Hope Expands

When God closes a door, He opens a window! The truth of that expression is dramatically evident here at Hope. When the doors closed at Apopka Family Learning Center last summer, a window opened for a much-needed second campus for Hope CommUnity Center.

Apopka Family Learning Center (AFLC) had been a sister organization of Hope’s for years, offering services to low-income families of South Apopka. When AFLC ceased operations, Hope embraced the opportunity to open a campus in South Apopka where the Ministry first began.

Meanwhile, staff and participants at Hope have been struggling with overcrowded program space and a serious parking shortage. “We’ve been holding summer day camps with 120 kids in our parking lot!” said Sister Ann. Parking at Hope is so tight during evening programs that people have to cross a heavily trafficked road to get to class. Teams of staff are sharing offices originally meant for half as many people.

The idea of acquiring the AFLC building and grounds was presented to the HCC Board of Directors as a way to expand Hope’s facilities and continue the Apopka Family Learning Center’s legacy. For months, HCC’s leadership and board considered and discussed the opportunity and its challenges.

Finally, on February 5, 2016, the deal was sealed, thanks to a $250,000 surprise donation from Disney and a substantial contribution from the Sisters of Notre Dame. The six acres of land and 7,200 square foot building are ready to become Hope’s Second Campus — well, not completely ready! Plenty of “sweat equity” is still needed to bring the AFLC campus back to life.

And that’s where you come in! Can you help with cleaning up, landscaping, painting, decorating or repairing? Or perhaps you can help fund a badly needed kitchen renovation, an outdoor eating area, computers or van repairs. Whether you can give time, money, or your prayers and moral support, please consider yourself a part of this exciting new chapter in Hope’s story.

Hope CommUnity Center’s Second Campus is located at 800 S. Hawthorne Avenue in Apopka. To get involved, please call Mary Carroll or Lynn Devanie at (407) 880-4673 or go to the Volunteer page at www.hcc-offm.org.
“An oasis of love...
And a voice for social change”

An excerpt from Sister Ann’s message at the Hearts for Hope Luncheon

“I want you to understand who we are and how we give heart, hands and flesh to our HOPE. This is the energy of Hope Community Center...

Welcome, come right in! You belong here.
Bring your creativity, your dreams and goodness.
You can also bring your anger, and your hurt.
Your brokenness and your sorrow are welcome as well.
Our home is your home.
And in this home you will find LOVE,
you will find your own voice,
and you will discover the power of your story.”

This journey of discovery happens not only for those who come to Hope for help, but those who come to help. In this house, a diverse assortment of people from different backgrounds, social classes, languages, skin tones, cultures and life stories come together, and all write a new story, our story of personal and social transformation.

How did this all begin? In 1971, responding to an invitation from the Bishop of the Orlando Diocese to work with migrant farmworkers, four young Sisters of Notre Dame landed here and moved into south Apopka’s African American community, armed with a ditto machine, a few chairs and a table in the garage. So was born the Farmworker Ministry, now the Hope CommUnity Center.

We took to the streets to get to know the community. Who are you? What is your story? What are your hopes and dreams? What can we do together building on our strengths to face the oppression, the racism, the poverty, the lack of power to effect change?

And those questions continue to drive us today. The work of Hope is needed now more than ever. We have grown exponentially in the last year. We are hiring and preparing staff, volunteers and community leaders to carry on with our core mission, strengthening infrastructure and developing a secure, diverse funding base. Hope is much more than the Apopka Nuns!

We hope you fall in love with us because we do good work, the work of the heart. We work hard and can make a nickel go a long way. We are full of life and full of humor. We will make you laugh and we will make you cry. We hate injustice and mean spirited politics.

And we believe in Goodness — the Goodness of God, and your goodness, and that of the people with whom we serve. Such Goodness is implanted by God in each one of us. We are of the stars — we are Stardust! We have a God given responsibility to practice compassion and to be open to all.

Come visit. See for yourself. We make our own version of magic, only we call it grace.”
A Magical Gift from Disney

Disney is known for magical experiences, and they certainly created one here at Hope on October 8! Representatives from Walt Disney World awarded a surprise gift of $250,000 to help fund Hope's expansion to a second campus (see front page).

Disney representatives Betty Lowery, Michael Almeida (Michael is also an HCC board member), and Nancy Gidusko shared the surprise $250,000 gift at our Oct. 8, 2015 board meeting. The check was presented to Sister Ann (left) and Board President Roxanne Rose (right).

