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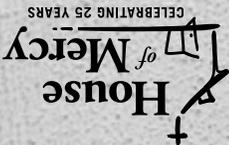
The House of Mercy provides food, clothing, shelter and assistance to many of the poorest people in Rochester. With a shoe-string budget, very small staff and a growing team of dedicated volunteers, we operate a shelter that stays open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. We never close our doors on people in need.

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INSIDE: Bianca's Story: Portrait of a Student Leader • City Garage Update • New Ways To Help The House

HOUSE OF MERCY



Fall Newsletter 2014

Bianca's Story: Portrait of a Student-Leader

She couldn't read or write. She had learning disabilities and behavioral problems. And she struggled in one school after another.

But the House of Mercy never gave up on her. And finally with help from Hope Hall, a remarkable school that made her believe in herself, she blossomed.

Honor roll. Peer counselor. School ambassador. Student leader. Future police officer.

This is Bianca Brooken's story.

Welcome to the family.

The story begins several years before she was born. Bianca's mother, Jacqueline, moved from the island of St. Lucia to Florida. But she was lost there, trying to survive on her own with her young son Eddie. So she joined an uncle in Rochester.

But even with help from a family member, she was still struggling to survive financially. Then a friend introduced her to The House of Mercy. And the staff there helped her get the assistance she needed.

Not long after that, she married a House of mercy volunteer. And to pay The House back, Jacquie became a volunteer, too.

"Sister Grace and C.W. opened their arms to me," she said. "The House of Mercy really became my family in Rochester."

A child of The House of Mercy

From the moment she was born, Bianca was a child of The House. Sister Rita helped with the delivery. And from Day One, the staff and residents were members of her family.

But when it was time to start school, Bianca struggled. She had learning disabilities. And it seemed like the city schools gave up on her. She sat in the back of the classroom. And the way she remembers it, the teachers didn't seem to care whether or not she did her homework. They were on overload with their other responsibilities.

Sister Grace went with Jacquie to countless meetings with teachers and school officials. They moved her to another school. Then they tried a Catholic school. But Bianca's academic and behavioral problems persisted.

"She needed more special attention than she was getting," recalled C.W. "She was failing everything."

That's when Sister Grace found one last school to try: Hope Hall, a private school founded in 1994 with a reputation for helping poor children with learning disabilities turn a history of academic failure into success.

The House couldn't afford the tuition. But Hope Hall found a benefactor to provide a scholarship.

"I promised her mother that I would find a school that would help her," said Sister Grace. "But Hope Hall was really her last chance. If she didn't make it there, I didn't know if there were any options left."

A school with heart

Hope Hall provided Bianca with incredible support. Teachers, coaches, counselors. Even the executive director and founder, Sister Diana Dolce, SSJ got involved.

Nevertheless, the problems continued. And on more than one occasion, the school threatened to withdraw her scholarship. But Sister Grace and C.W. remained heavily involved. And the school never gave up on Bianca, either.



They helped her deal with her learning disabilities. They encouraged her to believe in herself. They told her she was intelligent. They coached her on making good decisions and being a leader, not a follower. They also made extraordinary efforts to help her keep up with her homework.

It was a challenging situation. But there was one thing to build on: Bianca loved the school. And she hated the thought of leaving.

"When I first told Sister Grace I liked the school, she had tears in her eyes," Bianca recalled. "Hope Hall really became my home."

The turning point

Today, Bianca remembers the conversation clearly. She was in eighth grade. And Sister Diana told Bianca she could do anything she wanted to do in life. But it was time for her to grow up.

"I started to do things differently after that," Bianca recalls. "I told myself it was time to step up my game. I wanted to change and become a better person and become a role model for other students."

Still, it took time. But gradually the behavioral problems diminished. She started to do her own homework. And then one day an amazing thing happened. She was named Student of the Month. And her mother could see a definite change in Bianca when she came home at the end of the day.

"She was so happy and excited," Jacqueline recalled. "And when she told Sister Grace she was Student of the Month, Sister Grace gave her a big hug."

Profile of a super senior

Bianca's now entering her senior year at Hope Hall.

She's made the Honor Roll or High Honor Roll every year since ninth grade. She's been named Student of the Month so many times she has trouble remembering. She's a key member of the basketball team. She's represented the school at meetings with City School District officials and professional groups. She was interviewed on YNN.

She's even become a skilled woodworker, creating cabinets, tables and jewelry boxes that she gives as gifts to people who helped her. Or that she donates to the school for fund-raising.

But even those signs of a remarkable turnaround don't capture the full story. Bianca has become a leader at school, someone the administration turns to when other students need help.

"She has a wisdom well beyond her years," said Sister Diana. "There's not a student here who doesn't respect her and see her as a true leader. And the teachers here feel the same way.

"She was a natural gift for being able to look at a situation and recognize what's going on and see how to solve it. She builds bridges with people and inspires other students to do the right thing. She has wonderful social skills. She's just grown tremendously. And I could really recommend her for any job in the

world, because I know she'll approach it with great integrity and personal strength."

"One day Sister Diana said it was a gift to have me in school," Bianca said with a smile, sitting in Sister Grace's office at The House of Mercy. "I told her I'll help anyone who needs help. We're a community. So we have to help each other. I learned that from Hope Hall and The House of Mercy."

