

Project CREATE

A CENTER TO RE-INVOLVE A TOTAL ENVIRONMENT



By Frank Fanelli
Photos by Bro. Octavio Duran, OFM

In 1967 Father Finian Kerwin, OFM, then Provincial of Holy Name Province told a group of friars including Father Benedict Taylor, OFM "Go and see what the people need" in Harlem.

Instead of being assigned to another friary, these friars, including Fr. Benedict, lived in apartments within the community where their main objective was to assess a new ministry to directly serve the people. During the time of their move, the Second Vatican Council's documents inspired both religious communities and clergy to reevaluate their commitment to serving the people of God and spreading the Good News of the Gospel.

The move to Harlem wasn't an easy transition. The area was rife with drugs and crime, and many avoided the area for good reason. In the early 1970s, the area was a

haven for heroin, and it was made infamous by the leader of The Council, an African-American criminal organization based in Harlem, which controlled the heroin trade there.

Fr. Benedict relates that he and the others were somewhat apprehensive about moving there and when they arrived, the community besieged them for handouts.

New opportunities for people Upper left People wait for the Food Pantry to be open Jacques Nir Clinical Director at CREATE takes the opportunity to catch up with a client Facing page The Food Pantry distributed turkeys the day before Thanksgiving



"They thought we were an easy mark," the friar recalled. Within the inner city in the late 1960s, lack of employment, urban blight and crime led to a number of problems for young males. Despite that, not all of those were substance abusers or were suffering from mental illness -- some were just trying to survive against the odds through education and a positive career path. It was on those same rough and tumble streets that in 1970 the Franciscans of Holy Name Province established CREATE as a Center to Re-involve A Total Environment.

"No matter how rugged these people looked and whatever they

went through, they could create a new lifestyle -- through employment or going to school or learning a new trade," Fr. Benedict said.

CREATE had humble beginnings -- a storefront on West 112th Street, which was once used as a shooting gallery for heroin addicts.

The storefront served as a clinic for assisting those with substance abuse problems and/or mental health issues. A house around the corner served as a residence for those who were homeless or who needed a 24/7 support program to wean them from their chemical dependency issues.

"There wasn't much in the immediate community. There was no



place for this kind of treatment in Central Harlem," Fr. Benedict recalled. "People were afraid of this area, but I was convinced that this was something that we could be involved with."

From the beginning Fr. Benedict had an ace up the sleeve of his habit: Ralph Perez, who has served as the executive director and CEO, since 1992. Coming from the Alfred E. Smith Projects in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge, he knew what it was to be disadvantaged, and in his early teens he had a minor scrape with the law. In a way it turned out to be grace in disguise

Life of service to the poor From left to right: founders Ralph Perez and Fr. Benedict Taylor, OFM. "We believe in the person, we care for them, they simply are not a number, not a statistic."

because his caring youth counselor introduced Perez to Father Firmin Rankin, OFM, hoping he would make something better of himself. Fr. Firmin then introduced him to Fr. Benedict to help with his work at the Franciscan bookstore on West 31st Street.

Perez came to love the association with the friars and continued to help Fr. Benedict up until the time he entered Bard College. When he graduated in 1973, he thought of entering law school, but was also interested in helping CREATE grow. "I grew up on the Lower East Side where there was a drug epidemic, — heroin," Perez said. "We needed a place to help in doing our mission of getting people to detox."

With a demand so great, it wasn't long before CREATE had expanded

to a 10,000-square-foot facility. This served as the outpatient clinic for the clients, before a fire in 1985 gutted it completely and forced CREATE to go back to serving their clients from storefronts. The urban blight of the 1970s helped the project in a way. The current clinic/administrative building at 73 Lenox Ave., had been abandoned and the city sold it to CREATE for \$1. That's when Ralph Perez, with his master's degree in architecture, supervised the complete renovation

of the new building.

In time, the building that housed the clinic and administration was joined to a residence for young women and mothers with substance abuse issues. In addition, residence centers for young male adults were also inaugurated.

