The office buzzed with wonderful activity this quarter. The staff’s projects helped hundreds of people to have a few better days and countless children to have a very nice Christmas.

In our immigration assistance office, Stella Knight is beginning to see more and more young people as they may now obtain driver’s licenses. She cautions them to be safe drivers and counsels them about being good citizens.

Peggy Peterson continues to corral the ordered interactions of our dozens of faithful volunteers, without whom our work at Catholic Social Services would greatly suffer. She has a gift for finding the most talented volunteer for each job we have on the campus.

Case managers Annette Hicks and Donyale Rawson carry the load of seeing the clients who arrive daily needing help with utilities, rent or food. The line seems endless, but these dedicated women sort through the stories. No one goes away empty-handed.

Receptionist Lynn Bingert greets each person at the door with a warm, friendly smile that lets anyone entering the building feel that they are welcome here.

Connie Plemmons and Robin Suggs manage the Disabled Homeless Project and currently have 10 clients living in proper housing. The women see that these clients have everything they need to keep them living in safe conditions, somewhat independently and, most importantly, with dignity.

Counselor Jeannie Fleek maintains a support system for people who need one-on-one counseling. With her kindhearted spirit of helping, she offers clients that proverbial knot when they’re at the end of their ropes.

Office manager Phyllis Beam keeps us fiscally, financially and economically up-to-date. She’s like the beautiful swan gliding on the lake. On the surface, she appears peaceful and serene, while under the water, she’s paddling like mad, keeping the office afloat.

Christmas Sharing was a humbling experience for me as I watched what seemed like thousands of gifts pour in to our office during December. Hundreds of children had something special under the tree this Christmas because of the generosity of donors in our community. And the distribution process at the Christmas Building went blessedly smoothly due to the coordinated efforts of Peggy and our volunteers, spearheaded in a special way by Gerry Fischlein.

As we break the seal on a New Year, I am reminded of a passage in the Bible from the Prophet Jeremiah: “For I know the plans I have for you,” says the LORD. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.” Our clients are in good hands here at CSS and the thanks go in large part to you. May God continue to bless you.
VOLUNTEER HIGHLIGHT

For CSS volunteer Cheryl Korte, giving back has become her passion since leaving the world of banking more than 10 years ago.

The Baltimore, Maryland native looks forward now to spending her time helping others, whether it’s counseling pregnant women at To Be-Options for Pregnant Women in Fairhope, reading to first-graders at Summerdale Elementary School or handing out school supplies at our own Project Reach session in August. She just likes giving of herself. “It’s so important to give back,” she said during a recent talk at the Catholic Social Services office.

She first got involved at CSS when she picked up Christmas gifts for a family member at our Christmas Sharing project a few years back. She witnessed firsthand both the excitement and the sadness that are present at the annual event that allows marginalized families to receive three gifts for each of their children. After her experience, she boarded the volunteer staff bus at CSS and hasn’t looked back.

In fact, she even collects Christmas stocking stuffers throughout the year to bring in at Christmas time for Christmas Sharing.

Cheryl is an avid reader and a devoted Bunco player and plays three times a month with friends. She and her husband John have been married 37 years. They play in a couples Bunco group and are the parents of Aaron and Tiffany and grandparents to Zachary, Ethan, Andrew and Hope. They are members of St. Lawrence Parish in Fairhope and attend adoration once a week at Christ the King Parish in Daphne.

We are thrilled to have Cheryl among the wonderful volunteers at CSS and look forward to working with her for years to come.

FROM OUR CASE MANAGERS

October showed a slight rise in Thrift Store vouchers for warm clothes, especially for adults. There was also a rise in medical vouchers to the clinics for co-pays as the flu season arrived. We also saw clients take advantage of dental visits.

Thanksgiving time brought CSS wonderful unexpected donations of turkeys and holiday food that enabled us to provide over 90 families with surprising extras.

Christmas brought a record number of requests for toys for children. With the donations made to this office, we were able to provide these families with age-appropriate gifts. A big thank you to one of our volunteers who coordinated with To Be-Options for Pregnancy in Fairhope to provide a wonderful Christmas for a very sick baby boy who is sleeping in a new crib this year. His guardian also sleeps much better knowing he is safe there. Also a big thanks to another one of our volunteers who took on a special family of teenage girls, one whom has a lifetime disease. The kindness shown to this family made the grandmother speechless as the family picked up their items. Several single fathers of young and teenage children and a single father that had served a year overseas and is now struggling to provide for his two young children were helped this Christmas. All these instances wouldn’t have been possible without the generosity of our donors.

