



Q & A

Roberta Buchanan, executive director of the Howard Area Community Center (HACC), was born and raised in the small town of Beaver, Pennsylvania. Her passion for teaching and service was instilled in her by her family and kindled as an undergraduate at Bethany College, where she earned her B.A. in 1961. After several years teaching English, French, and Reading at the high school level, Roberta got married and, upon earning her M.A. in history from Rutgers in 1965, stayed home to raise her two sons. Once her kids were in school, she worked at the Mental Health Society for eight years until her husband took a job as chair of the science department for Evanston Township High School (ETHS) and the family moved to Illinois. With one son at Oberlin College and the other at ETHS, Roberta joined the Alternative Schools Network in Chicago where she worked to decrease the 50 percent dropout rate among Chicago high school students. In 1994 she became associate director of the Howard Area Community Center and within the year took over as executive director. Under Roberta's leadership, HACC has grown into a nationally recognized multi-service agency that, with the monthly help of 80–100 volunteers like those from the Ignatian Volunteer Corps, addresses the needs of the materially poor in innovative and effective ways.

MEASURING THE IMPACT OF THE IGNATIAN VOLUNTEER CORPS

THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF
HOWARD AREA COMMUNITY CENTER
REFLECTS ON THE CONTRIBUTION
OF IGNATIAN VOLUNTEERS

interview by Jeremy Langford

Q What is the history of Howard Area Community Center?

A The organization began in 1967 as the St. Jerome's Community Center under the leadership of Monsignor Eugene Mulcahey and Fr. Jim Dalton of St. Jerome's Church. Its mission was to offer emergency housing and food, information and referral, English language classes, legal services, clubs for senior citizens and local residents, tutoring, and gatherings with the alderman. It eventually merged with another organization started that same year, the Howard Area Community Organization, and was renamed Howard Area Community Center. Over the years HACC has been led by Sr. Katie McHugh, BVM; Sr. Fran Brenner, SSSF; Sr. Pat Crowley, OSB; and Vicki Hadaway. Since obtaining tax-exempt 501(c)(3) status in 1979, we have successfully sought funding from individuals, corporations, foundations, United Way, and governmental sources and have expanded from our original location on Paulina Street to five sites in Rogers Park.

Q What is your mission and what services does HACC provide?

A We all need help and support from other people and institutions. In poorer neighborhoods there are fewer resources for people who need more help. Our mission is to assist low-income individuals and families in Rogers Park to stabilize their lives and to develop the social skills necessary to become effective community members. In order to accomplish this mission, the agency's programs provide emer-

agency intervention, family stabilization, and promote developmental growth. We are a multi-service agency that provides the following programs: Social Services, Education & Employment, The Family Center, Youth, and The Alternative High School. We are an integral part of the community we serve. And our staff, volunteers, and clients are a community.

Q Please describe your clientele and the challenges they face.

A The majority of our program participants live in East Rogers Park, a racially, ethnically, and economically diverse neighborhood of 63,000 people on the far northeast side of Chicago. Ethnically our clients are about 50% African-American, 30% Latino (largely Mexican), and 20% Caucasian. We provide intensive services to over 4,000 low-income individuals annually. The majority of the families we serve have an annual household income of less than \$10,000. Household size ranges from singles to extended families of 10 or more. Some of the issues faced by our clients: lack of affordable housing and quality childcare, lack of job skills, low literacy skills and proficiency in one's native language and in English, lack of a high school diploma, physical disabilities, HIV/AIDS, mental illness, domestic violence.

Q When did HACC link up with the Ignatian Volunteer Corps, and how do you match volunteers with specific service work?

A When the Chicago chapter of IVC was started in 2001, the regional director, George Sullivan, invited us to apply for a volunteer. I believe he approached us because we are a well established agency that offers a wide variety of services and our north side locations are convenient to volunteers living in the northern suburbs. Originally, we submitted a job description for someone to help clients with LIHEAP (Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program) applications. As we've taken on more IVC members, we work with George to assess each volunteer's talents and find a good fit. Of course, everyone who works here, whether paid staff or volunteer, is flexible and willing to pitch in wherever needed.

Q What does HACC do to foster the volunteers' understanding of economic, racial, social, and political structures that impact those your agency serves?

A Besides offering training opportunities, our staff works very closely with the IVC members and engage in frequent discussions with them regarding these issues

and how they impact our programs. Volunteers' understanding of issues grows as they work with low-income clients who share their stories with them. Lunchtime also provides a good opportunity to ask questions, share ideas, and get to know each other.

Q How do IVC members benefit HACC?

A The IVC volunteers are wonderful. They offer so much because of their vast life and work experiences and their desire to serve. We really try hard to be a place that is welcoming and helpful, and the IVC members help us a lot by being upbeat, personable, and willing to go the extra mile. We invite them to help us assess our infrastructure and make suggestions. All of them have helped us become more efficient and effective. And because of their day-to-day hands-on work, we are able to serve more clients, spend more one-on-one time with the adults we are helping, and pay a little more attention to the children and teenagers in our classrooms.

Q What is distinctive about the ILVC program and types of volunteers?

A We have always had high-quality young volunteers coming out of college who dedicate a year or more of their lives to service through Lutheran, Jesuit, Passionist, and other organizations. Many of them stay on as paid staff. The IVC members have that same kind of passion and commitment, but because they are older they bring a different background and style into the whole mix. They show a great deal of patience and respect in everything they do. And because, through their faith, they are mission driven and social justice oriented, they are an ideal fit for us. We believe in the human dignity of every client who walks through our doors, and so do the IVC volunteers.

Q What are your greatest needs going forward?

A We have a lot to be proud of, like the new computer clubhouse we opened in our youth center, the alternative high school, the various accreditations and certifications our programs earn, our new \$5 million Family Center, the success of our Employment Resource Center. But we need more mentors to work one-on-one with the clients, especially the students. We are also trying to expand our high school by building a \$300,000 modular classroom next to the existing building. We are blessed to have four IVC volunteers, but believe me, we could use more! ■