Besides the young male adults that were the core group served by CREATE, seniors who needed basic nutrition or some minimal care, started to show up. In 1979, the growing demand turned into a senior day care center including a food pantry program to serve those who needed essential groceries.

The medically supervised outpatient clinic can provide men and women ages 18 and over with a variety of programs. They focus on medical and psychological issues,

medical evaluations, vocational counseling, job placement, basic computer skills, parole/probation status, mental illness, chemical abuse, anger management, and domestic violence. There's also a drug education/prevention program for adolescents.

They incorporate medical evaluations, counseling and peer support, vocational guidance and placement, 12-step programs, relapse prevention training and lifestyle direction.

"It's a spiritual program and compassion is important," Fr. Benedict said. "The framework was the 12-steps of AA and also the spirituality comes through because we believe that change is possible."

A little north of that residence is the CREATE Young Adult Center on West 128th St. The young men in residence can live in a home-like transitional program that's a "bridge between the street/shelter/foster care and independent living" and receive counseling in social service, substance abuse vocation education, and housing guidance and placement. The idea is to make them ready for independent living.

Post program housing can be a daunting challenge after the average 6- to 9-month stay in the residential programs. There are a variety of reasons: substandard wages, high rents or arrest records for even minor offenses that can make them ineligible for public housing. To deal with that problem, CREATE offers permanent supportive housing which includes rental subsidy housing and other supportive services.



"We needed a place to help in doing our mission of getting people to detox."



Committed to meeting their needs CREATE helps those afflicted with the disease of chemical dependence, and addresses the problems which may accompany this illness with the respect that each person deserves.

The scope and quality of all this caregiving obviously requires a completely professional staff and Fr. Benedict and Perez have worked hard at making sure all those working at OREATE meet the necessary criteria, especially now with all the regulations required to operate a facility like this. There is one other very necessary qualification besides all the letters after a name: compassion.

From the beginning of CREATE it



was a key ingredient. That was a product of the Franciscan charism and spirit Fr. Benedict instilled and maintained right from the very beginning. Perez reinforced that perspective: "We believe in the person, we care for them, they simply are not a number, not a statistic. We're here to help you."

To that extent CREATE provides a 2-track intensive training program for the staff. One track concentrates on the process necessary to instruct the clients to follow and adhere to regulations and documentation. Equally, or perhaps more important, is the training for human caring. In the beginning many of the authori-

ties thought that CREATE was throwing its effort and money down the toilet, that they were being far too lenient. As Fr. Benedict related: "It's recognized now that compassion is the main ingredient."

When Fr. Benedict first started CREATE, intake was a fairly simple process, but as time elapsed, New York City began to create more and more complex regulations and more agencies to deal with the abundant poverty issues in the city. Now the NYC Department of Homeless Services controls much of the intake. It means that instead of the very local client population, clients from as far away as western New York State can benefit from the various programs. But the main "catchment area" as it's called, remains central Harlem.

There are now many organizations, small and large, providing services like CREATE and funding has become the main issue that has led to the consolidation of some groups into much larger ones. CREATE remains fortunate in that the Dept. of Homeless Services is impressed with their success in that specialty group of young males. That success leads to a full house all the time and if there's no room for a needy client, CREATE will treat them through the outpatient clinic and arrange interim housing.

"I grew up in New York and sixty percent of my friends are either dead or in jail, so to me it has that emotional cord where I know what these people are going through," said Jacques Nir, clinical director at CREATE. "We could lead these

people to water, but we can't make them drink."

Help is always needed and it's a constant requirement to seek funding. Through the years the Franciscans of Holy Name Province have always helped either individually or through the auspices of the Province. While the fiscal requirements of CREATE are now well beyond the Province's resources it still helps out through its Benevolence Fund.

