

# Franciscan Youth Center

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## VISION

Recognizing that God creates all persons for good, the Franciscan Youth Center exists to provide opportunities for youth to develop their potential for good.

## MISSION

The Franciscan Youth Center provides a safe environment where relationships of trust can be developed. Experiences are provided for youth to seize opportunities to develop the skills needed to become productive and responsible citizens.

## GOALS

- To help children develop trusting relationships
- To build self-confidence in youth
- To encourage youth leadership
- To foster in youth a sense of respect, dignity and worth, both of themselves and of others
- To provide a systematic exposure to life opportunities
- To develop basic life skills for youth with the greatest need
- To build a "bridge" from the Center to the community
- To reduce juvenile delinquency in the Barclay-Midway community

## ORGANIZATIONAL HISTORY

The Franciscan Sisters of Baltimore started the Franciscan Youth Center in 1985, using the former convent of St. Ann's Church on Greenmount Avenue in East Baltimore. The Franciscan Youth Center fulfilled an expressed need for a safe haven for neighborhood children in the after school and evening hours. Over the last eighteen years, the Center has grown to serve as many as 250 children during the school year, with an average of 50 children using the Center on any given day. Fifty children are also served by the Center's six-week summer camp program.

Throughout the Center's history, the Franciscan Sisters of Baltimore have been a continual source of support and direction for the Youth Center. In addition to providing the services of two of their sisters, one who served as director for 12 years, the Sisters have also been a major funding source. In August 2001, the Franciscan Sisters of Baltimore merged with the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and the FYC became a part of nine corporate ministries of the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi. Since that time, the FYC continues to enjoy sponsorship by the Sisters, but no longer has financial or staff support because of diminished resources and the needs of their other corporate ministries. The Board of the FYC hired professional staff for the Center and has embarked on a fundraising campaign to fully fund the expanding programs of the center.

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## ROLE OF THE YOUTH CENTER IN THE LIVES OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD YOUTH

### CHALLENGES FACED BY THE YOUTH

Children growing up in the neighborhood served by the Franciscan Youth Center are considered "at risk." They generally live near or below the poverty level, often in a home headed by a single mother or a grandparent. Their caregivers are often uneducated and unemployed. The children may lack adequate health care, nutrition and clothing. Community problems that surround them include substance abuse, drug trafficking, and high rates of criminal violence.

Within a year or two after the Center opened in 1985, crack cocaine began appearing on Greenmount Avenue. Virtually every child living in the neighborhood has been directly or indirectly involved in, or the victim of drug-related or other, often violent, crime. Children are, unsafe on the streets, even in front of their own homes.

A high rate of teen pregnancies within the community has resulted in a significant percentage of young and single parent households – most of the youth served by FYC are from such homes. A high rate of substance abuse among these youthful parents results in poor, inconsistent, and inadequate supervision and parenting. In conditions such as these, children struggle just to survive, and are at a significant disadvantage in the educational system, where truancy, poor health and an inability to concentrate compromise school achievement.

### OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE TO THE YOUTH

The Franciscan Youth Center provides the youth of the neighborhood with opportunities in two general areas. First, the Center simply helps to take care of some of the basic physical needs of the children. Second, the Center provides an environment that is safe, enriching, stimulating, and supportive of school achievement. These opportunities are available to the youth through several programs:

- **YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT** forms the core structure of the Youth Center's organization. Youth leaders, under adult supervision, guide activities and help maintain the facility. They are paid a small stipend for their work. In order to be paid, youth leaders must be present every day. This gives their lives a consistent pattern, and the other children coming to the Center know that their role models will be present on a consistent basis. It provides exposure to job requirements, performance expectations, and experience in a supervisory structure. It introduces the concept of accountability, since leaders can be suspended or "fired" if they are not meeting expectations. This program gives youth leaders a sense of "ownership" of the Center.
- **THE RECREATION PROGRAM** provides opportunities for children to interact in a supervised but relaxed environment. Peer-mediated conflict

resolution techniques are implemented and youth participate in leadership. A healthy snack is provided every day. Children have the opportunity to enjoy common highlights of childhood -- (e.g. outings and trips, basketball, outdoor sports, tennis, golf, movies, birthday parties, and games).

