The Magazine of Back Bay Mission

The Changing Tides

Summer 2015

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STRENGTHENING NEIGHBORHOODS, SEEKING JUSTICE, TRANSFORMING LIVES
Two New Partnerships Tackle Healthcare on the Mississippi Gulf Coast

As in so many other areas of life, Mississippi ranks at or near the bottom of the list for health determinants and health outcomes. In 14 of the last 25 years, the state has ranked 50th overall. In only two of the last 25 years has it ranked 48th, the highest rank it has achieved. While the state ranks well in incidents of pertussis, binge drinking, drug deaths, and immunization of children, Mississippi ranks poorly in a wide variety of areas, including cardiovascular deaths, adolescent immunization, infant mortality, infectious disease, physical activity, cancer deaths, obesity, and incidence of diabetes.

Back Bay Mission has a history of addressing health concerns among our clients. Louise McDonnell, one of our founders, was a nurse by vocation, and we founded the first clinic serving the Back Bay population in 1929, which was expanded in the late 30s. While the Mission’s clinic closed in 1958 when a new Harrison County Health Department clinic opened down the street, the Mission was later instrumental in creating the Coastal Family Health Center in 1978. Today, Coastal Family Health operates ten clinics, two school clinics, a pharmacy, and a pediatric mobile unit.

As you can imagine, access to health care and health information is a major challenge for our poor, homeless, and at-risk clients. That’s why we’re so proud of two new partnerships that will help the people we serve live healthier lives.

Community Health Work at Starfish Cafe

Starfish Cafe is a full service restaurant in Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi, about 30 miles west of Biloxi on Highway 90. Besides serving meals made with locally grown produce - including produce from the Cafe’s own gardens - Starfish Cafe provides food service training, life coaching, anger management.

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Kenneth Haugk has new book out entitled *Don't Sing Songs to a Heavy Heart*. Though I have not read the book, the title caught my attention and sparked for me some reflections about our mission here on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. For me, music is healing, soothing, and so my immediate reaction to Dr. Haugk’s title was, “Why not?” Music calms, beautiful words can soothe, providing a momentary escape from trauma and chaos. When the music ends, when the song has ended, and nothing has happened to resolve the chaos or respond to the trauma then the song/music is experienced as a diversion, a momentary distraction with no capacity to sustain the calm and peace it seeks to establish for those in chaos.

Our staff’s goal for Back Bay Mission is to be in partnership with our clients, supporting them in moving from being just recipients of emergency assistance to being people who are developing the tools and resources to move forward in their lives. Proverbs 25:20 says, “Like one who takes away a garment on a cold day, or like vinegar poured on soda, is one who sings songs to a heavy heart.” We work to move beyond providing a momentary escape, which can feel to recipients like singing songs to a heavy heart living in the midst of despair. Because the needs of low-income people are often overwhelming and the structures that entangle the lives of the poor are so oppressive, it is critical to make available a range of supportive services. We connect the people who use the Micah Center, Emergency Assistance, and Supportive Housing with mental health resources, employment options, and health information. Through our work, we seek to build on our clients’ strengths rather than focusing solely on their deficits. We then work collaboratively to create their next empowering step. We invite the people who come on mission trips to meet and hear the stories of the people we serve, learn about their strengths and as well as their needs. We seek to transform the lives of those we serve as well as those who serve. Shifting the trajectory of people lives moves beyond ‘singing songs’ in order for sustainable change to occur. Please join us in this sacred work. It is our hope that when work camp participants return to their homes from their mission trips to Back Bay Mission they will do their local mission work from an enlarged perspective; a perspective that moves beyond “singing songs to heavy hearts”.

Alice Graham
Alice Graham, Ph.D. Executive Director

2015 Shari Prestemon Intern Selected

Nina Lester has been selected as the 2015 Shari Prestemon Social Justice Intern. Nina is a native of Cleveland, Ohio, and attends Hiram College in Hiram, Ohio, where she studies psychology and photography. She is a lifelong member of the United Church of Christ. Nina’s internship began on June 8, 2015.

The Shari Prestemon Social Justice Internship provides members of the United Church of Christ between the ages of 19 and 35 with a unique opportunity to participate in a 10 week summer program tailored to their interests. The internship nurtures participants’ passion for social justice and develops their appreciation for the church’s role in seeking social justice.

