FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Extreme Volunteerism: Dedicated Volunteers at Bronx Community Center Donate Twice As Much Time as National Average

Americans are generous. According to a 2004 survey by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average American volunteer gives 52 hours worth of time to charitable activities annually. Volunteers at Mercy Center in the Bronx, New York, however, give more than twice that much time: a yearly average of 110 hours each. The private non-profit family center depends on a corps of more than 150 volunteers who give 16,920 hours to the organization each year, according to Mercy Center Co-Director Joe Dirr.

“Volunteers are key to our programs,” says Mr. Dirr, who estimates that volunteer time at Mercy Center is worth about $250,000 a year, and notes, “That’s more than a quarter of our budget.”

Organization Serves Clients in Nation’s Poorest Congressional District

Mercy Center provides social services and support programs to over 3,000 people annually—90% of the clients women and almost all Hispanic or African American—in the Mott Haven section of the Bronx, part of the poorest congressional district in the United States.

Clients at Mercy Center take advantage of a range of practical services—English as a second language, children’s after-school programs, parenting and anger management classes, job training, introduction to computers, basic keyboarding, financial literacy—as well as programs that enrich personal development such as dance, yoga, breath relaxation, and counseling.

All services to clients—49% of whom live below the poverty line—are free.

Almost Half Of Staff Are Volunteers

Volunteers fill 41% of all staffing at Mercy Center. The organization counts on 3 full-time volunteer workers, four part-timers and another 143 “hourly volunteers” who pitch in when needed as babysitters, grant writers, teachers of English as a second language, clerks, dance instructors and camp counselors.

Volunteers come from a range of backgrounds and include corporate executives, high school and college students, housewives, teachers, retired professionals, construction workers and even Mercy Center clients themselves. A neighborhood client may “take ESL class on Monday and Wednesday,” says Mr. Dirr, “and volunteer to babysit on Tuesday and Thursday.”

Married Couple Gives 4,000 Hours Annually

In a frenetically busy urban world where most people consider their time anything but free, what motivates a person to give thousands of hours away with no financial payback? “I love the work and the people,” says Paul Marc-Aurele, 61, a full-time Mercy Center volunteer. Mr. Marc-Aurele, a retired
contractor and master electrician, now teaches Mercy Center’s anger management classes—and pinch hits as the organization’s building manager. “One thing people should realize,” says Mr. Marc-Aurele, “is that you get more out of this than you put in. I teach anger management to people, but the fact is they teach me.”

Mr. Marc-Aurele’s wife, Margaret Leahy Marc-Aurele, 62, also volunteers full time at the community center where she teaches money management to the center’s low income, debt-ridden clients. The former investment banker and Paine Webber VP also trains students in basic keyboarding skills, leads a knitting class and schedules coverage for the center’s busy reception desk.

She pauses when asked to explain why she finds her work at Mercy Center meaningful. “The place is so mission-driven,” she says. “It’s not about egos. It’s about the people and their needs.”

**Clients An Inspiration To Volunteers**

Volunteers feel that their work makes a tangible difference in the lives of Mercy Center’s economically deprived, mostly immigrant clients. Virtually all volunteers cite clients as sources of inspiration and motivation.

Ms. Marc-Aurele remembers one client—for anonymity, here called “Alicia”—with four children. Alicia was horrified when she learned that her male companion was molesting one of her children. Immediately Alicia removed herself and her children from the home—though it meant the family was temporarily forced to live in a city shelter.

Alicia entered several programs at Mercy Center and today has her own apartment and is pursuing a college degree. “She’s an amazing woman,” says Ms. Marc-Aurele with admiration. “Four kids and going to college. These are the things…. ” Her voice trails.

**Center Marks 15 Year Anniversary**

Mercy Center was founded in 1990 by Sister Mary Ann Dirr, Mr. Dirr’s sister, who saw a desperate need for counseling and other services for Mott Haven neighborhood women. Sister Mary Ann and Mercy Center Co-Director Mary Galeone are members of the Religious Sisters of Mercy, a Roman Catholic religious order. The Sisters of Mercy are committed to the empowerment, social independence and personal growth of disadvantaged women through skills-training and communal support.

From its beginnings, Mercy Center depended on volunteer generosity. For years Sister Mary Ann and community volunteers ran the center out of two rooms donated by a local school. The center has grown exponentially since then and facilities—a spacious new center was built in 2003—budget, funding, client base and volunteer numbers have mushroomed.

**Gala Fundraiser Honors Volunteers And Donors**

In celebration of fifteen years of community service Mercy Center is sponsoring a number of commemorations, parties and social events this year. On April 6th, 2005, from 6pm-9pm, a gala fundraiser for Mercy Center will be held at Manhattan’s Park Avenue Country Club at 381 Park Avenue South (at 27th Street). The fundraiser will feature cocktails and a silent auction.

Very likely there will be plenty of volunteers at the gala to pass hors d’oeuvre and pour Chardonnay. When help is needed,” says Mr. Marc-Aurele, “we have a saying here. It’s all hands on deck.”

To buy tickets to the fundraiser or learn more about Mercy Center, please contact Silvia Gonzalez at Mercy Center, telephone: 718-993-2789; fax: 718-402-1594; Email:  SGonzalez@MercyCenterBronx.org