



*Providing Help. Creating Hope.*

## **Catholic Charities Atlanta Family Enrichment Program**

After spending eighteen years in a refugee camp in Nepal, Pema\* and his wife Yangki\* arrived in Atlanta in June 2008. Prior to their immigration they had little or no voice in the basic necessities of life, such as where to live or what to eat, let alone the opportunity to step back and reflect on their lives together as a couple. Like most Bhutanese refugees, they were expelled from their country and had lived in camps in Nepal since they were teenagers. Now in the United States, Catholic Charities Atlanta arranged for Pema and Yangki to participate in a two-day "Healthy Marriages" training course.

During the workshop, Pema and Yangki opened up to share their thoughts, and began making decisions for themselves as individuals as well as their entire family. They realized that their refugee community (including fellow refugees as well as agency personnel) can provide a supportive environment. They also both began to realize a wider range of possibilities that lay before them, individually and as a couple, in their new life in the United States.

They received basic skills in communication and introduction to interacting with Americans in the workshop. These skills were invaluable in giving them the voice they needed to explain what they want to accomplish. Pema and Yangki felt a sense of freedom to give themselves permission to "Say it!" where previously they were limited to only receiving information.

Pema is interested in studying computers and business. He worked as a teacher in the refugee camp and is quick-witted with an amazingly complex English vocabulary. Yangki is much quieter and wants to study nursing. Over the course of the training session, she became more confident and aware of the opportunities available to her and her family.

Pema and Yangki have one beautiful preschool-aged daughter, who obviously brings great joy to their lives. She acts as a motivator to overcome the obstacles of acculturation to life in the U.S. The example of this young family shows how invaluable a simple training can be in its ability to give voice, opportunity and hope to refugees as they begin their new life.

If you would like more information or to provide a charitable gift for these projects, please visit [www.catholiccharitiesatlanta.org](http://www.catholiccharitiesatlanta.org).

*\*Names changed to protect privacy.*

*"... For I was...a stranger and you welcomed me." Matthew 25:35*



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Mothers generally want what is best for their children. However, when you are a refugee parent in a new country trying to learn the “ins and outs” of the American school system, providing the best can be a challenge.

Mrs. Nguyen\* approached Catholic Charities for assistance in helping her daughter, Qui\*, adapt to her new school environment within the Fulton County public school system and cope with learning difficulties which had been identified.

Catholic Charities Atlanta was able work with both the family and the school to identify special programs available for Qui through the creation of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Through the intervention of Catholic Charities, Mrs. Nguyen was able to understand the different services and options available for her daughter within the local school district.

Most importantly, Mrs. Nguyen began partnering with Qui’s teacher to develop a plan to help her succeed in school, “Thanks to Catholic Charities and the services provided, my daughter is doing much, much better in school.”

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## **Catholic Charities Atlanta Immigration Legal Services** *Just Imagine... "*

*To be alone...*

*To be alone and lost...*

*To be alone and lost in a foreign country...*

*To be alone, abandoned or abused, lost and in a foreign country...*

*And to be a CHILD."*

Karen\* is a 14 year old girl from El Salvador. Along with her stepfather, mother and new stepsister, the family was attempting to cross into the US without proper documentation. Her stepfather did not have enough money to pay a coyote (someone who helps people cross undetected into the U.S.) so he sold Karen to the coyote for safe passage for his wife and baby. Sadly, Karen was abused by the coyote for over a week before she escaped and was caught trying to cross the border alone.

The best thing that ever happened to her was being detained by Department of Homeland Security (DHS) because she went into an Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) foster care setting where she received counseling, medical treatment, and was assisted in locating an aunt who lives in Georgia. Karen was placed with her aunt, and Catholic Charities was contacted to continue the counseling. Catholic Charities' counseling services through Refugee Resettlement Services (MRS) contacted Immigration Legal Services to see if there wasn't something that could be done. Karen could not join her mother and stepfather who were now living without authorization in Texas, and there was no one to care for her back in El Salvador. We had an initial consultation with Karen, who is a bright, but shy girl, and determined that she would qualify for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status if we could get a Juvenile Court order from her county court.

Over the past eighteen months, we have seen Karen really bloom ... she has gone from a shattered, withdrawn little girl to a confident young woman who has hope. She is currently awaiting her final interview to obtain Legal Permanent Resident (LPR) status and no longer fears being returned to El Salvador or to her stepfather!

