

FALL 2026

BLESSINGS

CATHOLIC
CHARITIES

CHERISHING THE DIVINE WITHIN ALL

THE NFL'S CHRISTIAN BENFORD SCORES BIG IN THE COMMUNITY

FOOTBALL FANS MAY BE MORE ACCUSTOMED TO SEEING CHRISTIAN BENFORD CARRYING A FOOTBALL THAN A CHILDREN'S STORY.

But the Randallstown native and Buffalo Bills cornerback did just that when he visited Villa Maria School (VMS) in April to read from his book, *Stylish Safari: The Adventures of Being You*.

On the field, Benford has established himself as one of the top cornerbacks in the NFL; off the field, he is a passionate philanthropist. He created his own nonprofit, 47 Hearts Foundation, with the mission to "uplift vulnerable individuals and families in the U.S. through innovative programs, strategic partnerships, and community-driven solutions."

Benford was involved in charitable outreach in Buffalo but wanted to make a meaningful impact closer to home. VMS emerged as the perfect partner for his philanthropy.



with VMS faculty and administrators to discuss how he can continue to build this relationship.

He's already made good on his plan to show up for VMS students—he made a surprise visit to speak at the 8th grade graduation in June and has pledged to provide financial support for VMS through the creation of "The Christian Benford 47 Hearts Family Scholarship Fund."

While it may not be every day that an NFL star walks into your classroom, Paul Norfolk, VMS's curriculum and data coordinator, says, "What struck me most about Mr. Benford's visit was how comfortable our students were around him. They obviously admired him as a role model for all he had accomplished, but they quickly just started asking questions and conversing with him."

Norfolk continues that it was clear Benford had set this time aside to be truly present for students, faculty and staff. "He spent a good part of a school day interacting with various groups of students, rather than rushing out to another commitment. This was a true show of support for the children of VMS."

“Growing up in Maryland, I know how much it means to have people in your corner,” says Benford.

"The students at Villa Maria deserve every bit of encouragement and support we can give them, and I plan to keep showing up for this community for years to come."

VMS is Catholic Charities' nonpublic therapeutic and special education lower and middle school located in Timonium. Benford spent a full day at VMS reading to students and, of course, playing football. The goal of the visit was to foster mentorship and confidence-building. He also met

Catholic Charities is grateful to benefit from other meaningful NFL partnerships, such as the Baltimore Ravens and the Ed Block Foundation.

As both football and back-to-school season kick-off this fall, Catholic Charities and VMS look forward to expanding this winning partnership.

DEAR FRIENDS,

Each fall brings a sense of possibility — children returning to school with new dreams, families settling into new routines, and communities looking ahead with hope.

Yet for many of our neighbors, this season also brings challenges beyond homework. From financial strain and food and housing insecurity to uncertainty about the future, those Catholic Charities serves often carry a heavy weight into a season of fresh starts.

But we believe every new beginning deserves hope. Rooted in our faith and guided by our mission, Catholic Charities brings that hope to life each day by serving the whole person. You can see this work at Sarah's House, where we provide essential housing assistance while addressing the issues underlying homelessness and helping families build more resilient futures.

We see this in Head Start, where we educate young people while creating opportunities for tomorrow's teachers. Deja Johnson graduated from our 90-hour child certification program and is now making a positive impact in one of our preschools.

Much of this work would not be possible without our valued partners. NFL cornerback Christian Benford engages with students at Villa Maria School, our therapeutic and special education school. His generous pledge to provide scholarship support will help this partnership grow.

At the Esperanza Center, we are expanding our long history of ESOL classes by partnering with parishes to train volunteers to deliver high-quality programs.

But none of this would be possible without our donors. Frank and Gayle Kelly, co-chairs of this year's Leadership Breakfast, said it best in this issue's Q&A: in giving, we receive. Giving becomes a blessing. We are fortunate to have volunteers and donors who put their faith into action and make every day a blessing.

Wishing you all the best as you enjoy the fall season. May this new season bring renewed hope and faith to you and your families.

With gratitude,



Dave

Dave Kinkopf,
Executive Director





EDUCATING THE EDUCATORS

DEJA JOHNSON, 24, ALWAYS KNEW SHE HAD A SPECIAL AFFINITY FOR CHILDREN.

Growing up among numerous cousins, she always seemed to gravitate toward them – and they toward her. When she graduated from high school, she was interested in a career in education, so her school counselor directed her to Grads2Careers. From there, she joined Catholic Charities' Level-Up/Head Start 90-hour child certification program.

She successfully graduated with her certification in spring 2022 and became a classroom aide at Catholic Charities' Head Start of Baltimore City. Since then, her quiet determination has helped her grow her teaching career. She's now an assistant teacher, has received her child development associate credential, and is actively working to become a lead teacher.

Johnson describes her preschool classroom at the George Washington location as a loving, joyful place. "I enjoy dancing with the kids, and I just love their energy—it's contagious," she says. "And I love that they see the energy I give to make each child

feel safe and loved. They see I am the teacher who lets them be themselves."