You can support the Shari Prestemon Social Justice Internship with a gift to Back Bay Mission. You can keep up with the work that Nina is doing via our website: www.thebackbaymission.org.

Summer Meals Program Goes Client Choice

Last year, Back Bay Mission’s food pantry adopted a client choice model, becoming the only food pantry of its kind in the state of Mississippi. This model is centered around giving clients the opportunity to select their own food and offers four distinct advantages over the traditional food pantry model: clients enjoy the sense of dignity that comes with being able to select their own food, they have a higher rate of satisfaction with the food they are able to choose, there is less waste and the cost that the pantry must bear is reduced, and it provides more opportunities for clients and volunteers to interact. By all accounts, the model has been a huge success.

Also last year, the Mission began its summer meals program for families with children. Mississippi suffers from the highest rate of childhood food insecurity in the country, a problem that is only exacerbated during summer vacation, when access to free and reduced price breakfasts and lunches at schools is highly limited. This program provides families with child-friendly meals during the summer.

In 2015, the Mission decided to bring the client choice model to its summer meals program. Instead of offering prepackaged meals to clients participating in the program, we’re offering $25 vouchers to Food Giant and Rouses supermarkets. Participants are able to receive one voucher each month during May, June, July, and August. This brings all of the benefits of the client choice model to the summer meals program: allowing clients to enjoy the sense of dignity that comes with being able to shop at a grocery store while providing an opportunity for clients to select their own food and reducing waste.

You can support this valuable program through a gift to Back Bay Mission.
As a health and human services ministry of the United Church of Christ, Back Bay Mission enjoys the support of many of the congregations of the United Church of Christ throughout the United States. Since the Mission became the only presence of the United Church of Christ on the Mississippi Gulf Coast - and, for almost four decades, the only presence in the state of Mississippi - we have enjoyed only intermittent support from the churches in the Biloxi area.

We’re working to change that, and this work began with a breakfast for local clergy at the Back Bay Mission campus. Area clergy and other church representatives enjoyed breakfast and heard from Mission staff, including Executive Director Alice Graham, Director of Client Services Kenney Washington, and Emergency Assistance Caseworker Jill Cartledge.

Our thanks goes out to Ellen Mitchell, who prepared the meal, as well as all of the staff who participated in the event. Thank you as well, of course, to the many area clergy who attended.

April 12-18, 2015 was National Volunteer Week, and we spent the week honoring the hundreds of volunteers who serve the people of the Mississippi Gulf Coast through their work with Back Bay Mission.

Local and long term volunteers attended a luncheon at the Micah Day Center where staff recognized them and presented them with certificates. Select volunteers helped produce audio essays about their experiences at the Mission. In addition, we mailed and emailed certificates to our volunteers from throughout the United Church of Christ and across the United States.

Back Bay Mission welcomes more than 800 volunteers to the Mississippi Gulf Coast each year. Many of these volunteers come to the Mission on mission trips through their local church. These volunteers work in our Housing Rehabilitation ministry, the Micah Day Center, and our food pantry. Long term volunteers work as volunteer coordinators, construction supervisors, and Micah Day Center coordinators. Local volunteers serve in a variety of roles.

To listen to the audio essays with volunteers Doyle Luckenbaugh, Benji Benzschawel (now staff), Doerte Hesselman, Carol Merriman, and Kevin Frost, please visit our YouTube channel: youtube.com/user/BackBayMission.

To learn more about being a volunteer at Back Bay Mission or find an opportunity to volunteer, please visit our website - thebackbaymission.org - or contact our volunteer coordinator at volunteercoordinator@thebackbaymission.org.
In the lobby of the Newtown Congregational Church, we have a bulletin board that a few members diligently keep updated with newspaper clippings of things other members have done in the community that demonstrate our Core Values. Occasionally, they’ll also put up particularly poignant comics. The longest hanging clipping is of the latter. It’s a copy of a Family Circus comic where the family is walking out of a worship service. The youngest child states “Grandma says this is where church really begins, when we’re in the outside world.” I think Grandma and the wonderful people who work for Back Bay Mission would be in pretty strong agreement.

