



Anacostia is one of Washington's most troubled neighborhoods.

The Way to a Living Wage

By Pamela Schaeffer

After 25 years as a teacher and administrator in Sacred Heart schools and several years in national leadership for the Society of the Sacred Heart, United States Province, Sister Elizabeth "Betsy" Hartson was eager to put her life where documents of the Society had taken her mind and heart. ♦ As a result, about ten years ago, Sister Hartson moved to Washington, D.C., to work with people on the streets. ♦ Her new direction, she said, was prompted by "so many statements from our Society's documents about working with the marginalized." Too, she couldn't forget a challenge from a parishioner in Houston. Sister Hartson had been teaching social justice in parishes there when, one day, a man said to her, "Sister, you talk about all this. But I know a sister who does it."

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After working in several programs in Washington, including operating a Catholic Charities shelter for homeless people, she began to voice a growing frustration. She pointed out to her co-worker Robert Crittenden that a key component of social change was missing in their efforts. That component is education.

"Without education," she told him, "we're just recycling people through the system."

Sister Hartson's discontent "came from her background as an educator," said Crittenden, who oversaw 13 shelters for Catholic Charities Homeless Services. "She encouraged me to think about the whole approach." After months of deliberation, Sister Hartson, Crittenden and three other members of the Catholic Charities staff founded and incorporated Living Wages of Washington in 1999. It is a non-profit educational program for adults who have neither a high school diploma nor skills to get and keep a job that pays a living wage.

With a start-up grant from the Washington, D.C., government, the group rented space in two of the city's most troubled neighborhoods, an apartment in Washington Highlands and a storefront in Anacostia.

On a tour of the two sites last summer, Sister Hartson talked about her journey from education to direct service and back. Her efforts, she said, are rooted in the vision of St. Madeleine Sophie, who "chose to work with people who were denied education" – women of post-Revolutionary France and the poor. Similarly, Sister Hartson said, "What we're doing here is educating people who are not being educated, people on the fringes."

A Program that Pays

Adults come to Living Wages for literacy, job skills and high-school equivalency certification. That certification may be obtained either through the test-based General Equivalency Development (GED) or a new method, the External Diploma Program (EDP), which was developed to build on the life skills of adults. People in the program earn diplomas by meeting with a tutor and demonstrating



Sister Hartson works with Alice Mills, a teacher's aide who needs a high school diploma to advance her career.

65 practical skills, or "competencies." Both Sister Hartson and Crittenden are trained "assessors and advisors" for the External Diploma Program.

Students are required to study the U.S. Constitution and watch newspapers for articles related to the freedoms it guarantees. They must demonstrate in writing an understanding of environmental problems, causes and possible solutions, based on research. They study the various forms of cancer and learn the warning signs. They learn to read warranties, to understand and figure percentages so that they can determine discounts, sales taxes and tips.

"It's so interesting to watch adult learners work on these issues," Sister Hartson said, "because it challenges them. It allows them to draw on their own experience, and it's terrific for building self-esteem. But some of it is really tough."

Research shows the effort pays off. According to a study by the University System of Maryland, 72 percent of the graduates of the External Diploma Program increased their earnings – 14 percent by more than \$8,000 a year.

In keeping with its mission to help adults boost income through education, Living Wages sells affordable computers and teaches people to use them. Those who wish can become certified to do repairs.

The Living Wages programs serve about 200 people a year. Presently, 50 are enrolled in the literacy program and two diploma programs, 12 have graduated, and four are close to finishing. Others have improved their grade level by at least two grades, Sister Hartson said. The process is slow because Anacostia and Washington Highlands rank among the lowest neighborhoods in the District for literacy rates and educational levels.



Robert Crittenden is co-founder and co-director of Living Wages.

Antidote to Violence

Living Wages is one of just six centers in Washington, D.C., where the External Diploma Program is offered. "That's why we're getting so many people," she said.

A practical difference between the General Equivalency Development and the External Diploma Program is that the External Diploma Program lacks government funding in Washington, D.C. The result is that Living Wages has to depend on gifts for that program. The Society's Philippine Duchesne Fund, which provides money for start-up ministries, helped get the program underway.

