



MERCY
LEARNING
CENTER

2014 – 2015 Annual Report



Mission



Mercy Learning Center of Bridgeport, Inc. provides basic literacy and life skills training to low income women using a holistic approach within a compassionate, supportive environment. All women are welcome without regard for race, religion, color, creed, sexual orientation or national origin.

Since 1987 Mercy Learning Center has educated and supported over 10,000 women. By helping our students to realize what they are truly capable of achieving, MLC empowers them to transform their lives and the lives of their families.

Dear friends,

According to research commissioned by the National Institute of Health, “A mother’s reading skill is the greatest determinant of her children’s future academic success, outweighing other factors, such as neighborhood and family income.”

By teaching low-income, undereducated women to read, write, speak and advocate for themselves and their families, we are leveraging one of the most powerful tools of social change—women.

This past year, Mercy Learning Center welcomed 881 women. Each woman was seeking to irrevocably transform her life by getting an education. With your support, we provided our distinctly holistic and supportive literacy and life skills programs to hundreds of women and their families.

This report chronicles the many efforts and accomplishments of our students, volunteers, donors and staff. Thank you. Our work continues: together, we can empower entire communities with education—one woman at a time.

With gratitude,

Jane E. Ferreira
President & CEO

Cathy Ritch
Chair, Board of Directors

“I see education as key to ending poverty. If we can educate everyone to the level that they should be educated, societies change, communities change, cities are rebuilt.”

—Jane

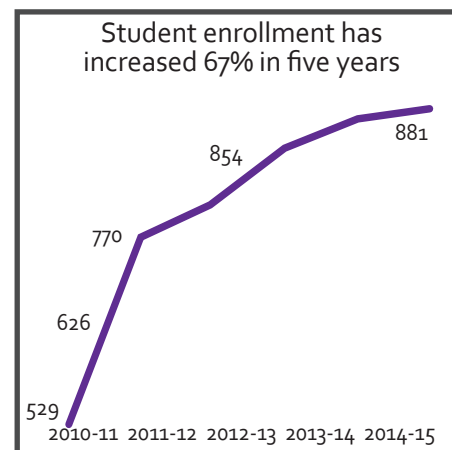


A Diverse and Caring Community



2014-15 Students:

- 881 women
- Ages 17 - 93
- 97% low-income
- 95% mothers or primary caregivers of children
- 51 different home countries
- 68% Hispanic/Latina; 21% Black/African American; 8% Asian; 3% White; less than 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native.



“The Best Class I’ve Ever Had”

Every fall since she started teaching at Mercy Learning Center, Mary Beth Clayton declares, **“This is the best class I’ve ever had!”** Last year however, she insisted it truly was the best class in her 12 years of teaching the Adult Basic Education Level I class at MLC. Why was last year’s class so special? **“The diversity.”**

The 37 women in Mary Beth’s class came from 14 countries around the world. Each day, they gathered in the sunny third-floor classroom, sitting at round tables piled with books, notebooks, calculators, pens and pencils. Together the women developed a common language, English, working hard to learn new vocabulary, develop their writing and reading skills, and become confident English speakers.

But as Mary Beth explains, this class became so much more than a simple grouping of learners: **“They created very strong friendships, across languages, ethnicities, ages and stations in life.”** Cultural differences and commonalities proved a rich well of conversation topics throughout the year. When guests and donors visited the class, students took great pride in raising their hands and naming the countries of the other students: Mexico, Congo, Iraq, Colombia, Brazil, Haiti, Syria, Vietnam...

The women in Mary Beth’s class also represented a diversity of ages, ranging from 20 to 64. The older women in the class naturally took on the role of mentor to the younger women, offering marital or parenting advice and encouraging the younger women to stay focused on their learning.

“Each woman in this large, diverse class really challenged her fellow classmates to become better students, to speak English all day long, and to be contributing members of the family that they formed,” reflects Mary Beth. **“This group succeeded in motivating each other to appreciate the gift of education that MLC offers.”**

*There is more need for women’s and family literacy than ever...
 1 in 5 women in Bridgeport does not have a high school diploma
 1 in 4 Bridgeport residents is foreign born
 2 in 5 children in Bridgeport enter kindergarten with no preschool experience*

Academics



Mercy Learning Center's approach to educating women is rooted in a belief that all women are capable of achieving their goals when given comprehensive and caring instruction and support. In 2014-15, the 881 women enrolled in our various academic programs made great strides in language, basic skills, and technology education—all while gaining invaluable confidence.

Tutoring Program

The Tutoring Program matches women with volunteer tutors for four hours of tutoring each week. Students work to develop a range of skills including English language acquisition, adult basic education, citizenship preparation, life skills and computer literacy.