Years ago, Father Salvatore Fink, OFM, then Director of St. Anthony's Guild, used his buoyant personality to get truckloads of clothing from the Haband stores. Years later, Father Mychal Judge, OFM, then Chaplain of the NYC Fire Department, would come with food and other items collected from the firefighters before distributing them to clients. After Fr. Mychal died on 9/11, his successor, Father Chris Keenan, OFM continued the tradition.

Father Paul Lostritto, OFM, Executive Director of Franciscan Bread for the Poor and its ministries, helps supply the food pantry at CREATE.

It remains a hard road to follow with continuing challenges and disappearing resources. Both Fr. Ben and Perez will continue to lead this very vital apostolate despite the mountain of obstacles.

"We believe change is possible," Fr. Benedict said. "CREATE is like a new creation, that each person can become something, no matter what it seems to be now." ■



HELPING OTHERS WITH COMPASSION AND EMPATHY

By John Zawadzinski

Philip Miller can directly relate to the clients he serves at CREATE, because more than 12 years ago, he was in their shoes.

As a young man, Miller turned to drugs after not properly processing or accepting the passing of his grandmother. Having been raised by aunts who weren't too much older than he was at the time, Miller was left without the proper guidance or positive male role models to process the trauma that is associated with the passing of a loved one.

"My uncles did and sold drugs, so I emulated them," said Miller, who serves as residential director at CREATE. "I didn't know I had a fractured personality or a mind-set that would lead me to addiction only because I didn't feel good about myself."

Having run the Harlem streets searching for a way out from his pain, Miller turned to drugs and with that, a life of crime that included selling drugs, trespassing and other offenses. After having some "pit stops" with sobriety and detox, Miller had a revelation one day while talking to some of the older addicts who had been using drugs longer than he had.

"When I was in these places – these drug dens and on these corners – they would tell me that I didn't belong in this type of environment," Miller recalled. "They told me, 'You should do something for yourself.'"

Dedication to the job Philip Miller takes time out from his office to talk to a resident at Project CREATE.

In the late 1990s, that something was to enter CREATE, whose mission is to promote the physical, psychological, social and spiritual well-being of the community they serve through the provision of sensitive, caring community-based services that empower the individual. Through health resources, social services, education, employment and housing services, clients are able to rebuild their lives in a caring environment and for the first time in his life, Miller gave his sobriety a real chance – something that he wasn't ready to accept and surrender to.

Having been transitioned from a life on the streets, Miller said his first 30 days in CREATE was rather difficult.

With no prior responsibilities and no daily structure except getting high, eventually he found the regimented lifestyle and counselors helpful towards his early recovery.

"One day I just decided I just wanted to do better for my life and keep moving forward," he said. "It had nothing to do with me – it was good guidance."

In addition to group and individual therapy, Miller attended anger management classes and after his first 30 days, he was able to get a weekend pass to go back into the community for a few hours. He would use that time away from CREATE to rebuild the relationship he had with his sister – who he would only check in with from time to time to let her know he was "still alive," when he was still out there using.

It was also mandatory for Miller to

also develop a social sober network of people he could rely on – a stark contrast from those he used to get high with prior to entering CREATE.

With a lot of personal growth, Miller was encouraged by one of his CREATE counselors to continue with his education, where he earned his CASAC (credentialed alcoholism and substance abuse counselor) credentials, before landing a job as a counselor at Odyssey House in Harlem, not too far from some of the places where he used to get high. Years later, Miller returned to CREATE, but this time as a residential director where he now serves close to 50 clients ranging in age from 20-65.

It is at CREATE, Miller stresses the important themes he learned so many years ago as a client that included anger management, coping skills and how to "respond to issues and not to react to them," pointing out that the issues "will always be there," no matter how long one has in sobriety.

He also points out that once even being in recovery, doesn't make him a great counselor. It's the dedication to the job and the motivation to teach clients the importance of the life-changing process is what's really important.

"I enjoy what I do and it doesn't feel like work," Miller said. "It's what I do and I know for a fact I can't see myself doing anything else. God has put me in a position to help others and not because of my past, but because I have the compassion and the empathy to do this." ■