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*"See that you never despise one of these little ones. I assure you, their angels in heaven constantly behold my heavenly Father's face. . . . Just so, it is no part of your heavenly Father's plan that a single one of these little ones shall ever come to grief." Matthew 18: 10, 14*



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**Catholic Charities Atlanta Immigration Legal Services**  
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Juan\* is a 12 year old boy from Honduras. He had been living in the streets of Honduras after his mother died, and his abusive father abandoned him. Juan had been tortured by local gangs and fought every day to scrape together enough food to survive.

One day, Juan couldn't take it anymore, so he got on his bike and rode across Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico – right up to the U.S. border. After a month of travel, he managed to make it across the border undetected. He made his way to North Georgia to the house of a distant relative who took him in and sought out our services.

Juan is the kind of kid you hope for... when we tell him to call, he calls; when we tell him to study harder, he studies harder... he is amazing and about to graduate from high school and wants to attend college. Somehow, through the grace of God, he survived his past and has a bright future. He is just a few months away from his Legal Permanent Resident (LPR) card!

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Alberto's\* trip was long and arduous, but his own desperate medical needs and desire to be reunited with his father were stronger than any dangers along the road to safety. The journey over many days in the back of a truck, sleeping whenever possible, made it impossible to tell one day from the next. Finally, swimming across a river, climbing onto a sandy shore, Alberto found himself in a desert. Was he somewhere in Texas? Arizona? He did not really know. He remembers facing a U.S. immigration official shortly after setting foot on American soil. Alberto was still a child, just past his sixteenth birthday, holding on to hope in a new country.

The U.S. official offered Alberto water and bundled him into his van with immigrants already sitting on the metal benches. Alberto recalled that it was all quiet and amiable. He was booked into a detention facility. However, when they realized his young age, Alberto was transferred into the custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement, the Department of unaccompanied minors, to a home for children at Catholic Charities in Texas. He lived in the home with other children and was cared for by kind people. He had enough to eat, a bed to sleep in, clean clothes to wear, and attended school. After several months, Alberto's father was successfully located, and transportation was arranged for Alberto to be finally reunited with him.

The National Center for Immigrant & Refugee Children sent Alberto's name along with many others to Catholic Charities' Immigration Legal Services in Atlanta accepted the case and agreed to represent him - to assist him with the filing of his residency application.

While in a much better place, Alberto continued to have medical needs with a severely injured hand. Catholic Charities Atlanta was able to connect Alberto through a generous donor to have the necessary surgery to restore the full use of his hand. With great thanks to the Free Medical Clinic of Newberry County and the generosity of Plastic Surgeon Dr. Owen, Alberto is now able to practice his writing and exercises his hand daily. Having regained use of his hand enables Alberto to make his future dreams come true as he takes courses to become an automotive mechanic.

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## **Catholic Charities Atlanta Refugee Resettlement Services**

Mary\*, a single mother of three, arrived in Atlanta in March 2008. She arrived with her two sons, ages five and four, and her one year old daughter. Mary's husband remained behind in prison in Burma (Myanmar) with no definite release date. She and her family are Burmese Chin from Chin State, in the northwest of Burma, bordering India.

After her husband was arrested and imprisoned, a pregnant Mary traveled to Malaysia with her two young boys. They stayed in Malaysia for over eighteen months until she was able to come to the U.S. On the night she arrived, the airline lost one of her bags. In that bag was her high school diploma, her marriage certificate, and her husband's only belongings. It took the airline 3 months to return her bag.

Mary came with some health problems – moderate arthritis and some complications from her most recent pregnancy and delivery. She had access to very limited medical care in Malaysia. Catholic Charities rented her an apartment in a community where Mary could have interaction with other Burmese families. She formed fast friends.

Her caseworker also enrolled her into an English class not far from her home that was especially for mothers. The English class met four days per week, and complimentary childcare was provided on-site. In order to provide intensive job development, Catholic Charities also enrolled Mary into an early-self sufficiency program. Catholic Charities knew that with her medical and childcare issues, Mary may have difficulty finding immediate and steady employment. In addition, Catholic Charities helped Mary get the medical care she needed.

