To understand the effort it took for Esther Chambers to earn a master’s degree from Notre Dame de Namur University, one would need to imagine spending their first semester studying at 5:00 am on a cot near thirty other cots full of sleeping seniors: “I started school while I was in the St. Mary’s Center Emergency shelter, it was meetings every day, and lights out at 10:00 pm. I had to get creative to find a place to study,” she remembers.

Her creativity was tested when she was forced out of her home in 2016. She had to learn quickly how to survive on the streets. Seeking out places that stayed open all night, she would nod off in a dark corner at 24 Hour Fitness, ride the bus back and forth from San Francisco to Oakland, and sleep at the San Francisco Airport: “With my suitcase I looked like I was one of the travelers until one day security approached me.” She gave the guard an excuse and ran into the bathroom; “I never went back there again.”

It was on a very cold night sleeping in a borrowed car when Esther had an epiphany, “A little bit of change was not going to help, it had to be a huge change.” Esther decided that what she needed was to go back to school, but it wasn’t until months later, with the encouragement of a fellow St. Mary’s Center client, that she was able to make that dream a reality.

(continued on page 3)
Dear Friends, Family, and Supporters:

I am grateful for the warm welcome from this community of hope, healing and justice, proud of St. Mary’s past accomplishments, and excited for a very bright future.

Let me share a little about my background before asking about your interests. My first job after college was at Nickerson Settlement House in Providence, Rhode Island – a place that St. Mary’s reminds me of every day. In the years since, I’ve been an advocate, executive officer, deputy mayor, and strategy consultant, always working to serve low-income communities and build strong neighborhoods. Most recently, I led multi-county campaigns for the Non-Profit Housing Association of Northern California to re-invest in housing affordable for seniors, veterans, and people with disabilities. Personally, my family lives in Oakland and just celebrated the birth of our first granddaughter!

When one of our Seniors, Keith A., and I recently testified in support of our Shelter funding, I could immediately see the value that St. Mary’s brings—the merging of personal stories and lived experience with strategies for building strong communities and livable neighborhoods.

I hope you will email me at: sharoncornu@stmaryscenter.org to share how you became involved with St. Mary’s and what this experience has meant to you. Learning about the connections and relationships we’ve built over these decades inspires and affirms this work.

Thank you for everything you do!

Sharon Cornu, MSHS
Executive Director
Dianne Jacob has served on St. Mary’s Center Board since 2013. She has served in the positions of Vice-Chair and Secretary and was elected as Board Chair in July 2019.

Ms. Jacob learned about St. Mary’s Center while serving on the Alameda County Community Food Bank Board. As a member of the Food Bank Board, Ms. Jacob attended events in support of St. Mary’s Center and travelled to Sacramento with St. Mary’s Center seniors for Hunger Action Day.

As a Board member, Ms. Jacob was involved in our purchase of Presentation House, a transitional supportive housing site which opened in 2015, the incorporation of Friendly Manor in 2017, a drop-in center for homeless women and 25 unit SRO-style housing facility, and the purchase of a site at 967 32nd Street to develop supportive housing for formerly unhoused seniors.

A journalist since 1978, Dianne Jacob is a writing instructor and coach who helps aspiring authors hone their craft. Ms. Jacob is a seasoned food writer and editor, and has become quite well-known because of the excellent advice and guidance she’s generously given to other writers.

Based in Oakland, CA, Ms. Jacob served as past board chair of the Alameda County Community Food Bank and is a member of the International Association of Culinary Professionals, The San Francisco Professional Food Society, Baker’s Dozen, and Les Dames D’Escoffier International.

Esther credits her ability to succeed in part to the dedication of the St. Mary’s Center staff who offered her a chance to get off the streets. “My first interaction at St. Mary’s Center was kindness. It was open arms, welcoming, reassuring, compassionate, loving...all the things I did not have when I was homeless.”

Her goal now is to move into permanent housing and turn her master’s degree into employment and prosperity. But Esther is facing new challenges. Full time teaching jobs are scarce, and competition is fierce: “Education is great, but you also need good health, emotional wellness, connection with others, a permanent home and a safe, clean neighborhood to live in.”

