



## Living Wages Pays Off

by Cliff Hackett—DC/Metro MD Associate Editor

In the universe of IVC agencies, Living Wages is one of its bright stars. Like the heavenly bodies, it can be judged by origins, by direction, by longevity and by brilliance. Living Wages started with the conviction of Sister Betsy Hartson and some Sacred Heart colleagues in 1998 that homelessness was an urban problem to be solved and ending poverty was the key. Together with Bob Crittenden, a colleague at Catholic Charities where Sister Betsy and Bob both worked, they soon concluded that this meant bringing the poor up to basic educational levels for work, self-reliance and productive citizenship.

IVC joined this effort almost from the beginning. Eventually there were many IVC tutors helping bring Southeast and other DC residents to prepare for the General Equivalency Diploma (GED). In 2002 an External Diploma Program was added. Some of the original former IVC volunteers are still at Living Wages, setting a mark for longevity.

And for luminosity. Living Wages glows with the success of over 400 students who have earned a diploma. The program is a tribute to Sister Betsy and Bob Crittenden, the founding co-directors, and to their perseverance through the years of stress and success. Over the years, the many IVC volunteers became the top cheerleaders of Living Wages.

Since its founding, the mission of Living Wages has been tapered and refined. The GED preparation was in 2008 left to others. Earlier the agency expanded to include the External Diploma Program, now its main program. Open to all DC residents over age 25, the EDP is based on 65 specific tasks and five "books" where competence must be demonstrated. The program helps those with some work experience to bring up their skills over 6 to 24 months.

The IVC and former IVC volunteers bring special skills and experiences to the students who have their work evaluated by an assessor who can certify their work to Ballou High School which awards the diplomas. Ed Prendergast, a former IVC volunteer, was a stock broker trained to bring security to anxious investors. Today he is doing the same for equally anxious learners. Tony Carroll, a current IVC volunteer, was a successful engineer who brings math and analytical skills to basic education. "It is so gratifying to see the great variety of people in this program. Imagine grandmothers working hard alongside their kids and grandkids and all getting their high school diplomas!," Ed says.

Many entrants to the program must concentrate on the 9th grade level of remedial work. That mastered, they can go on through the high school curriculum. The goal is always the same: solve poverty through education. We're dealing with the basics here," Tony Carroll notes: "reading, writing, simple math, in a simple but disciplined way."

Students work at their own pace and schedule. There are no timed tests for the computer-based Curriculum. They must be able to attend at least 20 hours a week and pay modest enrollment and instructional fees.

Living Wages started modestly in the basement of a Section 8 housing unit. It then moved to a house at the St Thomas More parish in far SE.. Eventually, the program expanded to a second campus at nearby St. Teresa of Avila Community Center on V St SE. The direct IVC role has varied over 15 years. At one time, after IVC increased the fees paid by Living Wages (and other agencies), some of the tutors reacted by leaving IVC. They've stayed on as independent volunteers. Later, the IVC role resumed to the great satisfaction of both the Living Wages' leadership and the Ignatian support team.

Ed Prendergast, the former IVC veteran, and Tony Carroll, its newest recruit at Living Wages, share a fierce commitment to the program's mission: to help adult learners compete for jobs and become live-long learners and productive citizens through basic education.

In short, great ambitions, brilliantly executed, and still moving forward.