- 700 students
- 226 tutors
- 48,816 hours of instruction
- 74% of students made gains roughly equivalent to 1 grade level

Intensive Study Program

The women in the Intensive Study Program receive 25 hours per week of classroom instruction, learning from a certified instructor alongside their classmates. Class levels include English as a Second Language, Adult Basic Education levels I, II, and III, and GED® prep.

- 152 students in 5 classes
- 127,680 hours of instruction
- 89% of students made gains roughly equivalent to 1-2 grade levels



Technology Education

To ensure that our students have computer literacy skills and online access, MLC's two computer labs are open and staffed by full-time instructors 45 hours a week.

- 726 students
- 27,521 hours of instruction
- 109 technology certificates earned

High School Diploma Programs

MLC's two high school diploma programs have helped 229 women to reach this important milestone and gain access to post-secondary education, higher wages, and more rewarding lives. In 2014-15, 24 women earned high school diplomas at MLC.

- 3 women earned diplomas through the GED® exam
- 21 women earned diplomas through the National External Diploma Program (NEDP®)



Job Readiness & Transition to College

Mercy Learning Center is committed to helping students follow fulfilling career paths and earn living wages. 300 women received a total of 890 hours of one-on-one career and college counseling. Women also participated in other career and college readiness programming, including:

- Job/career skills training workshops
- Mock interview sessions with volunteer corporate interviewers
- An onsite job fair
- MLC graduate panel discussions
- "Life After Mercy" and "Transition to College" courses
- "Taste of College" visit to Housatonic Community College



Volunteers from local corporations and agencies conducted mock interviews with students in the fall and spring.



Luz Vargas celebrated earning her high school diploma with Cathy Alfandre, MLC career and college counselor, at the annual Recognition Reception.

Transforming Lives

In 2014-15, more MLC alumnae than ever were pursuing post-secondary education:

- 49 graduates were enrolled in college
- 16 graduates were enrolled in a vocational or career certificate program
- 37 graduates received scholarships

MLC alumnae celebrated earning many degrees and certifications, including:

- Master's degree (1)
- Bachelor's degree (1)
- Associate's degrees (2)
- Community college certificates (3)
- Career certifications (11)

And 85 students and graduates found jobs over the course of the year.



Students visited Housatonic Community College during "A Taste of College" day.

Social Services

MLC staff and volunteers help our students to overcome many obstacles to learning by providing comprehensive social services, including:

- 1,700 hours of case work (444 students)
- 62 family therapy sessions
- 39 days of nurse consultations; 8 days of midwife consultations; 6 health screenings
- 10 legal clinics
- 3 tax preparation sessions
- 1 voter registration drive
- Hundreds of bags of food, household items and diapers



A student had her blood pressure checked during an on-site health fair provided by Fairfield University School of Nursing.

Life Skills Education

Developing key life skills as well as academic knowledge is integral to MLC's approach. In 2014-15, life skills education included:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Alternative medicine | First aid |
| Art | Health |
| Breast care | Knitting |
| Bullying | Nutrition |
| College application process | Prenatal care |
| Domestic violence | Public safety |
| Emergency preparedness | Public transportation |
| Financial literacy | Social skills |
| Fire safety | Tenants' rights |
| | Voter education |
| | Yoga |



Nora Jinishian, MLC enrichment coordinator, delivered a life skills session on nutrition to students and tutors.



Students and tutors participated in a workshop on public safety.

Early Childhood Education and Family Literacy



Mercy Learning Center works with women and their children to ensure that two generations of family members have the opportunity to learn, thrive and advance. In 2014-15, our early childhood education and family literacy programming included:

- The Early Childhood Education Program, which provided 169 children with 42,926 hours of free, on-site educational childcare services.
- The Mother-Child Reading Program, which served 69 mothers and 74 children. The families participated in weekly sessions and took home a total of 1,850 new picture books.
- Five weeks of the “Family Fun” interdisciplinary educational program for mothers and their school-aged children during school breaks. 75 mothers and 171 children ages 5 to 12 participated.
- MLC’s annual Family Fun Day, which welcomed 360 women and family members.

Educate a woman ... Educate a family

At the end of 2014-15, 76% of women said they learned to be better parents to their children.

96% of mothers who participated in the Mother-Child Reading Program reported that they read to their children several times a week.

98% of mothers reported that they read the books given to them in the Mother-Child Reading Program at home.

90% of children who entered the Early Childhood Education Program below level were on-level at the end of the year.

100% of graduating 4 and 5 year olds were developmentally ready for kindergarten.