She says Catholic Charities has made her feel comfortable asking questions that help develop her as an educator. This was especially important when she first started in the classroom and was finding her footing.

"This program makes me feel so important and loved," she says.

"I feel wanted here and like everyone really wants me to grow." As a Christian, she also appreciates that there is a safe space in each day for prayer and for her to grow her relationship with God.

Johnson is not leaving the classroom any time soon, but she aspires to one day have her own daycare. "I look forward to continuing to serve children and families, leaving a lasting impact, and growing alongside the Catholic Charities family for many years to come."

WITH THE SCHOOL YEAR IN FULL SWING, IT'S HARD TO COMPREHEND WHAT IT WOULD BE LIKE TO FACE HOMELESSNESS WITH TWO SMALL CHILDREN.

SAFE HAVEN

Yet that is the experience of Asia Johnson and her partner, who were living in Annapolis with their now seven-year-old daughter when they both lost their jobs. It was a swift change of fortune, and the couple fell behind on their rent. They were evicted as Asia was expecting their second child. They stayed with family until their son was born and then went to a hotel. When a place opened at Sarah's House, Catholic Charities' emergency shelter in Anne Arundel County, they were grateful—but scared.

"We didn't have the experience of staying in a shelter," says Asia. "When you hear 'shelter' you think of a huge room with beds, but we were able to have our own room." During the year the family stayed at Sarah's House, they also accessed many wraparound services. Case managers helped them find a new dentist for their daughter, a primary care doctor for Asia, obtain food stamps, and organize their other benefits. There was therapy available on site as well as fun activities like game nights. As residents, they could

access personal care items like body wash, diapers, wipes and toothpaste as well as donated clothes, toys and shoes.

"We also became friends with other clients who then became part of our support," says Asia.

The couple stayed at Sarah's House until an apartment in the adjacent Project North Supportive Housing became available. They are living there now, at a temporary housing facility, while looking for employment. Asia explains that they are incredibly grateful to have access to what she describes as one of the best shelters available. Without access to emergency housing, she fears the family would have ended up outdoors.

"We're so thankful things worked out as they did and we didn't need to experience that part of homelessness," she says.



REGISTER NOW ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM: JOURNEY TO SOCIAL JUSTICE FROM STRANGER TO NEIGHBOR: AN IMMIGRATION CALL TO ACTION

October 21, 2026

6:30 – 8:30 p.m.

Church of the Nativity
20 E Ridgely Road
Timonium, MD 21093



Speaker:
Sister Norma Pimentel, MJ

Executive Director of Catholic Charities
of the Rio Grande Valley
and nationally-renowned
immigration advocate

English Class in a Parish Near You

Educational programs are at the heart of Esperanza Center's mission.

Over time, adult ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes have evolved to meet the needs of the community. A 2018 fire at the center followed by the COVID-19 pandemic saw courses change from large classes to smaller, more intimate groups. Now, Catholic Charities is looking to expand its programs into the wider community through parish partnerships.

What remains the same is a commitment to high-quality ESOL programs taught by trained volunteers. Diana Siemer, manager of educational services at the center, explains that you need more than a grasp of the English language to be an effective ESOL teacher. Not only do Catholic Charities volunteers give as much as five hours a week for 30 weeks a year to teaching at the center, they also pay out-of-pocket for a professional ESOL tutoring certification course. The results speak for themselves.

"Data shows increased language progress through quantitative assessments," says Siemer. Perhaps even more important than test scores, "qualitative, self-reported data shows our students are more comfortable using English in the community."

Learning English is an essential skill for helping immigrants succeed in their new home. Siemer notes that students come from diverse



backgrounds not only in terms of country of origin but also level of education. So, while a student may not know how to read or write in their native language, through Catholic Charities' ESOL classes they learn those skills in English, opening the door to new opportunities.

Now, the center is looking to expand its ESOL reach by partnering with parishes to help them develop their own effective, all-volunteer ESOL programs.

"I have always had a dream of bringing professional classes out into churches where there are often big-hearted folks who want to provide language services but don't have the background to create a program," says Siemer. "Also, I know that immigrants are best served in the communities in which they live, and yet often don't know how or where to access support services, so church-based programming is perfect."

A pilot program kicked off in spring 2026 at the Sacred Heart Parish in Glyndon. However, as the program develops, rather than placing teachers in parishes—not a financially or physically sustainable model—the center will collaborate with parishes to help train their members as ESOL teachers and to then run their own program. "This model will allow the parish to harness the power of their own parishioners and to bridge cultural divides through teaching English," says Siemer.

Is your parish interested in learning about ESOL training? Contact Manny Hidalgo at mhidalgo@cc-md.org

GIVE ITEMS THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

In-kind donations help Catholic Charities of Baltimore meet everyday needs across our programs — from essential household items and clothing to supplies that support children, families, older adults and neighbors experiencing hardship. Use our guide to find the program you would like to support and view current wish-list needs. Use the QR code or visit cc-md.org/ways-to-give/in-kind-donations-guide/



Learn more and
reserve your
tickets at
cc-md.org/christmas



December 2, 2026 | 7 p.m.

Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption
of the Blessed Virgin Mary
409 Cathedral Street, Baltimore, MD 21201



KICK OFF THE CHRISTMAS SEASON BE PART OF THE MISSION

An evening of music at the Basilica can help put a meal on a neighbor's table.

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT



PNC Financial Services Group team members volunteered at our Baltimore City Head Start Harlem Park site, reading with children and leading hands-on activities tied to nature-based learning. Students explored donated birdhouses and bug hotels, adding an interactive element to the day. We are grateful for PNC's continued partnership and investment in our children and classrooms!

LEARN
HOW TO
VOLUNTEER



<https://cc-md.org/get-involved/volunteer/>

MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS MONTH:

Support Starts Here at VMBH

Did you know? Villa Maria Behavioral Health (VMBH), provides high-quality care that changes lives, focusing on treatment for mental health and substance use disorders.

- **Big reach:** VMBH is among the largest behavioral health providers in Maryland, offering care through eight clinics, virtual appointments and school-based programs.
- **Whole-person support:** Services include therapy, psychiatry, medication management, peer coaching, family care coordination, addiction counseling and treatment, and skill-building support.
- **Care that connects:** VMBH's diverse psychiatry team supports clients across several spoken languages and ASL, helping reduce barriers to care.
- **FY25 impact:** VMBH served 6,530 adults and children with behavioral health services.
- **Family-focused results:** Parent Child Interaction Therapy served more than 50 new families, and Family Care Coordination supported more than 220 families with improved school attendance and better access to care.
- **Access matters:** VMBH accepts Medicaid and Medicare.

**THANKS TO YOU, WE ARE
ABLE TO CONTINUE OUR
WORK IN THE COMMUNITY.**

Use your phone's camera to scan the QR code to donate **today** or visit cc-md.org/blessings



**CATHOLIC
CHARITIES**

CHERISHING THE DIVINE WITHIN ALL

Catholic Charities is Maryland's largest private provider of human services. Serving all, we provide innovative programming to accompany people on life's journey including assistance to those living in poverty, individuals with developmental disabilities, immigrants, older adults, families and children in crisis.

Catholic Charities
Communications Department
Telephone: 667-600-2000
Email: info@cc-md.org
Website: www.cc-md.org

A CONVERSATION WITH GAYLE AND FRANK KELLY III



**FRANK KELLY III IS THE CEO OF KELLY BENEFITS;
GAYLE OWNS GAYLE KELLY TRAVEL.
TOGETHER, THEY ARE CO-CHAIRS OF THE
2026 LEADERSHIP BREAKFAST.**

How did you first connect with Catholic Charities?

GAYLE: We worked with Catholic Charities in Baltimore to adopt two children from South Korea. But we've known of the great work Catholic Charities has done around our city and state and have always been encouraged by it.

FRANK: I grew up with three brothers and a foster sister. Our foster sister lived at Saint Vincent's and she'd come on weekends, and then through middle and high school, she lived with us full-time. Also, I've been attending the Leadership Breakfast for probably 15 years.

What do you value about Catholic Charities' work?

FRANK: We both really appreciate the commitment to serving those who oftentimes are on the fringes of society and can easily be overlooked. They may appear to be invisible, but they're not to God, and so we feel Catholic Charities is a vehicle that God uses to share the love and truth and blessing of his son Jesus Christ in practical ways.

What inspires you to give your time, talent, and treasure to Catholic Charities?

FRANK: We believe we've been blessed by God to be a blessing to others, that any resource that we have is really a gift from God—it's not ultimately ours. We want to be good stewards of the blessings and resources God's given to us. And one tangible way is to agree to step up and try to do a good job as co-chairs of this Leadership Breakfast.

What makes the Leadership Breakfast special?

GAYLE: It's a gathering of men and women who are like-minded, and it provides an opportunity for them to come together, encourage one another, build each other up, and get behind the great causes that Catholic Charities supports.

FRANK: It also creates an opportunity during the Christmas season to stop and reflect and see how God is working through one of the amazing Christian-based ministries in our community.

What would you say to others to encourage their support, not just of the Leadership Breakfast but of Catholic Charities, broadly?

GAYLE: We often say it's your time, talents, and treasure that are valuable. Those three T's are opportunities for people to step in. And once you're exposed to the success of the programs, you want to get behind it. That's what happened to us last year at the Leadership Breakfast when a gentleman stood up and shared his journey of hope and healing from the services that he received through Catholic Charities.

FRANK: There's a scripture in the gospel of Luke: Give, and it will be given to you. You don't give to get, but when you give, you get. It's the law of sowing and reaping. The Leadership Breakfast and other opportunities are a tangible way to invite people into God's work to be a part of something that's bigger than themselves.