



*Meet the New Executive Director*

## A Conversation with Jeanne Geraci



Jeanne Geraci began serving as Executive Director of the Benedict Center in August, 2011. She recently met with the newsletter editor to reflect on her experiences and vision for the agency.

**Jeanne, tell me about the work you did prior to coming to the Benedict Center.**

**JG:** I had worked in the non-profit sector for 13 years before coming to the Benedict Center. Most recently, I served as the Associate Director of an immigrant rights group called Voces de la Frontera. Before that, I worked on a variety of issues, from mental health to job creation to safe neighborhoods. I have worked in neighborhoods in Milwaukee's north and south sides. My roots are in community organizing.

**What interested you in working for the Benedict Center?**

**JG:** When I worked as a neighborhood organizer, reducing crime was a main goal; however, I felt like our tactics were sometimes just pushing the problem around instead of solving it at the root level. If we closed down a drug house on one block, it did not really stop the drug dealing or the drug use—it just re-located it. That's why I appreciate the Benedict Center's commitment to approaching the root causes of crime and injustice, a strategy so critical to creating long-term solutions.

**What has most surprised or challenged you thus far in your experience as Executive Director?**

**JG:** This is not so much a surprise as an affirmation that the Benedict Center has an amazing story of countless

individuals who are dedicated to justice and have collectively made our mission a reality. Our mission moves forward with the support and engagement of an interconnected web of community members, donors and volunteers, as well as the board, staff and program participants. I am grateful to all of those individuals and organizations for providing their ongoing support and expertise and for building a strong, sustainable future for the agency.

**What is your vision for moving forward?**

**JG:** I believe that the unprecedented level of incarceration of people in Wisconsin and in the country is one of the most pressing social issues of our day, but it does not receive the attention it deserves.

I firmly believe that the Benedict Center offers an important part of the solution: to provide treatment alternatives to incarceration that are more effective, humane, and cost far less than imprisonment. This solution not only saves money, but it helps individuals, families and communities to be healthier and safer.

My goal is to continue our leadership in a broader community response to expand meaningful alternatives to incarceration within the criminal justice system. The Benedict Center will do that by continuing to offer programs that treat participants with dignity and respect, as well as by demonstrating proven outcomes.

In order to accomplish this vision, the Benedict Center is completing a transition process where we have been assessing challenges and opportunities and making strategic decisions on how to continue building a strong and healthy organization.

A fundamental part of this process, of course, are our volunteers and individual supporters, who are the sustaining force of the Benedict Center. As I am still learning the full story of the Benedict Center, I invite supporters to contact me to share their stories about the organization as well. I also wish to thank everyone for their continued support as we work together to create a more just system and provide meaningful ways for men and women to transform their lives.

# Restorative Community Service is a Win-Win Approach

Community Service offers men and women in conflict with the law to be accountable and give back.



For the last five years, the Restorative Community Service Program at the Milwaukee County Day Reporting Center has been providing local agencies with volunteer service, while at the same time giving men and women the opportunity to grow and give back to the community.

Christopher, a program participant, discovered that he enjoys helping others. “I never knew that working for the community could ever feel so good. When I help feed somebody it helps feed my soul.”

One of the organizations the Benedict Center has partnered with is the Salvation Army West Corps Emergency Food Pantry. Each month, the organization serves around 1,300 families in need. According to pantry manager Donna Khanthavong, “It is very difficult to find volunteers for the unloading and stocking. If the Benedict Center weren’t here to help, it would be so hard.”

The appreciation is mutual. The clients are “really well mannered. Some of them really want to get a second chance. We have a lot of guys who continue to volunteer after the program. Volunteering is job experience too, and I often give them my business card for a reference,” said Khanthavong.

The Salvation Army West Corps Emergency Pantry is just one of almost 20 active sites visited by the Benedict Center’s Restorative Community Service Program. In 2011, program participants provided over 2,700 hours of community service to help some of Milwaukee’s most vulnerable populations.

## 11 X 15: So Much More Than the Size of Prison Cell

The Benedict Center joins in a partnership with WISDOM, to reduce prison rates.

WISDOM, a network of congregation-based community organizations dedicated to social justice, recently initiated its statewide *11X15 Campaign for Safer, Healthier Communities*. Supporters aim to reduce the number of incarcerated persons in Wisconsin by half, or approximately 11,000 inmates, by the year 2015.