- **THE ACADEMIC SUPPORT AND SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM** includes special set-aside times for tutoring and homework assistance for all ages, a reading group for elementary age children, and opportunities to conduct research using the Center's computers and library. The Youth Center provides support, both directional and financial (if applicable), for students who have the motivation to pursue private school and/or post secondary school options.  
(Youth have been financially assisted to attend St. Frances Academy, Mother Seton Academy, Saint Ignatius Loyola Academy, St. James and John, Georgetown Prep, George-town University, Salisbury State College, Virginia State Technological Institute, Mary Baldwin College, Bradley Academy, and Baltimore Community College.)
- **THE OUTREACH PROGRAM** a significant number of the children who attend our program struggle with problems that if unattended by a responsible adult, cause intense suffering and can result in permanent loss of the child to poverty, drugs, crime and prostitution, In some cases the immediate cause of such problems is the final dissolution of the child's family. The Center provides significant interventions with children and their families that strengthen the family bond and supports the short-term family needs in a way that helps all family members to maintain their self-respect and dignity. This part of the program also encourages youth to give back to and improve their community -- (e.g. providing Christmas gifts to children of the neighborhood, participating in community beautification, providing help with proms, school fees, dental and medical care.)
- **SUMMER CAMP** over the course of a six-week period in the summer. Children have, at no cost, two nutritious meals a day, and structured activities such as swimming, cooking, reading, arts and crafts, and sewing. Emphasis is placed on physical fitness and maintaining the friendships and role models developed at the Youth Center during the school year. Excursions to state parks, baseball games, environmental centers, historical landmarks, the Science Center, the Aquarium and other attractions highlight the experience for the children. In addition to the regular summer camp, many children also take part in a special basketball-intensive camp.

- **THE CHILD ADVOCACY PROGRAM** is available for children who demonstrate a particular need for an additional adult liaison in various school situations with an emphasis on making school a positive experience. This advocacy role is wide-ranging. Guidance counselors often call upon the Youth Center to help handle truancy and other school problems. The Youth Center will help cover class fees if a student's family cannot afford them. We help students prepare for, and then take pictures at, important school events. Transportation is often provided to these events for family members.

As a special motivational incentive, the Youth Center under its former leadership developed a tradition of taking students who earn a high school diploma on a special trip that they plan together. Past trips have included a cross-country expedition to California, a Broadway show in New York and an excursion to Disney World. A vacation like this, otherwise unaffordable, is both enjoyable and educational, exposing the youth to new parts of the country and expanding their horizons. It also is a source of motivation for younger students who are at a more vulnerable stage of development.

## **CHALLENGES FACED BY THE FRANCISCAN YOUTH CENTER**

The Franciscan Youth Center currently faces two significant challenges related to programming and space. The Board of Trustees has recently reviewed the needs of the youth and the programs offered by the Youth Center. As a result of this review, new program directions have been prioritized to better meet the multi-faceted needs of the children. These include a "Healthy Minds" program that will involve counseling professionals. The "Career and Life Planning" program will provide youth with important adult guidance in developing the skills they will need to build successful futures. This also includes providing students with business leadership, sales and marketing and management skills to create their own entrepreneurial businesses. These program initiatives will require additional funding and will greatly benefit from a larger better-equipped facility.

Another area of grave concern to the Board of the Center is the re-location of the Center into a larger more appropriate facility within the general neighborhood. We are faced with the very painful reality of turning children away from the Center because of our inability to safely and adequately serve all the children who wish to benefit from the Center's programs. The parish of St. Ann's, which owns the building in which the Center is located, has plans to sell the building, probably in the year 2004. Once again, we are challenged to develop the resources that are needed to provide the youth of one of the highest crime and drug areas of the city an opportunity for a better, more secure and productive life.

## STORIES OF CHILDREN WHO THE FRANCISCAN YOUTH CENTER HAS HELPED

### **Youth Leadership Opportunity can Change a Life**

In the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, Arty had a hobby of breaking the windows of police cars. His two older brothers were active in drug trafficking and he was headed in that direction. One evening he saw teenagers going into the Youth Center, and he followed them in. Although he was too young for the evening session, he was encouraged by the staff to come back in the afternoon, which he did. He was a fixture at the Youth Center from that point on. He learned that there was a right way to do things, and he made friends that reinforced that mentality. He became a youth leader at the Center and served as a role model for his brother Matthew and many other children.