The beauty of the Back Bay ministry is that it constantly evolves. What started as a service for the fishing people of Biloxi has turned into something that repairs homes, provides rent and utility assistance, has one of the best food pantries I’ve ever seen, created and spun off a health center, started an AIDS Task Force, opened a successful soup kitchen, recently built high quality transitional housing for veterans, and is buying foreclosed homes to turn into truly affordable housing. Not bad for a mission that’s a mere 92 years old.

The story of the mission is not solely all the big and grand things they do, however. The greatest strength of the mission, to me, is how the people who work for the Mission care about the people that volunteer for them. In the aftermath of the shooting at Sandy Hook School, six of us went down to Back Bay for a weekend trip. It was not a trip made under normal circumstances. Shari, Craig and Bob stayed after hours to sit and talk with us, to share in our darker moments. Lori, Jill, Everett, and Kenney stopped over to give us their support. Shari provided me with some pastoral counseling over a tragedy that still brings a dark cloud over our heads on different days. These are the things that cannot be quantified into a budget, or cost-benefit ratio.

The practice of caring and nurturing volunteers extends beyond extraordinary circumstances, too. All who have spent any time at Back Bay Mission know the impact it can leave with you. Not just what the Mission gives us, but what the people we travel with give us as well. Old learning from new, straight learning from gay, white learning from black. We only become better people by listening and taking part in the lives of those around us. I am happy to say that the Mission has succeeded in making all of the people I’ve had the privilege of meeting there over the years and myself better than when we first arrived.

This was supposed to be a standard Mission Moment, and I’ve probably strayed from what people have come to expect in this arena. Sometimes, though, I think it helps to take a step back and look at all the things the Mission does and stands for. It’s not just a verse, Micah 6:8, it’s a way of life. Anyone can say “Do Justice, Love Kindness, Walk Humbly.” That’s the easy part. The hard part is living that, and our Back Bay Mission staff and volunteers exemplify that every day. If you’re reading this, and you’ve been before, you know how great a family this is to be in. If you’re reading this and you haven’t been to Back Bay Mission yet, our family is always open to new members.

Mission Staff Attend Class on Dynamics of Poverty

Three members of the Mission staff - Executive Director Alice Graham, Emergency Assistance Caseworker Jill Cartledge, and Home At Last Caseworker Roxxanne Watts - attended a workshop put on by Hope Ministries in Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Understanding the Dynamics of Poverty. The workshop focused on the reasons that people living in poverty make some financial decisions that make little sense to others, decisions like spending money on manicures rather than utilities.

In conversation, both Jill and Roxxanne said that the workshop served as a reminder that people living in poverty do have reasons for the financial decisions that they make and that these decisions are often based in how little people have. Even when someone is living in poverty - and perhaps especially then - having the opportunity to look good or enjoy a good meal can make a real difference in that person’s day and outlook on life.

Of course, this also means that our clients need more help with financial planning, and Jill and Roxxanne both brought back a game to help them with that. The Bean Game teaches financial strategies by giving each player a certain number of beans or other tokens to represent resources they have, a family whose needs they must meet, and a list of things that they must secure for those families. During the game, players must determine how many beans they will allocate to each of the different needs while still meeting all of those needs. Both Jill and Roxxanne have plans to introduce the game to their clients.
Two New Partnerships Tackle Healthcare on the Mississippi Gulf Coast (cont.)

courses, and other enriching lessons for at-risk youth and adults between the ages of 18 and 30. In addition, the Cafe provides health education and referrals for the community, thanks to a partnership between community health worker Diana Fillhart and Back Bay Mission.

When Executive Director Alice Graham came to the Mission in January, 2015, she brought Diana, and the grant from Tulane University that funds Diana, with her. Diana has years of experience in healthcare and mission work: a pediatric and neonatal intensive care nurse, an employee at a Christian camp and retreat center, an executive director, a missionary in New York City, and now a community health worker at Starfish Cafe. At the Cafe, she provides health education and information to a diverse clientele.