Esther is adamant that she is “homeless but not hopeless.” Her plan includes securing multiple streams of income as a personal coach and a motivational speaker as well as teaching online. She presented at the St. Mary’s Center International Women’s Day event and more recently was the keynote speaker at the Graduation Mass of Notre Dame de Namur University.

When asked what life lesson she would like to share, Esther replied, “When people feel down and broken they do not have anything to look forward to. People need to know that they are greater than their circumstances.” - by Janny Castillo
WEST COAST RELEASE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDY ON POVERTY AT ST. MARY’S CENTER

“You must let suffering speak if you want to hear the truth,” James Cogley shared at the St. Mary’s Center west coast release of “Pushed to the Bottom: The Experience of Poverty in The United States” hosted at St. Mary’s Center on April 18th, 2019. “Pushed to the Bottom” is a report by the international non-profit, All Together in Dignity, in collaboration with University of Oxford under the Multi-dimensional Aspects of Poverty (MAP) Research Project. This report redefines the sources, stressors and systems that perpetuate extreme poverty around the world. Members of the St. Mary’s Center community were key contributors to the study which was conducted in six US cities and six countries worldwide. Both the report and event were dedicated to MAP co-facilitator and St. Mary’s Center Senior Advocate for Hope and Justice Ron Anderson, who passed away in 2018.

Over 200 guests, including community leaders, government officials, non-profit executives, and social justice advocates attended the event at St. Mary’s Community Center. The day’s program was emceed by Janny Castillo, St. Mary’s Center Hope and Justice Coordinator and MAP organizer, and featured a memorable performance by St. Mary’s Center Emergency Shelter homeless residents. St. Mary’s Center MAP activist and Senior Advocate Carey Whiteside shared what life is like renting a subsidized unit in Downtown Oakland, struggling with the high cost of living and poor air quality, “I love my neighborhood, but it’s really hard to live here.”

Former St. Mary’s Center executive director Carol Johnson generously provided overnight accommodations for out of town participants and guest speakers. After the event St. Mary’s Center executive director Sharon Cornu commented on the larger impact this report provides and the ongoing work of St. Mary’s Center in relationship to redefining poverty; “These important insights into the lived experience of poverty are the foundation of our action to make real change—to bring hope, healing and justice, as the mission of St. Mary’s Center demands.”
“The project was also created as an effort to draw attention to the issue of homelessness in the East Bay and give local residents an opportunity to meet, discuss and take action.”

- Barbara Reiner

Barbara Reiner first became connected with St. Mary’s Center as a liaison between SMC and the low-income senior job placement program ASSETS, and for many years since has been a dedicated supporter of our community. In April of 2018, Barbara and several of her North Keeler Avenue neighbors launched a project called Adopt a Homeless Senior, dedicated to supporting homeless seniors at St. Mary’s Center. Adopt a Homeless Senior is dedicated to raising $17,000, $8,000 of which has already been raised and donated to SMC. These funds will go toward providing one homeless senior with meals, health care, transitional housing and a variety of social services for one year while on the way to finding a permanent home. In addition to fundraising throughout the summer of 2019, the group held a silent auction during the Keeler Avenue Labor Day Gathering on September 3, 2018 in Berkeley.

The Adopt a Homeless Senior project developed out of a desire for community building, in the words of Reiner, “to provide a structure for neighbors to meet each other and work together for a common cause and, in this way, develop a stronger sense of community.” The project was also created as an effort to draw attention to the issue of homelessness in the East Bay and give local residents an opportunity to meet, discuss, and take action. On September 8th, 2019 they will have a booth at the Solano Avenue stroll, where they hope to gain more exposure and participation from surrounding neighborhoods, as well raise additional funds. Project organizers hope that the success of Adopt a Homeless Senior will inspire surrounding neighborhoods to mount fundraising campaigns of their own to make a concrete impact on the homeless crisis in the East Bay and beyond.