“We understand the rewards of engaging with an organization like HCC, which helps children and families tap into their creativity, make healthy choices and fill our communities with hope,” said Nancy Gidusko, Community Relations Director at Walt Disney World.

Thank You
It’s the kind of story we all love to hear: a beautiful circle is completed when a person returns to serve at Hope after having her life touched by one of HCC’s programs or services. With Dulce Barrera, HCC’s new Youth and Family Advocate, the circle is an even bigger one—it began before she was even born!

Dulce’s parents were migrant farmworkers whose lives were touched by Sister Ann and the Office of Farmworker Ministry back in the late 1980’s. Years later, after the family settled in the area and Dulce graduated from Eustis High School, family members connected her with Sister Ann, who recruited her for our AmeriCorps team.

It wasn’t an easy transition into a service role, says Dulce, who recalls the experience as a “privileged time” in her life and a time of vulnerability. She rose to the challenge and served for two years, working in Zellwood Elementary and Apopka High School.

In 2015, Dulce completed her bachelors in social work at UCF (congratulations, Dulce!) and is now a full-time member of the Youth and Family Services team here at Hope.

You may not know Alex Saunders, Hope’s new Director of Media and Communications, but if you are someone who appreciates beautiful photography, you probably have noticed his work! (Just look at that picture of Juana to the right—wow, right?!) Alex served as the Media Production Coordinator & Trainer as part of the 2012-13 AmeriCorps team, working both at Hope and the Farmworkers Association of Florida. When he and partner Liz Ortel (now our Director of Academic Support) moved on after their AmeriCorps year, Alex left a legacy that made him impossible to forget: more than a dozen marketing and training videos and thousands of gorgeous, inspiring photographs of our community.

With a Media Production degree from FSU, a successful stint as Public Awareness Director at Prevent Child Abuse Louisiana, and a deep commitment to social justice and advocacy, Alex brings an easy-going manner and a huge bank of skills to Hope. So, when you’re inspired by a piece of media or communication from Hope, you know who to thank.

Welcome back, Alex!

Hope Team Gives Keynote Address at a National Conference

“They brought the house down with a standing ovation!”

On Valentine’s Day, five members of the Hope family shared their stories of strength and struggle, resilience and love with 400 members of Notre Dame AmeriCorps from across the US, who had gathered in Baltimore, MD for the annual NDA AmeriCorps Retreat. Sin Fronteras (“Without Borders”) members Hannia Barbosa and Iris Silva and group alumna Astrid Rodriguez gave the keynote address at the retreat, joined by Hope staff members Nilka Melendez and Dulce Barrera, themselves AmeriCorps alumni.

“I am so proud of them,” said Sister Ann. “They brought the house down with a standing ovation!” Congratulations, ladies, for the courage it took to speak with such dignity and grace before a huge crowd of NDA members. Your words of hope, resilience and love are an inspiration to all of us.
**How Hope Transformed My Life**

“I was given support, compassion and knowledge when I was educated on my rights and how I deserve to live a life with dignity and respect.”

“I have lived in Apopka for fifteen years. My experience with the Hope CommUnity Center was life changing; I always say God had the perfect timing for me when he brought the Parenting Program into my life. The program has shed light on a new life for my family and me.

My life has been transformed. Because of the parenting program, I was able to see how I could be a stronger parent. I gained courage because I let go of the fear attached to being a female immigrant. I was given support, compassion and knowledge when I was educated on my rights and how I deserve to live a life with dignity and respect. I’ve achieved a lot by participating as a volunteer on Hope’s CommUnity Advisory Committee, working with my community and serving to create change. This is why I want to thank all of you who make it possible for people like me. You make it so that I can learn and teach others that we are people with big dreams and that we are also capable of helping and making big changes in our world.”

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**Why I Give**

We are confronted daily by many appeals for funds, in our mailboxes and e-mail, on television and radio, on Facebook and on the phone. Many of the causes are good ones and, if you are like me, you are often faced with a decision: To whom will I give? What organization stands out and speaks to me like no other?

For me, Hope CommUnity Center is a consistent and beloved giving choice because Hope stands as an example of both spiritual inspiration and programmatic excellence.

At HCC, I have found an ethos and a spirituality that is present not just during certain special times of the year. It’s there all the time, even imbuing Hope’s daily programs and organizational structure.

People who come to Hope for services or classes or immigration information leave with much more than that. They leave with a spark—of hope, of joy, of love—based on newfound knowledge that they are part of a community defined by shared struggle and shared commitment to justice.