After ordering their meals from the regular menu, patrons of Starfish Cafe are presented with a ‘Wellness Menu’ where they can select topics that interest them. These topics are based on goals from Healthy People 2020, a government program that provides 10-year national objectives for improving the health of all Americans, and include information on blood pressure, diabetes, weight management, and smoking (all areas in which Mississippi is among the worst performers in the nation). The Cafe then holds community classes and workshops on the topics that its patrons are most interested in. The Cafe also provides information on healthy living and eating, instructions on cooking for people with special dietary needs, referrals to local health practitioners, and assistance for people living with life-altering illnesses.

The grant administered by Back Bay Mission provides support for several of these program areas and helps us help Starfish Cafe provide much-needed health education to the people of the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

Mental Health Care through the Program for Assertive Community Treatment

The relationship between mental health and poverty is a complex one. In some cases, a person living in poverty may encounter a variety of risk factors for mental health and develop mental health problems. In fact, recent research has indicated that the latter is more likely: except in cases of schizophrenia, poverty is more likely to precede mental illness.

Back Bay Mission is very familiar with mental health challenges in the communities we serve, especially among clients at the Micah Day Center and in our permanent supportive housing programs. While we can connect people with diagnosed mental illnesses to vital services, we cannot provide that diagnosis ourselves. And that’s why we were thrilled to hear about the Program for Assertive Community Treatment (PACT).

PACT uses interdisciplinary teams - including psychiatrists, nurses, mental health professionals, employment specialists, housing specialists, and substance abuse specialists - to provide comprehensive, locally based treatment to people with serious and persistent mental illnesses. Among the services provided are assistance with daily living activities, housing, employment, benefits, financial management, and access to health care. Importantly, PACT works with its clients, meeting them in their homes, places of work, or other settings. And all of this on their clients' schedules. PACT is also time-unlimited, providing care for as long as the client needs it.

Back Bay Mission is able to refer our clients to PACT to receive mental health and other services from the PACT teams. This is especially important for our clients who may find it difficult to travel to service providers or who may lack support systems able to respond in emergencies.

Partnerships Matter

Back Bay Mission has been a force for good on the Mississippi Gulf Coast for more than 90 years. Over our nine decades, we’ve served in a variety of capacities and founded many of the social service organizations that continue to help the people of the Gulf Coast today. We also know that we alone cannot provide all of the services our clients and our communities need. Partnerships like those with Starfish Cafe and the Program for Assertive Community Treatment allow us to help the people we serve receive services that we are not equipped to provide directly. Through these partnerships, we - and you - strengthen neighborhoods, seek justice, and transform lives across the Mississippi Gulf Coast.
Local Leaders Spend a Morning “In Their Shoes”

Five years ago, Back Bay Mission opened the Micah Day Center, which provides a number of services to the homeless population of Biloxi and beyond. At the Micah Center, our guests can take showers, have laundry done, receive phone calls, pick up mail, use the internet, enjoy fellowship, and connect with other service providers. If you’ve volunteered at the Mission, you may have spent some time in the Micah Day Center and enjoyed meeting and talking to our guests there.

But have you ever wondered what it’s like to be a guest at the Micah Day Center? Several local community leaders got the chance to find out!

After spending some time waiting for the Micah Center to open (guests are often waiting outside up to an hour before the Center opens), our guests-for-the-morning signed in at the front desk and met with service providers to have their ‘needs’ addressed. In addition, they were able to hear about the many services provided by the Micah Day Center and our community partners.

Our thanks go out to the Micah Day Center staff, our community partners, and the community leaders who participated in our first ‘In Their Shoes’ event!

A ‘Guest’ Checks in at the Micah Day Center

A Caseworker Waits to Serve ‘Guests’

‘Guests’ hear from Executive Director Alice Graham

Wondering Where Your Name Is?

At Back Bay Mission, we pride ourselves on our ability to keep administrative costs low and put so much of your gifts to work serving the poor and marginalized of the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

We also know that you want to hear about the great work your gifts do.

In order to make The Changing Tides more about keeping you informed and less costly for us to publish, we’ve moved the ‘honor roll of donors’ that used to be published in each issue online. You can find the honor roll on our website at www.thebackbaymission.org.

And remember, you can always find the latest news about the work of Back Bay Mission on the website or by following us on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google+, and LinkedIn.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Church Relations Associate Christopher Marlin-Warfield by calling 228-243-5322 or emailing chris@thebackbaymission.org.
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strengthening neighborhoods, seeking justice, transforming lives