St. Mary’s Center is honored to have the support of community members such as these, working to make a difference in the lives of our clients. - by Jamie Townsend
Nearly 300 revelers joined St. Mary’s Center in a Mardi Gras themed celebration for this year’s gala fundraiser. Held on March 9, 2019 at the Ascension Greek Orthodox Cathedral in the Oakland hills, the evening kicked off with a lively reception which included games, a silent auction, and a golden ticket raffle. The reception hour also featured the New Orleans jazz stylings of the acclaimed Bay Area ensemble MJ’s Brass Boppers. Following the close of the reception the band and the St. Mary’s Center Gala Committee including special guest, entrepreneur and mental health activist Sydel Curry-Lee formed a second line procession leading guests into the dining hall.

The second half of the evening featured remarks by Alameda County District 4 Supervisor Nate Miley, a pre-dinner benediction by St. Mary’s Center Board Member Sister Marilyn Medau, and a moving video presentation titled “Restoring Dignity,” followed by remarks from Ortencia Hoopi and Carey Whiteside, two St. Mary’s Center clients featured in the video.

By the end of the evening guests had raised almost $200,000 to support programming and services at St. Mary’s Center. Many thanks to Gala Committee Chair Kathy Gannon Briggs, committee members Sydel Curry-Lee, Arnold Perkins, Steve and Peg Wilcox, Kent and Pamela Donahue, as well as the St. Mary’s Center Board of Directors, our guests, donors, and sponsors for making this year’s event a great success.
St. Mary’s Center will be recognized by East Bay Eats, a yearly series of dinners hosted at some of the area’s most beloved restaurants which brings communities together to raise money for non-profit organizations. Join St. Mary’s Center on November 17, 2019 at Almond & Oak (3311 Grand Ave in Oakland) at 5pm or at 8pm for a second seating. Representatives from St. Mary’s will share information about our work and will be raising additional funds at the event. A signature cocktail may be ordered throughout the night at the cash bar and 100% of the proceeds will be donated to St. Mary’s Center.

Tickets cost $60-100 per person, wine included, for a multi-course, prix-fixe meal. For more information and to purchase tickets please visit eastbayeatsseries.bpt.me

COMMUNITY GARDEN: In the Fall of 2018 St. Mary’s Center was awarded a grant from the California Agricultural Leadership Foundation for use in maintaining St. Mary’s Center gardens.

BERKELEY PILGRIMAGE: Recently St. Mary’s Center was honored to receive a grant from the Berkeley Pilgrimage Foundation. The Berkeley Pilgrimage Foundation is a non-profit organization dedicated to providing funds and services for low-income seniors in the East Bay.

KAISER PERMANENTE NORTHERN CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY BENEFIT GRANTS PROGRAM: Kaiser Permanente recently awarded St. Mary’s Center a grant that will help more people in this community get access to the resources they need to lead a healthy life. Kaiser Permanente’s community involvement uniquely pairs grant funding with 65 years of clinical expertise, medical research, and volunteerism to support prevention-focused, evidence-based programs that are expanding access to care and creating healthy environments.

UPCOMING EVENTS

ST. MARY’S CENTER 2020 GALA FUNDRAISER

March 21, 2020
5:30pm-10pm
Ascension Greek Orthodox Cathedral

Thank you to our new grant funders

Save The Date
St. Mary’s Center is a community of hope, justice, and healing that serves at-risk seniors and preschoolers in the heart of Oakland. We strive to improve quality of life through counseling, shelter, nutrition, advocacy and social support.

### WISHLIST

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To make a donation please visit our website www.stmaryscenter.org. To contribute an item from our wishlist, please contact St. Mary’s Center at development@stmaryscenter.org.

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ST. MARY’S CENTER ANNOUNCES: CHANGE OF MAILING ADDRESS

Protect your identity! Use our new secure Post Office Box for your contributions:

St. Mary’s Center
PO Box 23403
Oakland, CA 94623

We want to hear from you! Please keep us updated with your preferred contact information at: www.stmaryscenter.org

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