Looking ahead

For many high school seniors, the future is a fog-covered landscape. But for Bianca, the path leading from Hope Hall is crystal-clear.

She wants to study criminal justice in college. Get a job in corrections. Then her long-term goal is to be a police officer and join the Rochester Police Department. She's already visited the Police Academy and 'shadowed' Rochester Police Department officers.

"It's just something I've always wanted to do," she said. It's a great way to help people."

But even when she takes that big step into adulthood, she will always remember the people at Hope Hall and The House of Mercy who supported her and encouraged her and helped her turn a history of academic failure into success.

"They never gave up on me. They taught me to believe in myself. And I wouldn't be where I am today, doing so good, without Hope Hall and The House of Mercy."

Want to help The House send other children to Hope Hall? Send your check labeled "Scholarships to support children from The House of Mercy" to Sister Diana Dolce, Hope Hall, 1612 Buffalo Rd. Rochester, NY 14624

The Dangerous Decision:

Sister Grace interrupts much-needed retreat to advocate for downtown's homeless

When you lead a homeless shelter and social services agency that operates around the clock with only two full-time paid staff members, it's important to get a chance for rest and reflection. That's why Sister Grace goes on an annual retreat.

"It's wonderful to be able to lead the House of Mercy. But it can be exhausting," she said. "That's why the retreat is so important. It gives me a chance to rest and reflect and be alone with the Lord. It gives me the spiritual strength to continue."

Unfortunately, on Tuesday, Aug. 19, only a few days after she arrived at the retreat in Stella Niagara, N.Y., Sister Grace got the call: Officials were closing the Civic Center Garage to the homeless.

"Right then and there I knew I had to come back. I wondered if they made the decision knowing that I was out of town."

As soon as she returned to Rochester, Sister Grace jumped in to help organize a press conference to focus attention on the importance of finding a refuge for homeless people downtown.

"I asked them, 'Why don't you keep the garage open until we find a safe place for the homeless?' They just said, 'We've discussed this already. And we've made our decision.'"

Déjà vu all over again

Later that night, Sister Grace returned to the garage with other supporters. They stayed until 11:30 pm. Then

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The Dangerous Decision: *continued*

Sister Grace drove around downtown by herself looking to help the people who had been evicted from the garage.

Around 1 a.m., she found three men who wanted to go to a shelter downtown. Sister Grace helped them get something to eat. Then she took them to the shelter. But they were denied entry. And that was a dramatic *déjà vu* for Sister Grace.

"That was exactly what happened 30 years ago. I was taking homeless people to shelters and churches in the area, and we were turned away. That's exactly why I started The House of Mercy in the first place."

Two of the men decided to stay that night in Washington Park. The third went to the House of Mercy. "He wants to get into a substance abuse program. We'll continue to work with him on that. He's such a nice guy."

The following evening, Sister Grace

and some other supporters decided to continue their protest by staying in the garage all night.

"I was lying there in my sleeping bag thinking how the homeless must feel when they have to sleep under bridges and on sidewalks," she said. They stayed until 7 a.m., holding up posters to educate morning commuters about the danger of the decision to close the garage to the homeless.

The search for a safe refuge continues

As of press time, no resolution is in sight. As a result of the impasse, the homeless people who live downtown will no longer have a roof over their heads, a situation that will undoubtedly threaten lives when Rochester's brutal winter weather returns.

"We're not fighting to keep the garage open as a permanent solution. Everyone knows that's not the answer," Sister Grace said. "But until there is an



alternative, we need to keep it open. The garage kept people from dying."

Sister Grace vows to continue working on the issue with St. Joseph's House of Hospitality and other interested people in the community.

"We're not giving up. We're going to keep working with the County and the City and people who care. And I'm not going back on retreat until homeless people downtown have a safe roof over their heads."

For the latest updates on the garage situation, visit our Facebook page: www.facebook.com/houseofmercyrochester

Here's A New Way To Help The House

Want to make a big difference for some of the poorest people in Rochester with a few keyboard clicks? Just visit "The House of Mercy Amazon Wish List" at www.bit.ly/HOMamazon. You can buy items on our top-priority needs list and have them shipped directly to us. It's a fast, easy way to help The House.

Save The Date for our Annual Xmas Dinner Dance Friday, December 12 at Pittsford's Burgundy Basin

It's the most important fund-raiser of the year for The House. So join us for dinner, dancing, our famous Silent Auction, and more. To order your tickets (\$40 each) or reserve a table (\$320 or \$400), visit www.houseofmercyrochester.com.

You can also mail your check for "the Xmas Dinner Dance" to Sister Grace, 725 Hudson Ave., Rochester, N.Y. 14621. But hurry! Seats sell out fast!

There's Still Time To Win Our New Car Raffle!

Donate \$25 to The House, and we'll enter you in our first-ever New Car Raffle. If you win, you'll get a free, 2-year lease on a 2014 Ford Focus donated by Van Bortel Ford. It could make a great gift for a student, a family member, or you.

But don't put it off any longer. We'll draw the winning ticket on September 30.

So buy your tickets online at <http://www.houseofmercyrochester.org/CarRaffle/>. Or send a \$25 check labeled "New Car Raffle" to Sister Grace, 725 Hudson Ave., Rochester, N.Y. 14621. We'll mail your tickets to you ASAP.



**"Give to the poor,
and you shall have
treasure in heaven."**

— MATTHEW 19:21 —