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MercyFirst CEO helps change lives of abused, neglected children

by Sr. Camille D'Arienzo

Conversations with Sr. Camille

The Council On Accreditation recently cited MercyFirst "for exceptional strength in 12 major areas including Financial Management, Board Governance, Administration and Management, Human Resources, Performance & Quality Improvement, Behavior Support & Management, Client Rights and Training & Supervision," according to New York Nonprofit Press. "In addition, every program of the agency was recognized for outstanding delivery of services, including Family Foster Care & Adoption program, Preventive Services, Residential Treatment & Group Homes, Mother-child programs and Youth Development."

That's an extraordinary list of achievements for Gerard McCaffery, 62.

Sr. Camille: As the MercyFirst's president and CEO, you must be proud of that record.

McCaffery: The work that our staff does every day is really quite extraordinary. Working with almost 4,000 children and their families each year, MercyFirst is a very complex organization and a very vital one. This is evident in the services we provide, the geographic region we cover, and the mix of public funding we have to do this work effectively and with a great deal of heart. I'm very proud to be the CEO and to work with staff and the board of trustees in this incredible organization.

Would you please describe what you inherited?

I joined MercyFirst in 2006. I inherited a very skilled and committed staff working with children placed in our care after being traumatized through abuse and neglect from the same adults who were responsible to care for them and make sure they were safe.

I also inherited an agency that was formed by a merger in 2003 of two organizations founded by the Sisters of Mercy -- St. Mary's of the Angels, founded in 1894 in Syosset, Long Island, N.Y., and Angel Guardian, founded as an orphanage in 1899 in Brooklyn. Unfortunately, MercyFirst was operating as if it were still two separate organizations. The promise of merger, which was to provide a continuum of care for our children, was not happening for a variety of reasons.

Please say more about that.

A key factor was that the two organizations had very different cultures. St. Mary's had a corporate top-down management style with little participation in decision-making below the senior staff level. Angel Guardian was a traditional social work organization with many meetings and a focus on process in decision-making. While both cultures have their strengths and drawbacks, there was a clash between these different styles. The result was conflict and mistrust and a sense of "us vs. them." These tensions got in the way of how we carried out our mission of serving the children and families in our care.

In addition, I inherited a very tenuous financial situation that made it difficult for MercyFirst to pay its bills and meet payroll. The board of trustees was also divided in how it viewed its role when it came to governance and working with each other and the CEO.

Fortunately, everyone was very committed to MercyFirst and finding a better way to work together for the sake of our mission. It took a great deal of hard work, but we embarked on a journey that transformed the way we work together. For staff, it was committing to a trauma-informed approach called Sanctuary that now affects everything we do with our children, families and one another. With the board, it was committing to how best practices should shape governance and decision-making. We also made difficult decisions to balance our budget and work with the financial resources we have.

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The recent findings by COA affirm the success of our entire staff's resolve to work through all these challenges.

What prepared you for this work?

When I was unable to get a teaching position after college, a friend put me on to a job as a "Houseparent" in a group home for older teenage boys. I lived in the group home for three and a half days a week, preparing meals, shopping, overseeing the upkeep of the house and attending meetings, but primarily working with the young men who lived there as they struggled through handling conflicts, getting and keeping a job, saving money, learning to cook and gain skills necessary for independent living. That job prepared me for everything else I did in my career and life in general. Eventually, I felt I could run the program better than my director. That led me to get my MBA from New York University and move to administration, in which I've spent most of the 35 years I have worked in child welfare.

What attracted you to it?

As they say, if you love what you do, you will never have to work a day in your life. I consider myself

quite fortunate to have a job that fits this adage. It allows me to spend much of my waking hours working to provide opportunities and a second chance in life for young people who have had a terrible set of cards dealt to them. And, as I tell people, it is never dull. Never!

What do you consider your most important contributions?

I've always believed that what we do at MercyFirst is some of the most difficult and most important work anyone can be doing. I think my most important contribution is setting a tone that encourages open communication and motivating the staff to take ownership of their jobs and responsibilities so we do our best for our kids and families. My planning and fiscal skills are helpful during these times where change occurs so quickly. I also try to never miss an opportunity to thank staff for what they do and to use humor to relieve tension so we can focus on making the best decisions possible. You just cannot lose your sense of humor in this work because everything you touch and that touches you is so serious.

What have you learned from the young people in your care?

I've learned a great deal about resiliency and putting life's challenges in perspective. When I see a young person who's been through all sorts of horrendous things in his or her short life start to succeed in school, learn better ways of dealing with anger, or decide to go to college or vocational school, it is the greatest feeling.

Every year, our residents host an event with developmentally disabled adults. Every youth who participates tells us how the day helped put his or her own issues in perspective. Similar to the proverb "I felt sorry for myself because I had no shoes -- until I met a man who had no feet." To see our kids learn this is still pretty amazing every time it happens.

Is there something society in general should be aware of?