The Two Mercys

It is strictly chance that Meley’s daughter is named Mercy. She was born just before Meley became a student at Mercy Learning Center. **But little Mercy has grown up here, moving through MLC’s Early Childhood Education Program, from infant-care to toddler-care to pre-school.**

While Mercy learns important social, problem-solving, motor, literacy and other skills in the pre-K class, Meley is just one floor up, working alongside her Adult Basic Education Level III classmates on reading, writing, speaking, math, science and social studies.

Meley came to the U.S. in 2010, after living in a refugee camp in Ethiopia where she remembers, “There was not enough food.” When she arrived in the U.S., “It was confusing... especially the language.” Conversations were “incomprehensible.” Now she is one of the more advanced students at MLC, preparing to earn a high school diploma in the next one-to-two years.

Meley and Mercy demonstrate the power of family literacy. When parents and children learn together, they are involved and invested in each other’s progress. MLC moms model diligence and the importance of literacy to their children, as the children build their own strong educational foundations.

This past winter, Meley and Mercy would arrive at MLC early and head to the kitchen to warm up and eat breakfast. There, Meley would multitask, both helping Mercy and fielding all of her many questions and reviewing the class material from the day before—an effort that did not go unnoticed by Mercy. Meley truly understands the importance of family literacy: **“I need to learn English. If I improve my English, I can help my kids.”**

Volunteers are at the heart of our mission and operations.

Mercy Learning Center welcomed the greatest number of volunteers in its history last year - 446. They are the heart of our work and bring a diversity of wisdom and approaches that make our programs both dynamic and effective. These committed individuals share their knowledge, passion and energy with students every single day, making MLC infinitely more effective. Thank you to all of our 2014-15 volunteers:

Tutors

Barbara Abraham	Hayes Clark	Joanne Huntley	Sally McNeela	Paula Schooler
Sherisse Abrams	Anne Cleary	Richard Hyde	Felicity Medinger	Milissa Schramm
Wynne Abrams	Barbara Clerkin	Michael Ian	Kathryn Meiman	Suzie Schroeder
Henri Adato	Claudette Constant	Patty Jensen	Diane Melish	Ed Schwarz
Rosemary Ahern	Judy Conway	Myrtle Johnson	Suzy Mercado	Ralph Schwarz
Ruth Ahlers	Catherine Cron	Liz Johnston	Dwight Michaels	Kathy Scoville
Allison Allott	Barbara Curley	Dennis Keenan	Edna Miller	Maura Sedlacek
Gary Anderson	Patrick Curley	Jane Keller	Lester Miller	Gail Selover
Wendy Anderson Brachfeld	Carolanne Curry	Karen Kelly	Tara Modarelli	Julie Shapiro
Louise Attianese	Robin Danzak	Mary Ellen Keresey	Madeline Monde	Lisa Shapiro
Virginia Auster	Christine Davis	Martine Kessler Robb	Charlene Moran	Jessica Sheinman
Candace Bailey	Marjolijn De Jager	Sally Kidd	Kathy Moraveck	Anthony Siano
Roxanna Bajra	Johnna DeSantis	Deborah Kinnebrew	Christopher Morcone	William Siclari
Marjolijn Bakendale	Brenda Dominici Johnson	Claire-Anne Kinney-Meskers	Susan Nerenberg	Mindy Siegel
Barbara Balamaci	Jessica Donahue	Eileen Kirk	Fran Nicholas	Jeri Silverman
Lynne Bannister	Lorna Donnelly	Leslie Kirshner	Lynn Nicklin	Vanessa Sinnott
Hank Banville	Joan Farley	Barbara Kleban	Peg North	Ellie St. Denis
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Nora Benjamin	Christal Ferrandino	Margaret Kuhn	Karen O'Brien	Ellen Stevens
Gina Beranek	Heidi Flicker	Gerry Kuroghlian	Katherine Odom	Pattie Strain
Melinda Berdanier	Sara Flokos	Nancy Lahage	Precious Ofofile	Elaine Suthers
Susie Berenson	Anne Foley	Joyce Landon	Susan O'leary	Lea Sylvestro
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Park City Valve & Fitting
People's United Bank
Right Management
The Sun Products Corporation
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2014 - 15 Volunteer Contributions

Volunteer tutors	226
Other volunteers	220
Total	446
Volunteer tutoring hours	48,816
Other volunteer hours	5,627
Total	54,443
= a contribution worth \$1,458,528	



The value of a volunteer hour in CT in 2014 was \$26.79 according to Independent Sector.



Helping Women Find Their Voices

Donna Orazio has been a volunteer tutor at Mercy Learning Center for nearly a decade and has a store of countless memories to draw upon when asked to describe her experience as a tutor.