Mary soon began to feel much better, and her English improved. Her two sons were not yet old enough to begin school when Mary arrived, but we enrolled them in pre-K and kindergarten classes as soon as school began again. The family's program for early self-sufficiency ended in September, and we helped Mary enroll in TANF (the Temporary Aide for Needy Families government program). However, TANF payments would not fully pay Mary's rent, so Catholic Charities supplemented her rent and her basic bills for an additional three months. Through the TANF program, Mary received important childcare and transportation vouchers to allow her to seek full employment. After only three months in the program, she got a job at the DeKalb Farmer's Market. Mary is now completely self-sufficient and paying her own bills – only nine months after arrival.

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*“. . . The angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph with the command: 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you otherwise.'" Matthew 2: 13*



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## **Catholic Charities Atlanta Pregnancy, Parenting & Adoption**

Even during childhood, Latoya\* could not seem to catch a break. Her mom suffered from severe mental illness that frequently required hospitalization. Latoya and her siblings were bounced around through the foster care system. Being an older child, she was rarely an attractive prospect for potential adoptive parents. Too quickly, she aged out of foster care and was thrust into the world with little preparation for navigating her life – emotionally, mentally, or financially.

Without the tools and skills necessary for making good decisions, Latoya made a series of poor choices that left her in a dire situation. By the time Latoya came to Catholic Charities, she had already been parenting a young child for five years and was pregnant with a second. The father of her five year old tried to be a good dad. He tried to visit her now and then and might, on occasion, provide some childcare. But he could not or would not provide for her financially. The father of the baby was not involved at all and not particularly interested in Latoya even having this baby. Latoya had had a job, but between trying to get her daughter to and from daycare on time and trying to be there for her when she was sick, Latoya had too many absences and was released from her job.

With her circumstances and her family history of mental illness, Latoya quickly fell into a depression. With no income, she could no longer afford their apartment. It was getting difficult to put food on the table. She was scared to search for a job out of fear that she might have to miss too much or be later frequently again. She was also afraid of the prospect of being turned down for jobs due to her increasingly noticeable pregnancy. Who would hire her at this point? The depression crippled her to the point that she could not even think about possible solutions to her problems.

Latoya came to Catholic Charities with the idea that she would make a plan of adoption for her baby. As with many women considering adoption, it was not her first choice, but she believed there was no way she would be able to provide for a second child. Catholic Charities immediately began with counseling for Latoya. She was given the opportunity to talk not only about her adoption decision, but also the whole of her current and past life circumstances. Some of her depression began to lift, and this enabled her to see a way out of her crisis. She soon decided that adoption was not the right decision for her and was transferred into the Parent Talk program.

Once entered into Parent Talk, the Parenting Specialist began working with Latoya on tackling all of the obstacles that stood in the way of her creating a safe and stable living situation for both of her children. Chief among those concerns was helping Latoya to receive the mental

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health care she needed to better deal with her depression. Once on medication, Latoya began improving steadily. With a clearer mind, Latoya was able to take some steps in the right direction. She secured Section 8 and moved into a new apartment. She allowed her five year old to go on an extended visit with the child's father while she worked on getting settled in with her new infant. That respite allowed her to look for a job, find a daycare she trusted (and was flexible with work schedules), and enroll in school.

It wasn't easy at times. During her time working with Catholic Charities, Latoya's mom attempted suicide and was hospitalized. That event was an emotional blow to Latoya and set her back into crisis mode for a short time. She also experienced the normal disappointments and setbacks that every one faces when trying to find a job and make ends meet, all while caring for two young children.

However, things are looking up for Latoya. The father of her five year old has agreed to pay some child support. Latoya now has a job, and her two children are doing well in their new daycare. She is working toward her Associates degree in Health Administration and was able to get into school on a scholarship. At her last meeting with the Parenting Specialist, nearly a year after she began services, Latoya said she's not as fragile as she once was, she trusts people more, and she feels content. After a very tough start, Latoya is making the most of what she has to work with and is ensuring that her two daughters have a better, more secure life.

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## **Catholic Charities Atlanta Pregnancy, Parenting & Adoption**

What happens when a beautiful young college student finds herself with an unplanned pregnancy? This dilemma is faced by thousands of young women each year. Sadly, all too many make the choice to abort their unborn babies. Few are as determined to find a better alternative as the young woman you are about to meet.

Raised with Catholic values, aborting her newly-conceived child just wasn't an option that Terri\* and her boyfriend Josh\*, both students at the University of Georgia, were willing to consider. Yet, Terri, a self-described artist and Josh, an athlete, wanted their child to grow up in a home with parents ready in every way to take on the considerable challenges of raising a child.

