

A New Mission for Mercer Street Friends



What images come to mind when you hear the word “poverty”? Do you envision a middle aged homeless man panhandling on the street? Or an elderly woman deciding between buying medication and buying groceries? Or a family of four with two working parents whose rent is so high that they can afford little other than their tiny apartment? Or a single mother torn between taking off of work to care for her sick child and knowing that calling out will put her job at risk?

When most people hear “poverty”, they immediately think about a lack of financial resources. Unfortunately, poverty is far more nuanced.

In Dr. Ruby Payne’s book *“A Framework for Understanding Poverty”*, she lays out some of the additional contours of poverty. Poverty often involves lack of physical resources such as physical health and mobility. It involves diminished emotional and mental resources and even compromised support systems and lack of role models.

It often involves deteriorated spiritual resources as the continuous onslaught of crises of living drain hope and sense of self-efficacy. Furthermore, the culture that develops around poverty in order to make it survivable, also makes it hard to transcend.

The social organization, customs, language, and norms of generational poverty in particular are often at odds with “mainstream culture”; therefore, the culture that one needs in order to survive is also the culture that is least conducive to success in the broader society.

Tackling poverty is not for the faint of heart. It is at once an economic, social, political, and spiritual endeavor. Detangling it is daunting. Strategy is indispensable. Yet we firmly believe that both breaking the cycle of poverty and diminishing its deleterious effects are possible and that providing people with opportunity is the key. Our new mission statement boldly asserts that belief.

*“Bridging
opportunity gaps...
helping families
and communities
make the journey
out of poverty.”*

We will continue to implement evidence based programs, evaluate our interventions, develop cross sector partnerships, and seek new opportunities for deeper impact.

This new mission, however, will guide our decision-making and resource investment, as well as serve as the standard by which we evaluate ourselves. Hold us accountable. This is why Mercer Street Friends exists.

Dear Friends,

By now you may have heard about some of the changes that have been taking place here at Mercer Street Friends. After over thirty years of providing Home Health Care services to thousands of aging and medically fragile members of the Mercer County community, changes in health care made it prudent for us to transfer Friends Home Health Care to an organization dedicated entirely to health care.

This decision was made and implemented with the highest regard for quality and continuity of patient care, respect and concern for staff, and overall commitment to ensuring that we were taking the approach that would result in the most positive long term outcomes for the communities that we serve.

On October 1, 2013, Friends Home Health Care was officially transferred to Ocean Health Care and began operating under the name Mercer Home Health Care. We are proud to say that the vast majority of our staff and care providers successfully made the transition and that there was no disruption at all to client services. This seamless transition was a team effort, but leading the team was Mary Jane Darbee, home health administrator and employee of Mercer Street Friends for nearly 20 years. We owe her a great debt of gratitude.

In addition to the Home Health transfer, we completed the sale of the property that has become home to the Village Charter School. In response to concerns over inadequate educational alternatives for children in the City of Trenton, the board of Mercer Street Friends founded the Village Charter School over 15 years ago. Since that time, Mercer Street Friends has provided extensive administrative and fiscal support to the school.

As the sale of the property to the Village Charter School suggests, the seeds that were planted have taken root and a strong self-sustaining tree is blossoming on Sullivan Way. News of the transfer of the Home Health Division and sale of the school property may be leaving some of our friends wondering what is left.

Let me assure you that there is plenty left! Along with these transactions has come the opportunity to refine our vision, re-articulate our mission, and re-affirm our values. It is my hope that this issue of Circle of Friends re-energizes you as our ongoing endeavors are re-energizing us.

Onward,
Shannon M. Mason

CLOSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Trenton Digital Initiative

The Trenton Digital Initiative (TDI), a collaboration formed this past summer between Mercer Street Friends, Trenton Rotary Club, HomeFront, Comcast, and the City of Trenton, was created as a way to close the digital divide and provide low-income families access to computers and the internet from home.

The initiative began by securing 100 used computers, donated from corporations, local agencies and individuals, which could be refurbished and reformatted.