There are two things I always tell people. The first is, "There but for the grace of God ..." Any one of us could be in the shoes of the young men and women who are at MercyFirst. The second issue is that regardless of what our kids have been through or done, or maybe because of what our kids have been through, we must never forget that they're still just kids. They need what every kid needs: the care and guidance of an adult, to learn to trust again, and small successes they can build on for their self-confidence and future.

How did you meet your wife?

Margo Magid was my supervisor when I was a Houseparent working in that group home. We did not start going out until we both had changed jobs. She left social work with her MSW degree and became a banker and eventually worked in the advertising business. I stayed in social work and got my MBA. Go figure! We are married now for almost 30 years.

Do you bring your work stories home to her?

It is hard not to, but I try to be a bit selective. She prefers the stories that involve our dog program or the ones about the success of our young people, however big or small. The last thing I ever want to tell her is about some recent snafu involving government bureaucracy.

Please say something about your own childhood -- parents, siblings, role models, education.

One story I like to tell is that I grew up in the Bronx until I was 12 years old. I attended St. Simon Stock

School, was an altar boy and had the Sisters of Mercy as my teachers. I was a little bit of a wise guy, and back in those days, that was usually met with firm discipline if you got caught. Given this, I never thought I would end up working with the Sisters of Mercy.

When I came to MercyFirst, there was a "Welcome to MercyFirst" gathering with staff that came to greet me. After talking about myself and some of my goals for the agency, I noticed a few sisters in the back of the room. I told the room that there was a skill I had learned from my years in Catholic school that I still had with me to this day. After a short pause I said the skill was the ability to whistle without moving my lips. One sister in the back called out pretty quickly, "Can you still whistle?" I grinned and showed them that yes, I still could!

I had a very stable life growing up. My mother was a stay-at-home mom, caring for me and my younger sister and older brother. My father was a NYC fireman. After he retired from that job, we moved to Long Island, where he worked another 20 years for American Airlines. I attended the local community college and earned an associate degree in mathematics, then graduated with a teaching degree from SUNY at Stony Brook. My parents always advised me to get a job that I enjoyed doing, and so I did. As soon as I had the chance, though, I moved back into NYC and have lived there for the last 30 years.

What blessings or challenges do you experience from your faith?

I think there are many things I learned that are very much a part of who I am. The first is, "*Do to others as you would have them do to you.*" Certainly as CEO, I don't treat anyone differently regardless of whether they are senior staff, a maintenance worker or one of our clients. It's a message that is part of sanctuary, and one I hope filters through the agency by my actions.

I consider myself quite fortunate to be working at MercyFirst and have come to have a very strong appreciation and respect for what the Sisters of Mercy have done in building this ministry and so many others. Their dedication and commitment to their faith adds a unique and special flavor to the mission of MercyFirst. It infuses our work with a level of energy and mercy that truly strengthens what we do every day.

Do you have a favorite Bible story or Scripture passage?

"Tell me a fact and I'll learn. Tell me a truth and I'll believe. But tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever." I think we all learn best through stories, and the Bible is filled with them.

At a recent campus school graduation, I used the story of David and Goliath. I spoke of how every resident comes to us with a "story" on who they are, what they've done and what they may be capable of doing. I went on about how David was a musician and a "rapper" of his time, something many of our youth aspire to become. Even though he was just a boy, his confidence and faith grew over time and led him to do great things for his community and to change the story others told of him. David went from being a rapper to being a warrior, eventually becoming the king of Israel. My message is that with faith and confidence in oneself and a willingness to accept help from others, we can change who we are and the story others tell about us.

I'm still hoping to do something with the story of Jesus and the miracle of the five loaves of bread and two fish to see how we might multiply the funds we have, but that's for another day!

What have been your major professional endeavors aside from your commitment to MercyFirst?

I think I've helped improve every organization I've worked at. Part of this requires that I be an advocate

on behalf of those we serve, which I believe I do in a strong and respectful manner. The one particular initiative I am proud of is the scholarship program to help our foster youth go to college or vocational school through private funds raised from the community. MercyFirst is the third organization I've been involved with where a scholarship program was initiated with tremendous results for the youth and their future.

What in contemporary Catholicism encourages or distresses you? Is there anything you would change?

The main thing that distresses me is how the church has treated the sisters. One would think that given everything else the church had to address over the past 10-15 years and today that they would celebrate the work that the different communities continue to contribute to the life of the church and the people they serve.

What causes you sorrow?

Violence in all forms in the world

What causes you joy?

I love live jazz, working in my garden, riding my bike in the park and being on the beach listening to the ocean.

What gives you hope?

For me, the glass is always half full. As we say at MercyFirst, "Hope is unstoppable!"

How do you relax?

By all the things that give me joy as well as an ice cold beer on a warm day at a Yankees game as they pound any team.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, narrates *Stories of Forgiveness*, a book about people whose experiences have caused them to consider the possibilities of extending or accepting forgiveness. The audiobook, renamed *Forgiveness: Stories of Redemption*, is available from Now You Know Media.]

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