darlene. And she shows her gratitude often by calling them just to say "thank you!"

Our Lady of Hope members plan to formalize their understanding and use of the "Bridges Out of Poverty" program and encourage all members to learn new ways to provide a hand up.