Terri and Josh knew that adoption would be the best situation for them and their child. Yet, as Terri describes, "I had known about closed adoption and heard lots of horror stories about people trying to find their real parents. I didn't want that for my baby," she said. So, determined and hopeful, she began the process of finding the best possible solution for her, Josh and their baby.

Terri began immediately talking to her friends about her situation. She also talked with her doctor who recommended a faith-based adoption agency. Terri met with a counselor from an agency and recalls feeling pressured to make decisions without having all her questions answered. "I knew it just wasn't right," she said. Trusting her developing 'mother's instinct' Terri mustered her naturally positive attitude and renewed her determination to continue her search for the adoption agency right for her.

She soon discovered she had a friend who had experienced the open adoption process through Catholic Charities. "So, I got my friend to help me," Terri says. And, soon she was introduced to Christy, an adoption specialist from Catholic Charities. Terri remembers the connection between the two of them to be almost immediate. Recalling their first meeting, Terri says, "She had a lot in common with me. Christy came to visit me right away - I didn't have to go to an office somewhere. And, she brought a list and was ready to discuss a lot of things that I hadn't thought about," she continues.

Terri was comforted by the care and personalized attention she received from her Catholic Charities counselor. "Lack of information breeds fear," says Terri. "Christy helped me to keep the goal - creating the best possible home for my child - in front of me."

Catholic Charities also helped Terri and Josh handle the opposition to their decision they received from family and friends. They equipped them with the tools and resources they needed to help those close to them understand and support their decision.

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Terri is also thankful for the relationship counseling and support they received from Catholic Charities. "Josh and I are still together," says Terri. "Everyone at Catholic Charities was so patient with us, and we've learned to be patient with each other."

Today, Terri and Josh's son is thriving in a home they feel is perfect for him. They enjoy a close relationship with the child's adoptive parents, and both couples have made a commitment to nurturing their child-centered relationship by keeping the lines of communication open and staying focused on the child's well-being.

Asked about her advice to other young women facing an unplanned pregnancy, Terri says, "Keep things in perspective. Stay positive and look for help." "You can't have too many people helping you when you face life's big challenges," says Terri.

Mother always knows best.

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The literal definition of adoption is "...to take into one's family through legal means and raise as one's own child". The definition for us is: "...a child to love and call our own, borrowed from God, that fills our heart with joy." It might not be the proper definition to use, but for all accounts, we think it is well suited for our experience. Our names are Roberta\* and Jim\* Hammer, and we began our adoption journey in March of 2005.

That's when we found out that having a biological child was not in God's plan for us and without much debate, we decided that adoption was what God wanted us to do. We accepted the challenge of finding the proper agency to fulfill our dreams. After some research and help from other resources in Hall County, we decided that Catholic Charities was the best option for us. We liked their program, which supports expecting mothers to parent their children and ensure that babies are safely born. Or, if necessary, helps the birth parents make an adoption plan. We also liked their concept of an "Open Adoption." Most people do not understand open adoption and what it means. It is not co-parenting or sharing custody. It is letting the child know who his/her birth parents are, telling the child the birth parents' story and maintaining contact between the birth parents and adoptive parents after placement.

After collecting the necessary adoption information, we began the process of becoming available adoptive parents. Although the interviews, testing, and evaluations were extensive, we knew that it would be rewarding and that three months of questioning and home studies were well worth the lifetime of being parents. We prepared our profile (basically a scrapbook of us) which assists the birth parents when looking for the right adoptive parents.

In September 2005, we were officially on the waiting list and our profile became available for viewing. This new journey began full of excitement but also brought disappointment. We met with a birth mother and decided we would adopt her unborn child if she was willing. But shortly after our meeting, she disappeared and was never heard from again. We needed to prepare for such unforeseen emotional blows. For the next several months, we had our profile shown several times, but nothing developed. During this time, while stress tried to get the best of us, we found comfort in knowing that it was God's decision when our gift would arrive and to leave it in His hands.

In August 2006, we took a week off and left for a much needed vacation. We stepped back from the anticipation of being prospective adoptive parents, and enjoyed our time together. Then, just a few weeks later, our lives changed with just one phone call.