“On the surface it’s a good thing: You’re helping a woman navigate a new language and the practical aspect is right there,” she says. “But it’s so much deeper as you watch the women find their footing, find their own voices.”

She shares a story about one of her students who couldn’t even look her in the eye for the first few weeks. Then, one day, the woman challenged Donna during a lesson. Donna was elated and congratulated her student on her newfound confidence and trust in her own intelligence.

Like so many of the people involved at MLC, Donna has always seen education as the key to progress: **“Growing up, education was so important for me and I passed that along to my children. Education opens doors—it’s everything.”** But she emphasizes that one doesn’t have to be a trained teacher to be a successful tutor, explaining how the materials, training and staff support at MLC provide a solid foundation.

As much as Donna is motivated by the big-picture goal for women to transform their lives and the lives of their families through education, she thrives on the little things as well: **“It’s not just the big things... it’s the smiles, the sharing of cultures, that I know when their kids’ birthdays are. The kind of information that mothers exchange that is so universal.”**

Asked what she would say to anyone considering becoming a tutor at MLC, Donna quickly replies, **“Do it! Your life can be enriched by this experience in ways that you cannot measure.”**

Our donors make it all possible!

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Members of MLC’s 2014-15 and 2015-16 board of directors celebrate student and volunteer achievements at the annual Recognition Reception.

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Special Gifts

Gifts were given this year in memory of:

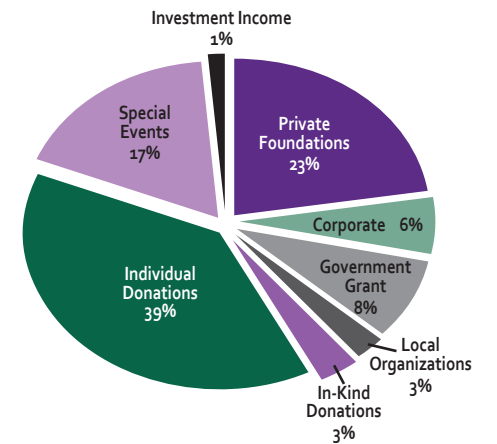
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Linda Larkin	Gifts were given this year in honor of:	Jim Haas	Nina Skaya
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2014-15 Financial Summary



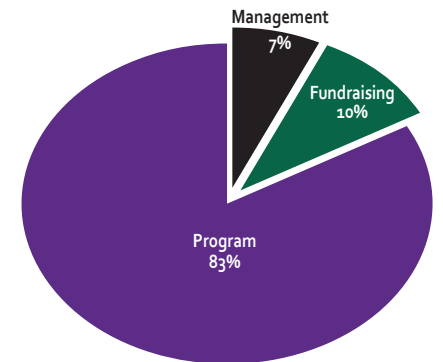
Support and Revenue

Private foundations	\$527,700
Corporate	\$130,351
Government grant	\$195,000
In-kind donations	\$58,375
Local organizations	\$75,010
Individual donations	\$901,731
Special events	\$402,355
Investment income	\$29,557
Total support and revenue	\$2,320,079



Expenses

Program	\$1,636,034
Management	\$136,257
Fundraising	\$202,020
Total expenses	\$1,974,311



Mercy Learning Center has received a 4-star rating for sound fiscal management and commitment to accountability and transparency from Charity Navigator for the third consecutive year, ranking it among the top 12 percent of rated charities.

Audited financial statements and IRS 990 report are available at mercylearningcenter.org.





Lilbet and her daughter celebrate at MLC's pre-K program graduation in May.

Overcoming All Odds

When you meet Lilbet and her happy, spirited daughters, there is no trace of what they have been through over the past few years... or how far they have come.

Lilbet came to Mercy Learning Center in 2010 to learn English and earn a high school diploma. She started in our lowest level English language class and progressed rapidly, but soon had to abandon her studies. A daughter who remained in Mexico was in danger, and Lilbet was determined to get to her. While she was gone, MLC staff made sure that her two younger daughters were cared for.

With her daughter again safe, Lilbet returned to MLC and continued to study and advance. But soon another major hurdle arose: her landlord was being foreclosed upon and the bank notified her that she would have to move out immediately. Nearly overnight, the family was homeless.

Again, Lilbet turned to the one place she knew she could depend on—MLC. **"Whenever I have a problem or a worry, I know that I can ask Jane, Lynn or others at MLC. They always give me support and very good advice to never give up."**

Staff members helped her find an affordable apartment in a safe neighborhood and MLC community members donated furniture, clothing, food and books. Lilbet and the girls moved in on Christmas Eve, joyful and relieved.

With holistic support from MLC, today Lilbet has a home, a job, a car, and a high school diploma and she is grateful for all the help and life skills education she has received: **"This program totally changed my life!"**

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