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# CHARITIES<sup>IN</sup>ACTION

Catholic Charities, *Diocese of Allentown*

Spring 2019 Edition

## Immigration Staff Volunteers At Border

*Jennifer Clerici, Immigration Program Supervisor, and Jennifer Zurek, Immigration Caseworker, with a combined 30 years with Catholic Charities, share a passion for their work.*

They help clients with Family Reunification - the process of bringing separated family members to the United States and establishing permanent residency in the U.S. for those that are already here. Both Jennifers provide representation at the United States Citizenship Service Office in Philadelphia and Clerici provides representation to asylum applicants at the Immigration Court in Philadelphia. They offer referrals to reputable attorneys for cases in criminal immigration removal proceedings; naturalization assistance to clients preparing to become U.S. citizens; and assistance with filing and screening eligible clients who face losing their Deferred Action for Childhood Status and Temporary Protected Status.

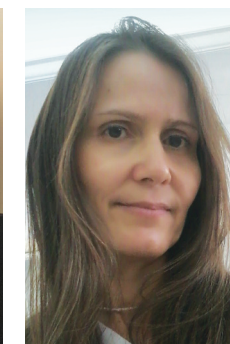
Last September Clerici and Zurek were awarded a stipend by the Catholic Legal Immigration Network to travel to the U.S./Mexico border to volunteer by preparing migrants to present themselves to Customs and Border Protection (CBP). While in Tijuana, Mexico, they prepared migrants for their credible fear interviews and also worked at the Otay Mesa Detention Center in San Diego, CA preparing detainees' asylum applications.

Upon their arrival to the office in Tijuana, their host agency Al Otro Lado (The Other Side) provided intake forms and a list of individuals with whom to meet. The stories presented to them were difficult to hear: children who watched their parents being murdered by violent gangs and cartels; wives who saw their spouses gunned down while holding their babies. Often, migrants have family members who are willing to sponsor them in the

United States but they face difficulty contacting them because they often have to abandon their cell phones during their journey to avoid having their whereabouts tracked by cartels and gangs.



Jennifer Clerici



Jennifer Zurek

Clerici and Zurek worked each 12-hour day in a different place. They struggled to meet with detainees at Otay Mesa Detention Center, facing great difficulty entering the facility. Their credentials from the Department of Justice were questioned by guards and required a lengthy verification process. On one occasion, they were forbidden from entering with their laptops, which held crucial notes and information.

*"This trip gave me a perspective into how difficult detention facilities make it for detainees to get proper legal assistance," said Zurek.*

Clerici and Zurek also visited a shelter housing migrants who had not yet attempted to present themselves before CBP. The conditions inside were harsh. The floor was cluttered with mattresses and mothers laying on them with their children, flies everywhere.

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Our sincerest thanks to the lively group of volunteers from C & S Wholesale who helped clean and organize the Chew Street Community Center!



Thanks to the enthusiastic volunteer team from Big Lots, the Lehigh/Northampton county food pantry has been totally transformed!

Outside of Otay Mesa Detention Facility facing Mexico





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Lehigh/Northampton  
Counties

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# Annual Gala Breaks Fundraising and Attendance Records



Left to right: Evelyn Carfagno, Msgr. Smith, Anthony Carfagno, Dr. Linda Lapos, Paul Wirth



Bishop Schlert congratulates the honorees.



Auctions and live appeals helped boost the FUN-draising!

The 12th annual Catholic Charities Gala, attended by 465 people including Bishop Alfred A. Schlert, honored Reverend Monsignor Joseph P.T. Smith and John & Alice Freeh, all long-time champions for the poor.

Despite Mother Nature delivering a snow storm which forced a last minute date change from March 3 to March 8, the Gala raised more than \$265,000 – the most ever in the event’s history.

This year’s chairpersons were Anthony and Evelyn Carfagno who oversaw the committee of Paul Acampora, Lina Barbieri, Von and Jane George, Patty and Paul Huck, Sister Janice Marie Johnson, Lori Mergel, Rob Nicolella and Julie Scheck.