The first to finish the External Diploma Program was Tony Elliott, 40, father of four. He's worked for 13 years for Jiffy Lube and one day noticed a sign, "Learn to Use a Computer," outside the Living Wages site in Anacostia.

"I thought God must be working in my life," said Elliott, who dropped out of high school in the tenth grade. "I always wanted to go back to school, but never found the time," he said. He is now working on his computer skills at the Living Wages Anacostia site.

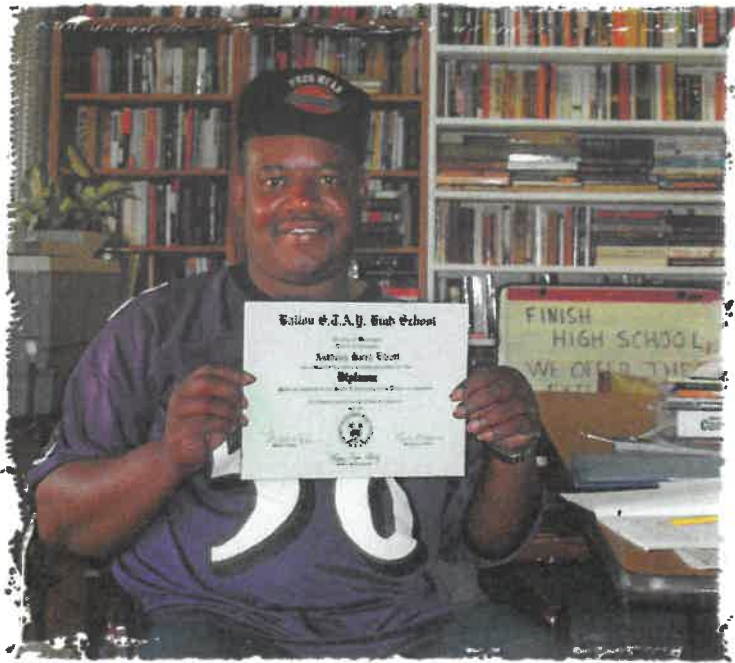
Sister Hartson and Crittenden travel between Living Wages' two sites, teaching, training teachers, providing computers, overseeing a thrift store, and getting to know the neighborhood children. In Washington Highlands, Sister Hartson invites neighborhood children to attend a summer Peace Camp operated by Living Wages as an antidote to the street violence for which Washington Highlands is well known.

"Four people have been shot and killed on the block since we've been here," she said. "Last spring, a body was found in an alley. Before that, one was found in a dumpster."

Students from American University and Georgetown University help with the Peace Camp, where the goal is to teach children ages 4 to 11 skills for dealing with anger, analyzing difficult situations, resolving conflicts before it's too late.

Sacred Heart Sister Felisa Garcia works in the thrift shop. Five other RSCJ volunteer their expertise from time to time.

At the Highlands apartment, the rooms are outfitted for learning; the atmosphere is inviting and warm in contrast to the desolate streets outside.



Tony Elliott, the first graduate of Living Wages' External Diploma Program, proudly displays proof of his success.

Patricia Donaldson, 42, was working one day last spring on a math lesson with Deborah Wimberly, one of two full-time teachers on the staff. "I come here every day," said Donaldson, who read about Living Wages in a local newspaper. "When I finish I want to be able to teach little kids."

Alice Neal, a student at the Anacostia site, works as a teacher's assistant at an elementary school in D.C., and now, under new federal guidelines, needs to upgrade her education to two years of college just to keep her job. The first step is a diploma.

"I was walking by one day and happened to see this place," she said.

Word of mouth is another draw. "We really try to be a resource for the neighborhood," Crittenden said. "People in the neighborhood send other people in. We don't have to recruit."

Some who come also stay to help. Three graduates of the External Diploma Program are now involved as volunteers.

"The commitment," Sister Hartson said, "is amazing. People in this program call each other for help all the time. It's a wonderful experience to teach adults who are so eager to learn. It's clearer to me all the time that people who are educated have so many more chances.

"Nobody gives education enough attention in the social service arena," she said. "Education is power. It's an equalizer. It's security, responsibility and independence. It is the way to a living wage." ❖



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