Garland Kahl, owner of Garland’s Auto Body in Robertsdale, graciously donated his time and talent in seeing that the panel truck donated to us by the Original Oyster House last year, received a well-deserved paint job. Shown is the newly-painted truck, which was well used during December to haul toys and food.

GOING GREEN! The next issue of Connections will be available on our website at www.cssbald.org. We are attempting to save postage. If you would prefer to receive it via email, send a message to colleen.cssbald@gulftel.com.

DISABLED HOMELESS PROJECT

This quarter was very busy for the Disabled Homeless Project. The renewal application was submitted in December. We are happy to report full capacity with eight participants. Recent achievements include:

- a single mom who continues in the Event Planner program at Faulkner;
- a single mom who regained custody of her two children from DHR;
- a client who was assisted by a Round-Up Foundation grant for COBRA premiums who has received extensive medical treatment at UAB while awaiting her disability determination.

The federal grant award for Baldwin Community Housing was signed Oct. 1. The program will provide housing assistance for chronically homeless individuals and is proceeding well. We currently have six units under lease and are already serving one family and one individual. The family was very grateful for a wonderful Christmas.

A grant application was submitted in November to the Round-Up Foundation for $20,000 to provide the 25 percent match requirement for Baldwin Community Housing. We are awaiting the award decision.
ONE MORE THING ABOUT CHRISTMAS SHARING

Our program kicked off at St. Patrick's Center with a well-attended luncheon/training meeting on Oct. 9. We began taking appointments from clients on Oct. 22 and the phone lines were jammed with calls.

By then our well-trained volunteers were excited and ready to begin. We registered clients in our new Annex building next to the Catholic Social Services main building. The larger waiting area, the private interviewing office and multiple gift choosing stations helped make our clients more comfortable. Our volunteers loved the nice surroundings as well as the snacks we provided to keep the energy flowing!

The old saying, “Many hands make light work,” was evident this Christmas season. A whopping 39 volunteers gave their time and talent to make the program a huge success.

If you ask our volunteers why they come to Catholic Social Services you would get a variety of answers. I think that sharing their time and talent with a client is very gratifying for them. If you observe these volunteers, you would see their love and kindness for their fellow human beings demonstrated in many ways.

We are so thankful for our volunteers, so impressed with their talent, and so humbled to witness their commitment to Catholic Social Services. May God bless and keep them all.

THRIFT SHOP

The Thrift Shop earned $35,310.34 during the fourth quarter of 2012. We helped 55 clients shop for free in the Thrift Store at a value of $1,904.17.

Other funds used were:
- Share: $552.07 for four clients;
- Riviera: $2,185.06 for 15 clients;

IMMIGRATION

On Dec. 18, 2012, the USCIS statistics on Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals cases from Aug. 15 to Dec. 13, 2012 show a total of 355,889 DACA applications accepted for processing, 336,464 biometric services appointments scheduled, 157,151 requests under review and 102,965 requests approved.

About 70 percent of all deferred-action applicants are from Mexico, according to the DHS, followed by El Salvador, 4 percent; Honduras, 2 percent; and Guatemala, 2 percent.

Locally, CSS has received 18 DACA approvals to date. For the first time, these individuals will be able to fully participate within the society they have been living and working in for years.

These individuals will be able to apply for a Social Security card. However, while deferred action confers temporary permission to remain in the country, it does not necessarily mean that recipients will be eligible for driver’s licenses, reduced tuition or other state benefits. The answer may depend on the law of the state. Currently, in Alabama approved DACA applicants are not able to obtain a driver's license.

It is a personal reminder of the freedom we take for granted every day, while those living among us live and work in fear daily of being removed from a country they call home.

Pictured are siblings Jose Ortega, left, and Mayra Ortega, right, with Stella Knight. The Ortegas are the first recipients in Baldwin County to receive approved applications for deferred action for childhood arrivals.
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Fourth Quarter, 2012