One of the speakers at the campaign’s kick-off was the Reverend Willie E. Brisco, president of the Milwaukee Inner-city Congregations Allied for Hope. According to Brisco, “Far too many of our young men are in jail for non-violent crimes, offenses that they could get treatment for instead of prison. We’re going to put common sense on the front burner. We’re going to make sure that the men and women who need treatment get it so they can come back to the community as whole citizens and we’re going to make sure our state officials and public officials know how we feel about this.”

We couldn’t agree more, Reverend Brisco. The Benedict Center is proud to participate in this justice campaign.



Friends of the Benedict Center, Sister Mentors and staff join MICA’s press conference to launch the 11x15 Campaign.



## Peer Mentors Critical to the Success of the Sisters Project

In the Sisters Project, a pro-active partnership to address prostitution, the Benedict Center encourages women to mentor others and help them leave the violence of the streets.



The Benedict Center is proud to have Genene Williams and Shavon Pope as our Sister Mentors. “They are amazing women,” comments Donna Hietpas, Women’s Harm Reduction Program Director. Graduates of the Women’s Program, Genene and Shavon now work for the Sisters Project. They are dedicated to conducting street outreach to help other women develop more safe and satisfying lives. Genene reports, “The work gives me a chance to give back what was given to me – HOPE. There was a time when I gave up and people at the Benedict Center pulled me through. Now I want to be that someone to pull someone else through.”

Women involved in street prostitution confront multiple barriers that make it extremely difficult to exit from the streets. Genene and Shavon have experienced and overcome similar obstacles. They now use their experiences to offer inspiration and proof that change can and does happen. Yet it is not easy nor necessarily quick work. They must patiently develop trust with the women they encounter doing street outreach. That trust then can grow into a relationship in which Genene and

Shavon invite the women to a drop-in center, where they discover a safe, non-judgmental place to access necessary resources and counseling.

Street outreach is just one of the ways that the Benedict Center identifies women involved in street prostitution. In the Sisters Project, we work in collaboration with the 3<sup>rd</sup> District of the Milwaukee Police Department, the 3<sup>rd</sup> District Community Prosecutor, Reformation Lutheran Church, and various neighborhood and business groups. Women ticketed for prostitution through law enforcement “sweeps” in the Walnut Hill neighborhood now have the option to work with the Sisters Project in order to have their charges dropped.

By attending programming, women access counseling and other vital resources to help them build successful lives. As Milwaukee County Assistant District Attorney Christopher Ladwig recently described the partnership, “The first part is law enforcement and the second is offering women treatment and counseling to find alternative lifestyles. Instead of the cycle of arresting people, we want to resolve the problem using community partnerships” (*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 4/3/2012).

Thus far, 48% of the women referred to the Sisters Project by law enforcement have not only completed the required six-month commitment, but have also continued to participate in weekly support groups for over a year. The women report that the support they get from each other in the groups is critical to allow them to examine their priorities, uncover their strengths, and set a roadmap for change. These women, like Genene and Shavon before them, are on a journey not only to survive, but to thrive in the aftermath of adversity.



Benedict Center staff meet with 3<sup>rd</sup> District Police to discuss details of the Sisters Project.



135 W. Wells Street, Suite 700  
Milwaukee, WI 53203  
www.benedictcenter.org

Non-Profit Org.  
U.S. Postage  
**PAID**  
Milwaukee, WI  
Permit No. 956



*Thank you for your support and interest in justice. Please share this newsletter with friends and colleagues.*

## Wisconsin: Too Many Prisoners?

If you missed the recent 4<sup>th</sup> Street Forum on this topic, you can find a video of the discussion at: <http://www.4thstreetforum.org/>



Host Enrique Figueroa, Ph.D. facilitates this pertinent conversation.

## Friends of the Benedict Center to Host June 4<sup>th</sup> Luncheon

The Friends of the Benedict Center was founded in 1992 to provide financial and volunteer support to the Benedict Center.

We are grateful for their ongoing support and their tireless commitment to justice.

Please join the Friends at their upcoming Summer Luncheon.

Date: Monday, June 4, 2012  
Time: 11:30 – 1:00 pm  
Program: The Women Speak  
Location: Milwaukee Yacht Club  
Donation: \$35 per person

To RSVP, please contact Cathy Fink at (262) 827-0722 or [c.fink1029@sbcglobal.net](mailto:c.fink1029@sbcglobal.net).

**Rational Justice** is a publication of the Benedict Center  
Editor - Michele Wink