—HCC Board Member Betsy Swart

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**Why I Volunteer**

Years ago I was asked to write about why I do what I do. In the process of answering, I clarified two of my core beliefs: First, be intentional in all you do and establish priorities. Second, pursue the things that make your heart smile.

So why do I intentionally choose to spend my time volunteering at Hope? The answer is simple. As I look into the faces of our students, I am inspired by their focus on their studies and their dedication to overcoming challenges. I am also inspired by the unity of staff, volunteers and AmeriCorps, building a community of respect and fighting for social justice.

And Hope makes my heart smile! Sister Ann and her team are tireless in their efforts and infectious in their enthusiasm. HCC has worked with thousands of families, helping them to acculturate while maintaining their unique identities. In doing so, Hope spreads the true spirit of God’s love in the world.

I encourage anyone with heart and passion to consider volunteering. Bless and be blessed!

—Citizenship Teacher Linda Leonard Woods
It’s a holiday tradition in Apopka: the annual Toy Sale, started by Sister Gail Grimes nearly 40 years ago. With help from you, our donors, we collect an assortment of brand new children’s toys and games. Then, our jolly team of Sin Fronteras Youth, HCC staff, and volunteers set new, low prices at a small fraction of retail. For months, parents look forward to choosing special gifts that they can afford!

Why do we sell the toys instead of giving them away? Sister Gail started the Toy Sale tradition with the conviction that parents in our working poor community want the joy of selecting specific gifts for their children. Other organizations might provide donated gifts to a family, but accepting a free gift, however lovingly given, can make parents feel like inadequate providers, unable to participate in this season of giving.

And there’s a second benefit to the Toy Sale — it raises funds for Hope’s programs that serve the very people who shop at the sale! The prices may be low, but because the toys are all donated, the income from the sale can go straight to supporting Hope’s many services and programs. The most recent Toy Sale brought in nearly $13,000, making this annual event a win for everyone: parents shop with dignity and for a purpose, and the money raised supports the programs they love. Thank you, Sister Gail, for starting this beloved Hope tradition!
plans to study nursing in college. “I know how good it feels to help people,” he said.

Surely, that’s a feeling known by former Congresswoman Patricia Schroeder, this year’s recipient of the Hope and Diversity Award, who made a difference for American families through her long service, representing Colorado’s first district from 1973 to 1997 (she’s now a Central Floridian). She was a prime mover behind the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993.

Cheering Rep. Schroeder’s legacy and greeting one other as we munched delicious salads, luncheon guests were also treated to a video about Hope CommUnity Center by board member Jean Bauman and to a reflection by Sister Ann about the center’s past, present, and future.

“We do things that are hard to codify,” said Sister Ann, noting that the center’s true hope is that all people can live in safety, dignity, and peace. “Come visit and see for yourself,” she invited us. “We make our own version of magic — only we call it grace.”

—Joy Dickinson, Writer and Friend of HCC

Thank you to our Sponsors:
Second Campus Opening Soon
...With Your Help!

HCC staff, AmeriCorps and volunteers will be working hard to get Hope’s second campus ready for a spring opening, but we can’t do it alone! There are plenty of volunteer tasks for you to choose from: arranging a room for better workflow, painting inside walls, pulling weeds and cutting shrubs, and many, many more.

And then there are the things that cost money! Technology, safer playground, landscaping, paint and supplies, van repairs, and a kitchen that is still living in the 1980’s. See if you can figure out what’s missing and what needs to be updated in the kitchen photos below!

1) What is missing in this picture?
2) What is at least 20 years old in this picture?
3) What needs to be replaced in this picture?
4) What do you call those things on the windows?

Answers: 1) Oven (2) Kitchen cabinets (3) Countertops (4) Vertical blinds

Mission: Hope CommUnity Center is a service learning community dedicated to the empowerment of Central Florida’s immigrant and working poor communities through education, advocacy, and spiritual growth.

Be GREEN!
If you would prefer to have our newsletter emailed to you,
Let Us Know!
Please email mcarroll@hcc-offm.org

(Featured above, Sister Ann distributes ashes to the Sin Fronteras Youth Group as part of the Ash Wednesday tradition.) Pope Francis spoke during this time of Lent and asked us to change our hearts. Giving up alcohol, chocolate or ice cream may change our bodies but to fast from indifference to others changes our hearts. He says, this is when we began to feast on love.

February 12 marked the 11th anniversary of the death of Sister Dorothy Stang, who was part of the struggle for the rights of poor and landless people in northeast Brazil. Hope staff gathered around the rotunda to reflect on the life of St. Dorothy and to think about the role we all play to honor her legacy and advocate for the rights of the people here in Central Florida.