

Matthew 25



February 2024

A journal on ministry and service to the margins in western Oregon

Catholic Charities

Once a refugee, now a social worker

It was the day a woolen coat signified communal welcome and a lifetime of hope.

Cing Sian Nem vividly remembers Christmas 2016. Her family had recently arrived in chilly Portland as refugees from a murderous junta in Myanmar. The family delighted in their new city, Christmas and liberty.

“Catholic Charities came and brought us clothing and toys,” recalls Cing, who was 15 at the time. “I remember they bought each member of my family special gifts. I got a really warm coat. I’ll never forget that moment.”

The woolen coat was like a sacrament of warmth and welcome that bestowed strength.

Seven years later, Cing is a University of Portland social work student with an internship at Catholic Charities of Oregon. One of her first jobs was to help carry out a Christmas gift distribution for new refugee families.

“I am giving back,” she says. “I used to be the one getting those gifts. Now I am helping and delivering them.”

When the family of nine first landed in Portland in 2016, they stayed in an apartment with one bathroom and three bedrooms. Then they entered a Catholic Charities matched savings program that helped them keep enough for a down payment on a five-bedroom house. They moved in 2021.

Cing attended De La Salle North Catholic High School. When it came time for college, she was attracted to the University of Portland

because of its Catholic identity.

Social work emerged as her field of study because of memories about Catholic Charities as well as the influence of Francis Kham. Kham, leader of the Zomi refugee community in Portland, serves on the Catholic Charities board.

“I want to be like him,” Cing said. “I want to help people who may not get the resources they are supposed to get. I want to inspire more young people especially in my community.”

Her experience as a refugee youth informs her social work. The memory still causes her to choke up.

“I tried to fit into groups. I tried to fit into the school,” she says. “I tried to be traditional. Every day is like you are fighting for your life. You are trying to fit in, you are trying to fit in because you started as an outsider, you are a refugee, you don’t speak English. I never seem to get over those feelings.”

Doubt haunts her at times. But on her best days, she remembers her warm coat and the protection and sense of belonging associated with it.



Cing Sian Nem, a graduate of De La Salle North Catholic High School and a University of Portland student, is an intern at Catholic Charities of Oregon. As a girl, she was a refugee served by the agency.



Cing’s family poses with their home, purchased in 2021 with money from a Catholic Charities matched savings program.

SEE THE VIDEO





Rabbi Michael Cahana and Natalie Wood meet Jan. 31 in Portland.

Leaders meet

Rabbi Michael Cahana of Congregation Beth Israel in Portland and Natalie Wood of Catholic Charities met for lunch Jan. 31. The two discussed the need to accompany the most vulnerable people in Oregon and planned for possible future collaboration. Rabbi Cahana, a prominent faith and social leader, will deliver the annual Catholic Charities Tobin lecture on Sept. 12 at 7 p.m. He'll discuss the Jewish tradition of care for the poor.

Steadily admired

For the 6th year in a row, Catholic Charities of Oregon has been named one of the most admired



Natalie Wood holds recognition.

non-profits in Oregon.

The agency made the annual list after voting from local chief executives across all industries.

"It becomes clear that we operate best in Oregon as a cooperative community that includes non-profits, industry, finance and churches," said Natalie Wood, executive director of Catholic Charities. Wood added that she wants to share the recognition with Catholic Charities donors and staff. "We could do nothing without them," she said.

Workers braved cold to help at shelters

During January's deadly cold in Oregon, two Catholic Charities workers risked their safety to volunteer at area warming shelters.

Honor Hehn and Korin Kanzler traveled to the shelters in unprecedented slipperiness, braving falls in treacherous ice left by freezing rain.

Fifteen people died in the area. Broken wrists, elbows and hips surged in the state.

Rose Bak, chief program officer for Catholic Charities of Oregon, thanked the two members of the Housing Transitions team in a note to all staff of the 90-year-old nonprofit.

"Your willingness to brave the elements and travel in dangerous conditions to care for the most vulnerable in our community is a great gift," said Bak. "I know the folks who were able to come in and get warm and dry for a few hours appreciated your being there. It is not an overstatement to say your work saved lives this week."



About 100 people sheltered at Ascension Parish for five nights during severe cold, snow and ice in Portland.

Hehn is lead outreach case manager who served at the shelter at Imago Dei Church. Kanzler is a housing case manager who helped at Ascension Catholic Church.

Warming shelters can be tough places, where guests' trauma and suffering rise up quickly. Hehn and Kanzler witnessed untreated mental illness, respiratory sickness and many physical wounds and skin diseases.

DIY weatherization: Empowering residents

This winter, a DIY Weatherization Workshop took place at Catholic Charities of Oregon's Sacred Heart Villa, thanks to a collaborative effort between the Community Energy Project and the Energy Trust of Oregon, with support from Catholic Charities.

The event aimed to equip attendees with practical knowledge on energy efficiency, weatherization, and cost-effective strategies to reduce energy consumption.

Led by Sara Wallach from the Community Energy Project, the workshop provided insights into insulation, mold prevention, and techniques to lower energy bills.

The event garnered substantial interest from residents.

Jenny Mazzella, Housing Development Project Coordinator at Catholic Charities, said plans are underway to host similar workshops at other sites.



Have a story about Catholics reaching out to those on the margins? Contact Ed Langlois, Catholic Charities communications director, elanglois@ccoregon.org or 503-539-6333.



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