The next step was consideration of how the beneficiary families would access technical assistance and basic software training if they needed it. What surfaced was the idea of training and employing youth to be available to assist as a "Help Desk".

The youth participating in this program would be trained to support their communities and perhaps begin a path to future employment by learning the IT skills necessary to function as a Help Desk for the program.

Thus, the Mercer Street Friends Youth Division piloted a five week intensive program this past summer with Mercer County youth between the ages of 14-18 years old.

A cohort of 12 youth were enrolled into the program. Their days were split between

vocational skills training/career exploration and "hand's-on" experience in both understanding the operating components of the computer and then installing software to refurbish the computer.

The youth had the opportunity to destroy the previous information and system on the computer and replace it with new software. Due to licensing regulations and costs associated with software, the computers were installed with Ubuntu, a free system that is compatible with Microsoft Office.

Households receiving the refurbished computers from Mercer Street Friends qualified for high-speed internet service at a cost of \$9.95 a month through a special Comcast plan called Internet Essentials, aimed at bringing internet access to families below the poverty line.

When the summer program ended, 10 youth were able to take their "refurbished" computer home. Another three computers went to Trenton families and there is already a waiting list of families wanting to receive a computer and close their digital divide.

To donate a computer or learn about volunteering with TDI, please call 609-278-5513 or email to tdi@mercerstreetfriends.org.



The experience was so engaging that the youth expressed a hope the program would continue. Mercer Street Friends Youth Services is looking forward to being able to host another cohort in the spring of 2014.

MOVING CLOSER TOWARD A GOOD JOB

Adult Education Program Adds a Career Coach



Getting a high school diploma and an entry-level job are important first steps to self-sufficiency...and then, there's the rest of one's life.

Mercer Street Friends Adult Education program has been helping Mercer County residents aged 16 and older with these initial goals for more than five years – and now, we're expanding our services to help students figure out the rest.

Soon a part-time instructor/career coach will join our staff, thanks to generous grants from the NJ Department of Labor and Workforce Development and Nordson Corporation Foundation.

Besides helping students with academic instruction in math, language arts, science, and social studies, our career coach will focus on individual students and assist them in evaluating their skills, experience, and interests in terms of

The Mercer Street Friends Adult Education program received a "Partners in Learning Award" on November 14, from the **Board of Trustees at Mercer County Community College**. As part of the initiative to expand and improve literacy in Mercer County, our program, along with other members of the county's adult literacy consortium, was named for this "Spirit of Education" recognition.

careers that have been identified by New Jersey as growth industries in our area – including manufacturing, healthcare, financial services, retail, hospitality, transportation, and logistics. Once these interest areas are identified, the coach will help students determine what training and education they need and will lead them to appropriate resources.

The coach will also connect to local employers and training/education programs as well as assist students with resume development, online job applications, and registration on state work websites.

Because Mercer Street Friends Adult Education program bases all instruction on a one-on-one and small group model, staff and dedicated volunteer tutors really get to know students, building mutual trust and respect along the way. To further assist students who need to juggle parenting with employment, Mercer Street Friends certified parent educators can provide opportunities for parents to develop a "stress management toolkit" with strategies that support individual wellness, job retention, and family stability.

"There's a big old world out there, and it's always changing" says Gay

Egan, program coordinator and main instructor. "We want our students to be prepared to meet today's challenges and develop plans to tackle their tomorrows. We want students to maximize their sense of purpose and contribute effectively to their families and our larger community."

To learn about volunteering with the Adult Education program, please call Gay Egan at 609-278-6904 or email gegan@mercerstreefriends.org.

BRINGING OUR VOICES TO THE TABLE

West Ward Alliance

West Ward community members have been exploring the "Paths to Power" with The Citizen's Campaign! Over the summer, residents participated in four training sessions that detailed ways in which they could have an impact on solving problems within their neighborhoods. With groups as large as 32 members, the topics covered included: researching evidenced based solutions that have worked in other communities, accessing public records, effective techniques for a public presentation, the use of a no blame approach, citizen journalism, serving on appointed city boards, developing new city boards, and serving in the local political parties as a way to network and a platform to address neighborhood needs from the inside.