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On September 20, 2006, our caseworker from Catholic Charities called to let us know we had been selected by a birth mother and that "our child" had been born two days earlier. The birth mother was unable to parent the baby due to family and other obligations and made an adoption plan with the help of Catholic Charities' Pregnancy, Parenting & Adoption program. Suddenly, we were parents of a newborn baby girl. Our long awaited wish had come true, and a whole new life journey was about to begin - our prayers had been answered. We had ten days to prepare for this child, both physically and mentally, no standard nine months' advance notice here! The words "shell-shocked and ecstatic" can hardly describe our state of heart and mind.

For the next ten days, the baby lived with a Catholic Charities' volunteer foster family, until we could take her home. The State of Georgia has a ten day waiting period after the birth mother signs over her rights during which she may change her mind. We were able to visit our one week old darling daughter at the foster family's home. Before we saw her for the first time, we decided to name her Rebekah because we both loved that name. Rebekah's birthmother had given her the name "Rosario" at birth. We kept it as her middle name in gratitude to the mother who had given us this wonderful gift.

On October 2, 2006, we brought Rebekah Rosaria home. On April 3, 2007, we went to court and the judge declared us the legal parents of Rebekah. We received the final birth certificate in the mail this past July. We have had greetings and messages through our Catholic Charities' caseworker from Rebekah's birthmother. We send pictures and updates every few months, however we still have not met her. We understand that her family would not have accepted her child or the fact that she made an adoption plan for the baby. We hope that Rebekah will get to meet her birth mother and siblings at some point in the future, and we continue to pray for them.

Through the whole experience, we are truly blessed with our daughter and love her more than words could ever express. People say adopted children are "chosen" children; we just call her our gift from God.

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## **Catholic Charities Atlanta Village of St. Joseph Counseling**

Stephen\* is an eleven year old boy who recently had lost his mother due to her long battle with alcoholism, cirrhosis of the liver and internal bleeding. A counselor at Stephen's school observed the boy's continued grief, poor concentration and problematic academic performance two months after his mother's death. The counselor recommended to Stephen's father that he seek grief counseling for his son at Catholic Charities' Village of St. Joseph.

During the Intake program, Stephen displayed symptoms of anxiety and depression, and conveyed feelings of anger, worthlessness and being misunderstood. He also reported having problems with concentration and decision-making. Stephen, along with his therapist, set goals to process the grief that he had experienced during his mother's period of active alcoholism and her death. Other goals were set to improve his classroom and study habits, including engaging his father during the regularly scheduled homework sessions at home in the evenings.

Through St. Joseph's twelve-week Cognitive-Behavioral Solutions-Focused Brief Therapy model, Stephen was thoroughly engaged in his course of treatment. He accomplished all of his therapy homework assignments, processed his grief and losses, regained his good study habits, and made significant improvements in his family, school and social functioning.

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**History: The Village of St. Joseph Counseling program of Catholic Charities has a rich history of serving families and individuals who have encountered difficulties in the navigation of their lives.**

With a service history dating back to the late nineteenth century, the Village of St. Joseph was opened in Atlanta in 1967 by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet as a residential center for children and adolescents. It served in that capacity until its closure in 1998, at which time it opened as a counseling program. In 2002, the Village merged with the pre-existing counseling program of Catholic Social Services, and we are now the counseling department of Catholic Charities of Atlanta.

The Village of St. Joseph has a staff of 22 therapists who serve in over 27 different parishes as well as in the downtown office. As a general counseling service, we offer help in dealing with the many challenges encountered by individuals and families in today's world. In keeping with the mission of Catholic Charities, the Village continues its legacy of service to the most vulnerable and needy in our society.

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*"... Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." Matthew 5:9*



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## **Catholic Charities Atlanta Village of St. Joseph Counseling**

A mother brought her six year old son in to Catholic Charities' St. Joseph's Counseling program for help because he had witnessed several incidents of domestic violence. The last one he witnessed was when his father threatened his mother with a knife. The boy showed symptoms of being hyperactive, unable to control his impulses, and aggressive behavior. He was hitting other children at school, and he was not following rules at school or at home.

Because these symptoms could indicate several different mental disorders, the first important clinical intervention was to make an accurate assessment and differential diagnosis. This was accomplished using a team of caring adults that included his teacher, his pediatrician, his mother and his St. Joseph's therapist. After a thorough assessment, the diagnostic impression was that these symptoms were clearly related to the domestic violence he had experienced since he was born.

Play therapy was the treatment approach that was used. Through play, this little boy was able to express his anger, sadness, fears and frustration. He is now well-behaved at school and at home. He has learned healthy ways to express his anger, has improved his social skills, and his frustration tolerance has increased significantly.

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