### **Positive Role Models and Consistent Reinforcement**

Arty's brother Matthew, at age 15, was running drugs on the street for neighborhood drug dealers, for about \$200 a day. One day on Greenmount Avenue he was getting shot at, so he ran. The shooting continued, so he ran into the Youth Center, and went upstairs to talk with his brother who was a youth leader at the Center. This was a turning point for Matthew, who, with the help of his brother and our staff, got a job in the inner harbor and stopped dealing drugs. That next summer, he went to an interview with Social Services dressed in a three-piece suit. Sr. Claire, the former Director said "I'll never forget seeing him like that!" she remembers. He went on to graduate from high school, consistently coming to the Youth Center during that time.

### **Encouragement and Support**

Jamal grew up surrounded by negative role models. The family members living in his household would do anything, legal or illegal, to get money. Jamal once brought home a bicycle, and was held up at gunpoint by his sister's boyfriend. Jamal consistently sought refuge in the Youth Center, and as a youth leader there was able to develop his leadership talents. He received encouragement and validation for his inner convictions to do the right thing. With the academic support he received at the Youth Center, he was able to graduate from City College and has joined the Armed forces.

### **The Youth Center as an Advocate with the Schools**

Darrell was a bright kid, but just couldn't handle middle school -- he was in and out of three different middle schools. Sr. Claire, the former FYC Director, went with him no less than 15 times to these schools to try to work out the problem. With her support and advocacy, he finally made it through and is now in college in New Mexico.

## **Adult Advice and Guidance During Difficult Times**

Shauna's mother died of an overdose when she was nine years old. Her father, a convicted murderer, is in jail for life. She was left in the care of her grandmother, who is addicted to drugs. Her uncle worked at the Youth Center, and so Shauna had always wanted to come. A very talented child, Shauna was bright, artistic, and athletically gifted. At the Youth Center she was able to develop all these gifts. But she is a very "hard" person, and was constantly getting into fights. She was thrown out of Dunbar high school for fighting, and came to Sr. Claire for help. She wanted to get into a Catholic high school, she said, because there she was convinced that people would not pick fights with her. She was right. With Sr. Claire's help, she got into St. Frances Academy, scored 1300 on her PSAT, and was inundated with colleges wanting her to apply. She and Sr. Claire waded through the college application process, and she is now in her senior year at a prestigious small college, where she has a 3.0 average, and is 16<sup>th</sup> in the nation in points scored in Division III basketball. She has a full tuition scholarship but pays her room and board by working. During her college years, the Youth Center continued to support her by providing occasional funds for books and basketball uniforms, and Sr. Claire drove her back and forth several times. Shauna routinely comes back to the Youth Center in the summer to lead camps for youth, and at breaks to help in the Center. Without the Youth Center, she says, she would not have made it to college at all.

## **Refuge from the Streets**

Ten-year old DeShawn was heading home one night from a friend's house, when gunfire broke out in the neighborhood. He ran to the Youth Center and told the staff he was afraid to go home. We called his mother, and then drove DeShawn home in the Center's van, watching him safely up the steps of his row house.

## **A Ride Can Make all the Difference**

John was one of the first youth leaders at the Franciscan Youth Center. When John was in his senior year in high school, Sr. Kathy, the founding director of the Youth Center, encouraged him to explore several college programs. With the assistance, support, and encouragement of the Youth Center, John applied, was accepted, and received a full scholarship to Salisbury State. Sr. Kathy made frequent trips to and from Salisbury State helping John to transport his belongings at the beginning and end of each school year. John is now a homeowner in the neighborhood and a member of the Baltimore City Police Department.

## **An Interior Decorator in our Midst**

Steve had great dreams of becoming an architect, dreams that he loved sharing for hours with Sr. Kathy and his friends at the Youth Center. Sr. Kathy knew that Steve had great potential but knew that it would be unrealized if someone did not work with him to develop a plan and implement it step by step. Sr. Kathy played that role with Steve and

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was rewarded by seeing him graduate from Poly Institute and enter Virginia Technological Institute. Shortly after beginning his studies at Virginia Tech, Steve realized his gifts for drawing and design and decided to major in Interior Decorating. With the continued support, encouragement, and assistance of the Youth Center, he graduated four years later. He was immediately employed as an Interior Decorator, and is currently operating in a successful business in the Washington DC area.

November 2003