As a result of these sessions, participants are meeting to exchange ideas and successful community revitalization strategies. A second group of participants have become interested in citizen journalism and have begun contributing to a monthly West Ward Alliance newsletter. A third group "Paths to Power" participants have started a Youth Civic Engagement Effort.

West Ward residents are bringing their voices to the table!

BOOSTING ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD

Food Bank's Fresh Produce Program



foods – fresh fruits and vegetables, fish, lean meat, poultry, low fat dairy and whole grain products – are too costly or not readily available in the food stores where low income people shop.

Cognizant of the link between poverty, food security and poor health, our Food Bank subscribes to the notion that we have a responsibility to distribute nutritious food, which is why 90 percent of all the food distributed by the Mercer Street Friends Food Bank meets USDA Food Pyramid Guidelines and other accepted food standards.

In a matter of about two hours, all the produce will be out of our warehouse and into the community.

On the top of the list of the foods we like to distribute is fresh produce. This year to date, we have distributed 400,000 pounds

of produce, obtained from New Jersey farmers and growers, produce brokers, local food retailers and occasionally from the US Department of Agriculture.

While Food Bank staff pick up small amounts of donated produce from retail store pick-ups, the bulk comes delivered to us on trucks or tractor trailers.

Some of the produce is purchased with funding from the State Food Purchase Program and is allocated to the food pantries, shelters and soup kitchens that are members of the Food Bank based on the number of people or meals they serve.

Other produce comes from Community FoodBank of NJ, which shares with us donated product they pick up from produce auctions or other donors.

What we get is always a surprise and only revealed when the pallets are unloaded from the delivery truck.

Once the produce is in the building, our volunteers, appreciatively called “green grocers”, take inventory, count the number of cases, calculate how many cases each agency will be offered, re-package the produce if necessary, and begin the process of distributing the nutritious food to our member agencies. In a matter of about two hours, all the produce will be out of our warehouse and into the community.

It is great to see all this produce go out our doors so quickly and to know that by the end of the day, there are children, families and senior citizens who will have fresh fruit and vegetables on their plate for dinner.

The Food Bank welcomes all donations of produce, large or small. To make a donation, call 609-406-0503 or email foodbankinfo@mercerstreetfriends.org.



Fresh produce distributed for Thanksgiving included onions, apples and celery.



INVESTING IN OUR CHILDREN

Pre-School Center

Children are born ready to learn, but early environments either maximize or diminish their innate potential, leaving some children prepared to enter school and others behind from the start. According to the National Education Goals Panel, “school readiness” encompasses five dimensions. They are: physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language development, and cognition.

Children who enter school appropriately developed in these areas are more likely to experience academic success, attain higher levels of education, and are more likely to secure employment.

Children who enter school under-developed in these areas never catch up.

According to Advocates for Children of New Jersey, about 45,000 children in New Jersey currently participate in pre-school, while 35,000 children do



90 children, ages three to five attend our center on West State Street



Each classroom is designed around interest areas such as Library, Discovery, Music, Art, Dramatic Play, Computers.



not. Federal legislation has been recently introduced that would significantly expand pre-school to reach more low income children whose families cannot afford high quality pre-school, giving these children the opportunity to enter school prepared to succeed.

Please contact your Congressional representative today to encourage support of pre-school expansion so that more children can have the opportunities provided in our early education center.

Bridging opportunity gaps... Helping families and communities make the journey out of poverty.

Mercer Street Friends is a Quaker affiliated, nonsectarian human care organization that works to reduce hunger and food insecurity, close education gaps, and improve the physical and emotional well-being of at-risk populations through its three divisions:

- Children and Youth Services
- Food Bank
- Parenting and Adult Services

To learn more about the programs and services of Mercer Street Friends, please visit our website at www.mercerstreetfriends.org.





Circle of Friends

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A PUBLICATION OF MERCER STREET FRIENDS

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