The annual Gala is a primary source of funds for Catholic Charities. If you are interested in becoming a sponsor, advertiser or attendee of Gala 2020 – please contact Julie Scheck, Advancement Director, at 610-871-5200, ext. 2216; or [jscheck@allentowndiocese.org](mailto:jscheck@allentowndiocese.org).

Please read more about the Gala at [www.catholiccharityad.org](http://www.catholiccharityad.org).



Front of El Otro Lado’s office building

# Meet Catholic Charities Interim Executive Director – Rob Nicolella

Rob Nicolella has spent nearly his entire career working with various homeless shelters, mental health services and county government agencies where he administered grants and evaluated non-profit agencies in assisting the homeless and low-income households.

Prior to being named Interim Executive Director in December, Nicolella served as Program Administrator for Catholic Charities. Originally hired as the agency’s Administrator of its Lehigh/ Northampton counties office, he slowly took on responsibilities at each of the agency service offices, supervising staff and connecting with various parishes and community members. He has worked for Catholic Charities for the past 19 years.

According to Nicolella, “Catholic Charities is unique in that it works with the community and forgotten families from this economy, while also supporting the needs of our parishes with parishioners who might need additional assistance.”

“What keeps me going is the interaction between staff and families in need. When those professional communications happen and families get the help they need and feel supported by Catholic Charities, then it’s a win – win. The family supports are strengthened and staff feels a sense of pride in their work,” he said.

Nicolella earned his Bachelor of Science degree in Education from the University of Dayton. He also holds a Masters in Social Work from Temple University.

Born in Schenectady, New York, Rob has lived in Pennsylvania since 1995.



Rob Nicolella

# Veterans Services Program Offers the Greatest Gift: Compassion



Gary (Rob) Laubenheimer

Support Services caseworker, Gary (Rob) Laubenheimer.

“Jennifer,” a veteran suffering with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), turned to Catholic Charities during a time of personal mental health and housing crises. PTSD was new to Jennifer and caused her to feel alone, anxious, depressed, irritable – all classic symptoms of PTSD.

Jennifer, referred to Catholic Charities by the VA Homeless Outreach program, met with Veterans

listened patiently. He offered Jennifer examples of how and why he understood so well and shared similar stories from his past. Jennifer appreciated finally talking to someone who truly understood where she was coming from and what she was going through. Rob told Jennifer about the PTSD inpatient program through the Veterans Administration (VA), explaining the details.

Jennifer replied in relief that this program could be just what she needed to prevent her from harming herself. Rob immediately contacted the Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center and was referred to the Veterans Crisis Line for assistance with the mental health emergency. After speaking with the Crisis Line representative, Jennifer knew she needed to go to the VA Medical Center. Through her tears, Jennifer thanked Rob who could feel her sense of hope.

After four weeks, Rob followed up with Jennifer, who had been transferred to the Coatesville, PA VA Medical Center for their PTSD program. She had been through the facility’s two-week program and was now living with a friend and feeling much better.

Sometimes financial assistance is not what a client needs. Sometimes, it’s a caring heart, genuine concern, and a compassionate ear when no one else will listen.

*Please join us in our prayers for Jennifer’s continued healing.*

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One-by-one, they met with prospective asylees to prepare them for what they will face upon crossing the border. Of all the stories they heard, one stands out: a single mother of three who fled their home due to gang violence. Initially, the mother refused to speak and the children tried to answer questions for her. When she was eventually persuaded to speak, what she said was tragic - that she rarely speaks because she holds in her emotions to be able to “keep going” and get her children to safety. This family had seen all of their male family members murdered in front of them.

During their time in Mexico and at the Otay Mesa Detention Center, they encountered women and children fleeing from Southern Mexico, Haiti, Ethiopia, India, Eritrea, South America, Central America desperately seeking shelters or rented rooms.

According to Clerici, “Seeing the fear on their faces as they expressed the uncertainty of their future was heartbreaking. Hearing the accounts of what they had already endured was unimaginable.”

*Please join us in praying for the safety of these migrants.*